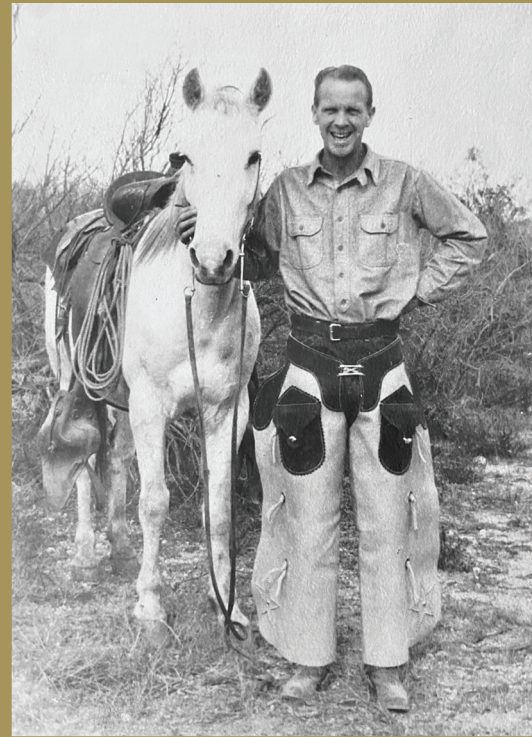




POST MORTEM ❖ *Clifford*



POST MORTEM

MOM AND DAD



James Clifford

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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PREFACE



Two essays about my parents: Virginia Iglehart Clifford and James Lowry Clifford. One essay, written in 2000, responds to my mother's prolonged experience of dying, a process I had just witnessed. The other, composed in 2020, more than forty years after my father's sudden death, is a long-postponed reckoning.

The two texts reflect different times, and they differ in style and emotional tone. They share, however, a common goal: to understand the two people who, more than anyone, formed me. I want to find a closeness inaccessible during my parents' lifetimes. Perhaps this writing can loosen the images formed in childhood and help me accept who they really were.

VIC



The part of this being that is rock,
the part of this body that is star,
lately I feel them yearning to go back
and be what they are.

~Ursula K. Le Guin

from "In the Borderlands."



VIRGINIA IGLEHART CLIFFORD finally stopped breathing on June 2nd, 1999.

There was nothing outwardly remarkable about her death, beyond the relentless misery of her ailment, emphysema. The degeneration of my mother's lungs began with cigarettes in college, a habit that persisted throughout her middle age. By the time she stopped smoking, the damage was done. In her early seventies walking had become harder, stairs a problem. She found reasons to pause, catch her breath. Then a case of the flu sent her to the hospital for a month. The last five years, before she died at the age of eighty-two, were a quiet hell.

My mother expired in slow motion. During the last years, when her condition became acute, I saw her often. Of her three children, I was the only one within driving distance of Mill Valley California, where she shared an apartment with her second husband, Louis Benezet. After a decade of widowhood Virginia had remarried, leaving New York City to divide her time between our summer house in Vermont and the San Francisco Bay Area. My sister Emily, my brother Joe and I, with our families, visited her in both locations, especially the Vermont place to which we were all deeply attached. By the summer of 1996, Mom was too weak to travel.

In California, Louis cared for Virginia day and night, with increasing help from a housekeeper and caregiver, Elsa Jusef. Later there was a part-time cook and a visiting nurse. Louis, in his eighties, struggling with cancer and chemotherapy, stuck with my mother

loyally. But the situation grew increasingly precarious. I tried to visit each weekend, and during emergencies.

The downward curve of my mother's existence led to exhaustion, depression and dementia. She spent more and more time in bed where, with the help of oxygen, breathing was manageable. Each trip to the bathroom, eight steps away, left her gasping. Most of the time Mom existed in a world of dreams, fleeting memories, blankness, a world to which others had no access. When someone entered the room she returned to the land of the living, if her strength, and the carbon dioxide building up in her blood, permitted.

At these times she would make a valiant effort to interact, remember, and converse. She could speak vividly of her childhood in Evansville, Indiana, our family life in New York City, and especially summers in Vermont. Then she would fade. She became lucid at random moments. In the middle of the night, a specter, she would appear in the kitchen looking for milk and a cookie, or worrying about unanswered mail and unpaid bills. She wrote lists of things to do, and fragmentary letters to friends and family—notes in a bottle. I usually saw my mother at her best, aroused by my arrival, loving and momentarily engaged. But a growing proportion of her life was spent elsewhere.

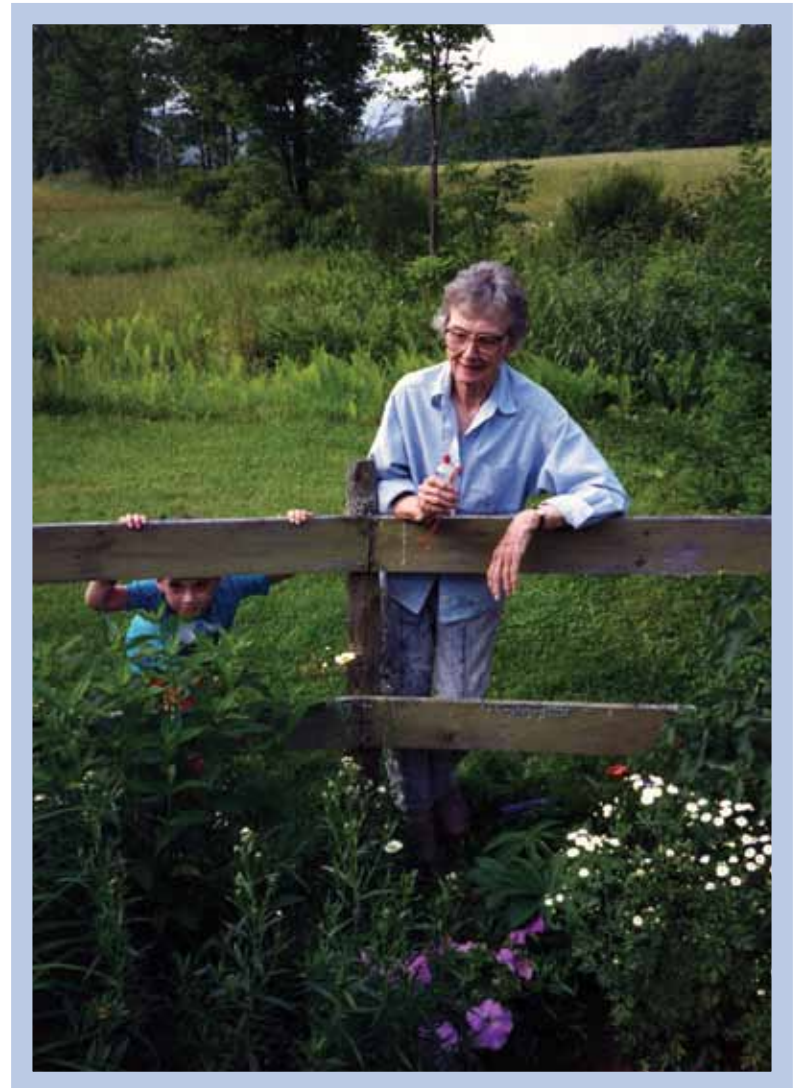
I wanted to know what she was experiencing. Was she traveling back and forth across a shadow-line of life and death? If my mother recalled anything of such adventures she said nothing. She had never been much given to self-disclosure, and she kept her intimate feelings to herself. There was one exception: an ecstatic near-death experience Mom recounted to us, her children, just after our father's sudden death. This revelation, along with her developed aesthetic sensibility, was the only evidence I had of an "inner" self. She was of a generation that thought you should get

on with life, let sleeping dogs lie. She refused to wallow in psychology or to ask for help.

As Virginia declined, her intense privacy expressed itself in what seemed an excessive, at times almost parodic, repression of reality. She was depressed, probably shamed, by her condition of dependency. The response was denial. "Oh, I'm all right. Nothing wrong with me. Just leave me alone." And though there were gaps in the armor, occasional comments that showed she was desperately aware of her condition, she continued, as she had all her life, to put the best face on things. She needed, Louis and I thought, to shed her defenses, to open up more. In retrospect, I believe this was more our need than hers.

I wanted a glimpse of her inner life. No doubt this was a desire to penetrate the mystery of dying, to hear about the experience from someone I trusted to speak plainly, not to embellish or moralize. More urgently, my need to know continued a lifelong struggle to communicate with my mother, to accept and to love her. A struggle with her reticence and my own...

EMPHYSEMA DIARY



GARDEN

A photo of my mother during the last summer she's able to spend at our Vermont place.

She leans on a wooden fence in the back yard. Beside her, my five-year-old son, Ben, grasps the top board and hangs down, peering underneath. They're returning from a short, unsuccessful, expedition to install a hummingbird-feeder on a tree branch. Forearms resting on the fence, Mom clutches the plastic bottle with its scarlet nipple, as her other hand drapes over the top board. Gazing slightly downward, she tries to calm her breathing.

Everything in the image is familiar: the fence, the ferns just beyond, then maples and the hayfield sloping away. I recognize Mom's half-smile, unusual in a photo, seeming to say: Why did I try to do this anyway? Or: well, take the picture if you must! Or: just look at those lovely daisies! Perhaps she's contemplating the scattered purples, whites, and reds of the photo's foreground: colors of the flower garden she worked on for more than forty years.

Exhausted, but content in this place. Her long fingers dangle earthward.

10/9/94

Early Sunday morning: Louis on the phone. Says he found Ginny in the midst of a bad night, sitting on the bathroom floor, unable to get up. He dragged her back into bed, but later, alarmed by her continued gasping, called 911. She's on her way to Marin General Hospital now.

Driving up the Pacific coast, listening to "La Boheme," taped highlights. Reminds me of nights at the Metropolitan Opera in New York with my parents; long climbs to the top balcony.

Bedtimes, in my darkened room, I listen to "La Traviata" on the living room record player, while at the other end of the long hallway, in a bright space, Mom is talking on the phone. Smoke curls from her ashtray. She's still talking as I drift to sleep...

A former world with Victrolas, brass railings and worn velvet seats. The heroine coughs, hits the high notes, expires. A crescendo of emotion.

This is the beginning of my mother's long death scene.



At the hospital she's in Emergency. An alcove with curtains for walls. Louis sits on a stool, his tall frame hunched over a book. She looks bad. In and out of consciousness. Colorless, lips caked, nose squashed under a transparent mask, sensors all over. She opens her eyes a slit, mumbles something, disappears.

I say something absurd like "Hi Mom. How are you?" taking up the dark-veined hand that falls over the bed rail. There's no response. Is this how she will look at the end?

A video display says her vital signs are OK. And I notice how she squirms under the sheet, feeling with her back and shoulders for a better position. Strength there, if the lungs can be made to work well enough.

While she's transferred upstairs to Intensive Care, I sit with Louis in a small waiting room. Doctors appear, and soon we are engaged in a discussion of what to do if things don't improve, or if they get worse. The respirator question. It might help her get through another crisis like this one. But there's a 50-50 chance she'd be stuck with the machine.

Virginia Iglehart Clifford has recorded before witnesses that there must be no heroic measures to prolong her life. But will we, her children and husband, be able to confront a situation that can never be clear-cut? The doctors speak of statistical probabilities. The pulmonary specialist tells us that the future, from his perspective, is clear. A steady loss of lung capacity, just a matter of time. But he can't predict the exact pace. Of course this tells us nothing about how to help the patient live, and how to live with her, at each moment of the descending curve.

But now, Mom has returned to life, thanks to medication that counteracts the effects of a sleeping pill. The change is dramatic. Her eyes are lively, skin no longer sallow. "Why did you bring me to this hospital?" She seems embarrassed by our clumsy kisses on forehead or cheek.

Louis almost shouts at her, in frustration and relief: "Why? Why? What if you found *me* helpless on the floor?"

Her face is taut, skin paper-thin. Fine bones. Eyes. The hospital gown baring shoulders and sternum, stuck with sensors and wires. Neck extended, hair pushed roughly back.

Her beauty.



On the way home, a beach below San Francisco. Sun sinking. Soft air. Feet kneading the wet sand.

It's early autumn. With each passing cloud the light veers between bright and dark.

I recall a photo: the young mother gaily holds up her first baby, my sister Emily. A time before I was born. Black and white, but with the color of life. Her radiant smile...

Our parents live in sunlight. Then a shadow moves through, and they crumple.



10/14/94

Virginia has been moved to a Rehab Hospital.

I find her sitting in a wheelchair, writing a letter. A patterned shirt and sweatpants. Hair nicely done. Oxygen tube in her nose, connected to a big metal tank.

She's very much herself: welcoming me to her hospital. We chat as if nothing had happened, catching up on family news. A social call.

The hospital staff, knowing she fell on the night of her crisis, insists that she be strapped to her bed. There's a seatbelt on the wheelchair (which she doesn't fasten) and even on the toilet. Mom tells all this with a smile that only partly masks irritation. If she begins to get out of bed without authorization, an alarm sounds.

Traveling down the hall with her therapist she grips the walker they insist she use. A new uncertainty.

Is it an effect of general weakness compounded by bronchial infection and a week in bed? Or is this the onset of permanently diminished capacity? The Rehab environment—with all the machines and prosthetic devices—makes me feel that Mom's near the end of her limited, but precious, physical independence.

And the infantilizing process: every move here assisted, monitored.

She seems girlish in her cheery acquiescence, as if she's putting her will on hold and simply accepting what all the efficient young professionals dish out. But underneath the public face, there's a deepening withdrawal.

Mom is pleased to have been mistakenly left alone outside, in a courtyard, for an hour and a half.

The hospital is friendly and well-equipped. Maybe she'll learn to breathe more efficiently, to control the panic of breathlessness, and to exhale the poisonous CO₂ that builds up in her tissues.

A constant effort, now, to hold onto a previous life.

Neither of us will express the inevitable question. Is there any, even temporary, recovery now? Or is this walker and the need for oxygen just the next step down? Always down...

Mom makes cheerful conversation. And while she speaks, I notice, exposed between sweatpants and slippers, impossibly thin, brittle ankles. How much longer will they support her?

6/18/95

Breath holds her, here in the last room, each vein and limb quivering.

Slips through her fingers: something said, a man's name, a phone message. Something about dinner. Snatch of a familiar...

Stops wanting to be outdoors. Lets go of flowers. Birdsong. Clouds. Summer house. Pictures of...

Now, now, now, now, now.

And fear. What's this place? Am I still... ? Why open these eyes? Eat this food?

Exhale...

Wasn't there once a bright picture, something wonderful?

Whose children are out there doing handstands on the lawn? The grass needs mowing. Remember to write it down.

Exhale...

It was a kind of moving picture, endless, electric, lifelike...

Filling up with zeros. Can't stop. Need to...

"Just let me sleep."

1/20/96

"Oh, I'm all right, Jamie. Nothing wrong with me."

Turning away...



Gleanings from a radio interview with Jon Krakauer:

Effects of oxygen deprivation on an eight-kilometer Himalayan peak.

Your brain doesn't work. You're light-headed and slow. Judgement affected, cartoon-like perceptions. You're not metabolizing food well. Systemically fatigued, losing weight.

You take a few steps, stop to breathe...

At Everest's summit the climbers can't focus on a killer storm as it gathers below—until the white-out.

A guide, exposed overnight in 100 mph. winds, reports on his satellite phone: "I'll be OK." And a veteran mountaineer sits down in the snow at 27,000 feet and mumbles "Send a helicopter."

You let go of the will to continue. The body says: Go to sleep.

People in the peak of fitness just lose it.

Yet one man who was left for dead, blinded, staggers into camp the next day.



Sue Lopez, the visiting personal care nurse, after a losing battle over a shower: "What's she want? Just to die?"

Louis: "Beats me."

7/21/96

I go into her bedroom and lie down.

Mom smiles. I hold her hand.

Quiet.

Old pictures, furniture, red tree in the window, a corner of blue sky. Oxygen concentrator throbbing gently. Breath-tumult calm.

“Tell me more. What’s new with you?”

Oh, you went to the mountains? That’s good.

Who went with you? Yes, That’s nice. Where did you go? Ah yes...”

“Who went with you?”

Eyes half-closed.

“So tell me, what’s new with you?”

A bright ceiling over us both. Cool air through the window.

Slow breaths.

Veins. Hands. Feet.

“I was trying to remember who you look like.”

5/1/78

In May 1978, following our father’s memorial service, Emily, Joe and I gather in the familiar New York apartment. Dad had died suddenly, at a moment of achievement.

A “good” end.

As we sit around the living room, Mom tells us she doesn’t feel any profound sadness. And to explain why, she reveals an extraordinary experience.

Her “vision.”

In 1942, soon after Emily’s birth, Virginia underwent surgery for mastitis. Deep in the anesthetic, she experienced what she recognized as death. In the recovery room she began to talk in an excited way. Dad jotted down some of what she blurted, in pencil on a couple of used envelopes. Only one survives, sides numbered 3. and 4.

We examine the worn object like a talisman. Two pale green one-cent stamps (“Industry, Agriculture: For Defense”) are still glued to a corner. Our father’s writing covers the postmark and address, lines measured by the envelope’s width.

It's as obvious as the nose on your face but I can't say it.

It's wonderful that nothing makes any difference. It's more wonderful than religion or anything. It isn't silly it's wonderful. If you could remember it all the time nothing would worry you; nothing would matter. But nobody can ever put it into words.

MRS. LESLIE M. SAIRS
413 MAIN STREET
BETHLEHEM, PA.

88769

|||||

3.

It's as obvious as the nose on your face but I can't say it.

It's wonderful that nothing makes any difference. It's more wonderful than religion or anything. It isn't silly it's wonderful. If you could remember it all the time nothing would worry you: nothing would matter.

But nobody can ever put it into words.

4.

Dying is really living. When I thought I was dying it was really living. Living is dying. You can almost grasp it, but you can't say it in words. It is the most wonderful thing in the world.

You are somebody just in so far as you affect me. There is only one life. We are the life. There is nothing but events in space.

It's all one.

Dying is really living. When I thought I was dying it was really living. Living is dying. You can almost grasp it, but you can't say it in words. It is the most wonderful thing in the world.

You are somebody just in so far as you affect me. There is only one life. We are the life. There is nothing but events in space.

It's all one.

Delbert

88769

PAID 10c

PAID 10c

Thirty-six years later, she vividly remembers the feeling. What was written down barely touches it. And she has since recognized her experience in other mystical or near-death accounts. What it's like to *be* electricity, she tells us. Or a *laugh*, a feeling of release, going on forever. There's a vast field of light, without pattern or shape. Lightness and light, no body, a sense of motion without time. No past, no future. The mind of God that knows everything all at once. She thinks she said something about love, but it wasn't preserved. And what she experienced was the *same* life as this one. Nothing lost. Pure joy, energy, whatever it was, this dying.



I'm amazed. The mother I know is no mystic, but a downright, get on with the job, sort of person. She tends to be skeptical, impatient with high-flown or metaphysical talk. Yet here she is reporting an ecstatic experience of death. It's as if she has become someone else; and yet this is very much her story, reported simply, as if it were nothing special.

I've read about shamans, men and women who visit the land of the dead and return with a dance, a song, a cure. But this is different. Nothing mystical or exotic: just the artless, blurted, words of a twenty-five-year-old woman talking about "electricity." And the astonishing fact: it's our mother saying these things.

Life is really death. Believe it or not.



In the New York apartment, we reminisce about our father, Someone mentions a new television version of Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. How he loved that novel! How much he would have wanted to see the series...

And my mother adds, in her crisp way: "Oh well, now he *is* Dickens!"

12/29/97

Back in the hospital, this time for declining to eat.

Virginia and Louis increasingly lock horns over the issue of proper meals at definite times. She can't stand his discipline, and he resents her sullen resistance. Tension feeds on itself. Their upstairs neighbor tells them: "You two need a vacation from each other!"

When I get to the hospital, Mom's disgruntled. "Why am I here? Why do I have to stay 'til Monday? It's too noisy. I can't sleep."

In this too-conscious condition, she notices the boredom, the slackness, the frustrating lost connections. She's assaulted by constant commotion, harsh light, the nurses checking in.

At home, her bedroom's quiet: pale, filtered light, the oxygen concentrator's gentle pulse, distant sounds from elsewhere in the apartment.



"She's well defended," says Dr. P., her personal physician, about Virginia's persistent denials that she's ill, that she even has emphysema, dementia, etc.

Louis thinks it's Alzheimer's, sees the signs everywhere. Dr. P. is more guarded. Could be that. Could be lots of things combined. Many tiny, undetectable strokes? And how to weigh the CO₂ inebriation? Or the effects of sleeping all day? And her depression?

We all agree the cause doesn't matter much. What's manifestly happening is a recurrent, apparently progressive, blanking out. Or rather a confused static: like a radio signal coming and going, strong and weak, sharp and fuzzy. Gone for long periods, but suddenly crystal clear.

And how to factor-in Mom's active will: the periods of stubborn resistance? Her desire, expressed so clearly, to be somewhere else: "Leave me alone. I just want to sleep."

NOTES IN A BOTTLE

April 1996

Dear Judith and Jamie —

Louis is a good sport and probably an optimist too.

We hope for the best report from the Drs.

We enjoyed dinner “out” last evening.

P.S. My memory is in bad shape these days. What to do about it?

~Love, Mom

August 1998

Dear Ben~

A very happy birthday to you — and may there be many more.

Please use this to buy something you really want, that nobody is giving to you. Have a good day and good year!

~Love, Ginny

1/5/98

A pleasant hour or so sitting on the bed.

We run through the family — children, grandchildren, spouses — several times.

Reminiscing: life in New York. Vermont. Travels: winter months in Rome, the mosaics in Ravenna. And Provence, on the tracks of Van Gogh, Cézanne... “Oh, all that light!”

I play my guitar: songs by Burl Ives and other old favorites sung by her brother, Joe, and husband, Jim. Her eyes closed, lips just moving.

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo

As I walked out in Laredo one day...

We hold hands. Her veins stand out, blue. Stained backs. Palms smooth. Still a strong squeeze.

Smiling: “You always were a good little boy, Jamie...”

Rolling over to sleep. “Yes, a good boy.”

1/19/98

I try to get her to talk about her current condition, to think about how to make things better.

What if there was more going on, more visits, something of interest, would she rouse herself? “No.”

What does she think about, lying here all those hours, day after day? “Nothing. Some memories... mostly nothing.”

And the future. What does she think about that? “You mean tomorrow?”

No, death. What’s it like? “Oh I know. A blank.”

I press for more, reminding her of details from her ecstatic vision.

She’s intrigued. “Oh, did I say that? How do you know? That’s interesting.” Seems to be hearing it all for the first time.

Maybe she just doesn’t want this kind of intimacy, or perhaps the memory of her vision has slipped away along with so much else.

But I can’t let the memory go. It’s become a token of her deeper self, her “soul.” Something I’ve never been able to know...

I wonder: In the process of dying can you cross part-way over the border of life and return with something like conscious awareness, with images and a story?

Or is it just the blankness Mom seems to be slipping into, desiring?

2/6/98

Has she lost touch with her experience of death-as-life? After all, it’s more than fifty years since that moment in the recovery room.

I find it, still vivid, in some taped reminiscences.

Mom’s in a wheel-chair I’m pushing along a garden path at the Rehab Hospital, the recorder on her lap.

“I wouldn’t be afraid to die. In fact I look forward to it. I want to see what happens. Cause I think something *does* happen. But we won’t know until we get there.

“Well I was in and out of anesthetic, I guess. My feeling is, when you’re in there, you get close to dying. That’s all I can explain. So that... There are people who write books about this. You know, the glimpse of heaven. And it’s usually a big white light. And it *was*. A big white light. Everything was light, and... But also, there’s a feeling that went with it. A tremendous feeling of relief. A good feeling of relief. Like, like, maybe you had a good sneeze?”

Finding the image rather un-poetic, I recall her former idea of an endless laugh.

“And it was like a laugh, yes, there are many ways of describing it. Like a laugh. The relief that comes when you’re laughing. And it was also like electricity. Like being part of electricity, yes. Like being part of the wire. Where the electricity goes.

“I think... I think what it means is that we’re all part of one. You know, were told this all the time, but just haven’t got sense enough to grasp the idea. We’re all part of each other. And all part of one.

“And when we die we’ll see it right like that, you know. Now I see in a glass darkly, but then... face to face. Now I know in part, and

I prophesy in part, but when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part will be done away.

“So, after you die, then you know everything. It’s a wonderful feeling to know everything. Because you not only know what’s happened in the past, and what’s... There’s no time. No time so... Time is a human construction. You know what’s happened in the past, what’s happening now, and what’s going to happen in the future, only it’s all in one time. Pretty hard to... to imagine it, But I did, briefly.”

Gently laughing...

“Yes I kept going back in and coming out again.

“Living is dying. And dying is really living, yes. That was exactly what I discovered. And that’s true. I think. Because when you’re living, you, you’re gradually dying, from the day that you’re born, you know. It’s...

“Well... I just keep it to myself. It’s kind of a secret.”

I have watched beloved animals dying. The withdrawal into some part of themselves that only they know about. It is, I think, not unknown to any living creature.

(His favorite aunt, with cancer in the hospital, fails to recognize him.)

Dying is something people have to live through, and while they are doing it... you have little or no claim on them.

~William Maxwell, *All the Days and Nights*.

2/18/98

Louis is running out of patience. Relations with his wife have become increasingly fraught, companionship waning.

He speaks with Virginia about future possibilities, including nursing homes, and tries to get her to focus on the worsening situation.

“Why do I need a nursing home?” she answers aggressively. “I’ve got a good nursing home right here.”

“But it’s getting harder,” he tells her. “You don’t eat well, and you can’t bathe yourself anymore.”

“Oh you can hire someone to do that.”

“But you refuse the help,” he points out. “And what if you were to become incontinent.”

“Oh, if that happens,” she says briskly, “just throw me away.”

3/12/98

Considering the low ebb of Virginia's life... the days, weeks, months spent staring at the ceiling, or sleeping; the gasping for breath after each journey to the toilet; the emptiness of mind, the lack of anything exciting, the closing off of all interests... I wonder why she would want to go on.

Several times I maneuver her around to the question of whether the time is approaching. Does she want to die? "Not yet."

And I have to wrestle with my own impatience, my wish for her to let go, or at least to show some will, some agency in her death. I want her to pass joyfully into that bright vision. A release for her... for us all! I'm angry at my mother for living on when there's so pitifully little left. I want her to die.

But how can I want this?

Of course dying as a conscious act, suicide, takes effort. And Mom now has precious little energy for anything beyond filling and emptying tattered lungs, taking care of bodily needs, sustaining some dignity. Advanced emphysema doesn't allow continuous lucidity. How could anyone know when it was her settled wish to stop living?

"Not yet..."

She seems to have given herself to an inexorable process: something happening to her body and mind, erasing any clear distinction between them. An absolute, non-negotiable momentum.

I recall her basic acceptance of the world, of what's given: her capacity for staying with the here and now.

"Not yet..."

2/15/98

Marin Convalescent Hospital, praised as one of the "better" places to deposit an old person. Clean, well run, and without the smell of roach powder and decay. Fifties motel decor. Flowers here and there, a sweeping hilltop view behind picture windows. All the patients in bed or scattered around the halls, slumped in wheel-chairs.

"It's a good time to be looking," the manager says, showing us a well-worn single room — bare, with narrow bed, dresser, sink, "The flu or pneumonia always gets a few in February."

We discuss Virginia's condition, her oxygen setup, her daytime somnolence and disinclination to eat at prescribed times. Wanting to know how flexible the staff can be, I add: "Sometimes, at night, she wakes up, raring to go."

Raring to go: the expression seems amusing.

We're in the dining room, where a well-dressed, white-haired lady sits in a wheelchair alone, gazing out the window. The manager, in a condescending, affectionate tone: "Well, Rosie, are *you* raring to go?"

The lady gives us a sweet, confused smile: "I don't know. I just do what they tell me."

In front, the empty hills; behind, a clatter of dishes.

I leave the place determined to prop up our house of cards. At home Mom has her big bed (where Theodore, the cat, wanders in now and then to snuggle), her things, her sounds, the pale familiar light...

10/3/98

“Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream, Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.”

Lying side by side, gazing at the ceiling, I can't tell if she's smiling. “Life is but a dream.” We sing it together, quietly, laughing, drifting up into a pale emptiness.

“This is all I ever do.”



...milkweed, fireweed, jopye weed, goldenrod, thistles gone to seed, remains of a wall cutting through blue clover, pale tendrils, a piece of bent metal, purple asters and daisies, their petals half eaten away, a few Indian paintbrush, blotched apples, seed pods, a distant screen door slams, veined rocks, moss, the tip of a lead pipe, grasses white in the sun, a torn tree trunk, silver elms, new maples straying under barbed wire, a few brown stalks, fresh green leaves, crabapples, chokecherries...

8/13/98

We're looking at photos in an album: Virginia's wedding to Louis ten years ago. Identifying people, forgetting quite a few. “Oh that's, you know, my cousin, what *is* her name?”

She says, over and over: “And that's you...” pointing at Louis. She's not looking my way, and I'm not there in her mind. Louis is her interlocutor now, day in day out.

Social space becoming more spare. Stripped to a few relations: Louis the companion, Elsa the caregiver, children the visitors, cat the warm body.

In this familiar room, if Mom's fortunate, her breathing will cease: a curtained place, diffused light, four walls, a vast ceiling.

Sitting beside her, absent, released: I feel a new kind of nearness.

But if only you had been with us on Sunday, when we saw a red vineyard, all red like red wine. In the distance it turned yellow, and then a green sky with the sun, the earth after the rain violet, sparkling yellow here and there where it caught the reflection of the setting sun.

To look at the stars always makes me dream as simply as I dream over the black dots of a map representing towns and villages. Why, I ask myself, should the shining dots of the sky not be as accessible as the black dots on the map of France? If we take the train to get to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to reach a star.

~Van Gogh, letters from Arles, 1888

5/29/99

In the dark, sitting on the side of the bed, calling my name...

“Jamie, I’ve been having such a nightmare! I don’t know... I don’t know...”

The night-light is out, and she can’t find her way to the bathroom.

“Such a nightmare. How can I make it stop?”

I help her to the toilet and we sit in the dim light, she clutching a grab-bar, pink pajama pants partway down, trying to breathe and move her bowels at the same time.

“Jamie, I’m in trouble.”

Her right hand grips the bar, the other presses on my knee as I sit on the edge of the bathtub.

“My big toe is icy cold.”

I find socks, a jacket, a robe for her knees. Sitting on the floor, massaging her feet, the thin legs.

She looks down at me through slits—dry, crumbling eyes.

A half-hour later, back in bed, gasping... Too few blankets. Too many. Too hot. Too cold. Slowly the lungs calm down.

“There’d be no problem... if I stopped breathing.”

I lie beside her and we talk, easily now. In brief phrases, breath-timed.

I ask what it’s like to die.

“I don’t know.”

And what about her vision of death, fifty-seven years ago?

“Like a laugh, yes, especially the going on forever. Yes, I remember that. I believe that.”

Does she need to let go?

“Not yet.”

Later she says, “It would be good to leave all this stuff behind.”

Does she mean leaving things: like blankets, the breathing tube...?
Or people?

“Oh, you’ll come too... The same place.”

I’ll come with you, in spirit?

“No... we’ll go our own ways.”

A Drawing by Kathe Kollwitz: “The Call of Death.”

A woman turns toward a ghostly hand touching her face. She’s haggard: shadowed eyes, mouth compressed, skin taut over the skull.

Her own hand, muscled and alive, wavers nearby. The rest of her form dissolves in watery streaks, as if some force has overcome all weight and body. Everything flows a new direction.

Death’s veined fingers rest lightly on the woman’s shoulder. Her cheek, in shadow, seems to want, to feel for, this presence.

There’s no pathos in the image: no shrinking fear, no calm resignation, no courageous embrace. Only tight lips. Eyes shut. Intense inwardness and a simple turn of the head.

Her expression? Relieved perhaps. Not happy, certainly not sad, and... yes, interested.

5/30/99

Now the body shakes with each breath, eyes fluttering, blood forcing a way through. Bruised and thin, stretched on the bed: not dying, not dying, not...

Crumpled veins swell, subside, swell again.

Dark blood: not yet, not yet...

5/31/99

As a girl in Indiana, outdoors with her aunt, Virginia observed the night sky.

A warm darkness enveloped them, reclining on lawn chairs, naming the constellations and brightest points of light.

Later, on a chilly Vermont night: the Aurora Borealis, exciting, fluid, terrifying.

Now, inside the skull's planetarium, lights run and play, flashing to the zenith.

Arched back, eyes tight, ripples coming up from feet and knees along a spine charged with particles and gasses, out through cold lips...

6/1/99

Swimming across a vast screen of mere light, another kind of consciousness. Mind turned away, looking after matters of lung, heart, nerve, fluid.

Openings, closings: something still happening beneath the paper-thin skin. Mouth round, nursing. Shards of air. A quivering eye filled with stars...

SONG

She fell in front of a large audience. That was all. There were flowers: wild cosmos, poppies, clover, swaying in front of a flapping flag. Cars passed through the fields of color, making a constant hum, which she no longer minded. Could this be all, she wondered. The stumble, the hands letting go?

Asked about her impressions of space, she spoke at length about the view of the earth at night, with “the lights of cities sparkling like stars and strung out in geometric circles, evidence that the earth is inhabited, that reason and intellect are at work.”

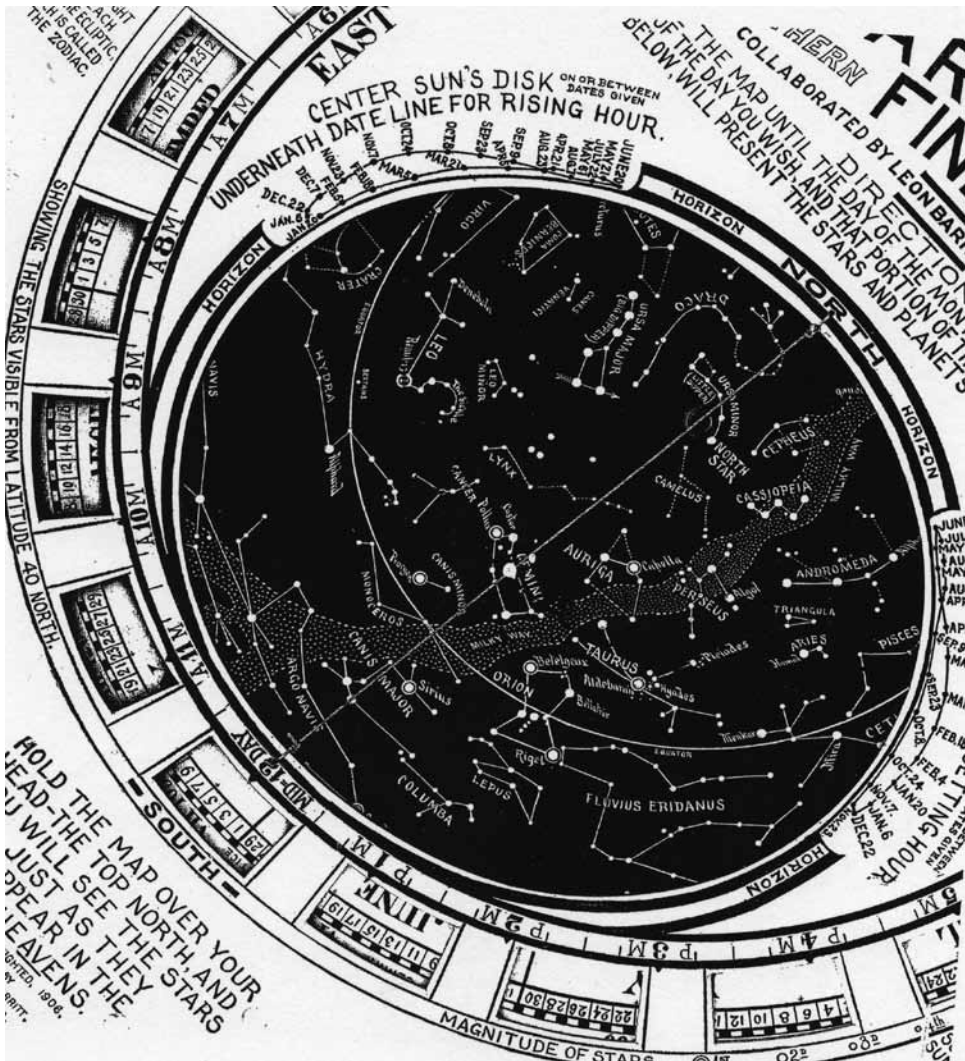
A strange tearing sound was heard in the night beyond the dark window pane. A hand reached over to pick off drooping blossoms from her day-lilies, one after another. Beneath a weight of apples half the tree had come down. A hand was reaching over to grasp wet petals.

But she said her strongest impression was her return to earth. “We had already touched down and our module was lying on its side,” she said. “In the porthole the raw earth of the steppe was visible. You could see that it was plowed soil, and although the exit hatch was still closed it seemed I could already smell the raw field, the wormwood and the grass.”

Her feet were not touching anything, not even the slats of light, which were pale white. It was a summer place with zones of deep green. Moth wings moved in the curtains. Her bare feet hovered, dreaming literal dreams in a room papered with flowers.

“Then the hatch opened and all the smells rushed in,” she said. “That moment was really nice.”

~Zvetlana Savitskaya, cosmonaut (in the *New York Times*, 8/11/84)



GHOST



Life goes on, she'd say. We can't always be dwelling on the past, picking through the ashes.

Yes, of course. I agree. But...



Toward the end, Mom reminisced on tape: family stories of Evansville, New York, Vermont, people and places. Responding to my questions, she talks about her youth and marriage. The story is matter-of-fact, told without nostalgia or complaint: childhood in Evansville, a close family (her strict but loving parents a rebellious younger brother, Joe; a grandfather, aunt and uncle, all quirky "characters"). High school (not much to report: movie dates, necking in cars). Then Randolph Macon College in Virginia and a year in New York (earning an MA in psychology at Columbia). When a planned trip to Europe is cancelled, due to Hitler's menace, she finds herself back in Evansville.

Virginia Iglehart creates an unpaid job for herself at Evansville College doing community relations, or what would today be called development work. She collaborates with an elderly trustee, Emily Orr Clifford, to organize a reception for key townspeople. The event is a big success, and she recalls with satisfaction: "It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't talked my way into that job." Before long, Mrs. Clifford introduces her son, James, to "that nice Iglehart girl."

Jimmy Clifford, well known to Virginia's parents, has recently finished doctoral work in English Literature at Columbia, including research abroad. He now teaches at Lehigh University. They date a few times, and then this bachelor, fifteen years her senior, pops the question. On their dates, she recalls, he talks mostly about himself, his life in New York, research in England, etc. "Educating

me. Well, I really had nothing to say. What did I know? Evansville High School, a women's college, a volunteer job..." A month later, they marry.

Soon, a first child: "We were off and running!" In three years, a second. Her husband takes a job at Barnard College, then Columbia. Three children. A dog. Her mother-in-law comes to live in their New York apartment. There's an old house to fix up in Vermont. Sabbaticals spent in Britain. And continuous community engagement: founding a local library, running a children's performance series, country auctions to benefit "civil rights." A lot to manage and care for...

Twenty-five years after her marriage, children out of the house, Virginia earns a Master's degree at Union Theological Seminary and begins a decade-long career as chief executive officer for Auburn Theological Seminary. Then comes widowhood: activism in a struggling inner-city church, retirement, remarriage...

As she tells it, this life simply happens to her.



My mother didn't dwell much on the past. Not at least publicly. She did, however, preserve family records for future generations: letters, clippings, event programs, travel souvenirs and old family photo albums.

A large box contained the letters and journals of Emily Orr Clifford who, in the 1890s, had travelled around the world with the diplomatic family of a college friend. Mom would devote much of her late life to transcribing and editing her mother-in-law's remarkably detailed record of a young Indiana woman discovering the world. Attempts to interest publishers proved unsuccessful. The original manuscripts went to a historical library in Evansville,

but the editorial work continued using photocopies increasingly covered with comments, corrections and queries, along with notes for an introduction.

As the emphysema progressed, work slowed, then stopped. It's unlikely now that I, or any of my siblings, will find the energy to master all the historical and personal details necessary to advance the project. So the box filled with writing from the 1890s and the 1980s, a collaboration of two talented women from different generations, stays unopened, its future uncertain.

I've gone through the other materials mom kept and have learned what I can. But much of her life, especially her childhood and youth, remains obscure.

A newspaper clipping offers a rare glimpse. At the age of ten, she traveled with her mother and brother to visit cousins in a New Jersey suburb of New York City.

Am. 1927

Cousin Virginia From West Is Home in Bloomfield Now

Truly the day of woman's emancipation has arrived!
Wives are no longer content to remain in the kitchen while their husbands tackle the problems of the outside world—and their daughters refuse to play with dolls at home while their brothers go adventuring.

Proof of the latter fact are Mary Ingel and Virginia Idlehart, two bobbed-haired modern misses of 10. The girls disappeared yesterday afternoon from their homes at 99 Beech street, Bloomfield.

Mother Becomes Worried.
A neighbor saw them go. Mary had under her arm a small handbag. Virginia carried a hat box. The neighbor thought they were playing house. Came dinner time and Mary and Virginia were not there to dine.

Mrs. Ingel, Mary's mother and Virginia's aunt, became intensely worried. She suddenly remembered hearing, one day last week, Mary confidently announce:
"I bet that I could find my way

around in the subways in New York!"
Mrs. Ingel then discovered the girls had taken extra clothing with them. Mary had also emptied her bank of \$1.25.

The police of Bloomfield, Newark and New York were notified.

"Meet Cousin Virginia."

At 8.30 P. M. a Glen Ridge patrolman noticed two small girls calmly sipping cups of hot chocolate in a drug store. Despite their serene manner, the officer became suspicious. The children were evidently travelers and they appeared much too young to be making a journey unaccompanied by a guardian.

He questioned them.
Mary paused between sips of chocolate to explain.
"This is my cousin, Virginia, from out West," she graciously introduced. "She's living out here and I'm showing her New Jersey."
Mary had in her possession a book, "Two Girls Astray."

An innocent time: two girls happily "astray." And a changing time, suggested by the reporter's humorous framing of the escape. Women's "emancipation" was on peoples' minds, a struggle of modernity and tradition, freedom and constraint. What kind of a woman could the ten-year-old adventurer become?

Her parents were civic-minded church-people. Her father, Joseph Iglehart, a prominent attorney, was a leader of the Methodist Church in Evansville and a member of many institutional governing boards, including Evansville College. As a young man, he had taken a tramp steamer to Europe, where he traveled widely and learned German. Virginia's mother, Gertrude Townley, was strict but loving, a moral force in her daughter's early upbringing. Mom told me that as she was finding her way as a young woman her mother offered firm, sensible advice, and did not impose her will. Her younger brother, Joe, something of a rebel as a teenager, occasionally ran away, consorting with hoboes, riding the rails. Virginia, a good girl, excelled in school and had an artistic, creative bent. Her family, while traditional Hoosiers, were open-minded and interested in a wider world.

On her New Jersey trip, Virginia visited New York City repeatedly. She wrote to her father about a ferry ride to Coney Island, the view from atop the Woolworth Building (in 1927, the tallest structure in the world), and visits to the major museums. She preserved a typewritten letter on law firm stationary from her grandfather, John Iglehart (a respected judge and, in retirement, an Evansville "character" called, affectionately "Pop Pop"). As an attorney he had represented the railroads and travelled frequently to New York, a place he came to know well. He advised his granddaughter to enjoy the city's cultural resources and especially the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The greatest collection in the country: "You will not forget it."

No doubt New York made an impression. Mom returned there for a year after college and, with marriage, it would become her home. In 1927 the young tourist was taken to a play at the Roxy Theatre, an experience she reported enthusiastically to her father. Perhaps this sparked her youthful career as a playwright. A few years later, she co-authored her school's Eighth Grade Play: "The Darkened Room: A Mystery Play." A typescript survives: the murder of a tyrannical father, a blocked love affair, untrustworthy servants, murderous "Spaniards," and eventually an impossibly convoluted plot that can only be resolved by the miraculous return of a lost lover.

Five years later, in college, Virginia Iglehart wrote and directed something more sophisticated, the Sophomore Class Play, composed entirely in rhyming verse. "What Every Woman Ought to Know" received glowing reviews. It involved a large cast of classmates in a spoof of "the new woman" set in a college resembling Randolph Macon.

The play begins with plainly-dressed, bespectacled girls in class studying hard and happily quoting Aristotle, a view of "serious" women's education. Under the influence of such scholarly tutelage, America's women, it seems, have forgotten their roles as lovely adornments, charming partners, good cooks and homemakers. America's men complain to the US President, who decides to correct the situation by shutting down all women's colleges. The deans and teachers are in a panic.

Virginia's play shows the students confronting the threat by creating a spectacle of new, attractive womanhood for the President who arrives soon on a tour of inspection. Expert consultants are recruited to rapidly transform the college: Mae West, Maurice Chevalier, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. This provides theatrical opportunities for sexiness, charming French-accented

(rhymed) banter, and enthusiastic tap dance numbers. The students enjoy impersonating silly men. Needless to say, their performance for the visiting President and his cabinet, saves the college.

Reading the script in 2022, it's unclear, to me at least, whether the play's fun-loving enactment of female empowerment and attractiveness is a recipe for a return to convention or a vision of something different. No doubt both...

Virginia married a loving man, a committed partner who always discussed family plans and relied on her advice. But he was often distracted, ambitious and working extra hard to advance a delayed career. Her considerable energy and organizational skills were needed to manage their life in New York and Vermont. Mom was always busy. (I can't recall seeing her absorbed in a long novel.) However, she never let family life absorb all her energies. Her theatrical interests found expression in a "Children's Performance Series" that she created and managed at Columbia's McMillan Theatre. (One season's schedule: a puppeteer, a ballet, Hopi Indian dancers, a circus group, folk singers, and a magician.) She founded and volunteered at a neighborhood children's library. All my father's writings were subjected to her editorial scrutiny (also drafts by other friends and colleagues) An amateur painter, Mom took art classes and found time for plein air landscapes. In Vermont, she worked every day in her flower gardens, which were admired by all.

In retirement, she composed and typed vignettes of family history for her children and grandchildren. One of these was a portrait of "Pop Pop," the grandfather who had written to her about New York City art museums. As an old man he lived in the country at a house belonging to Virginia's aunt where, as a girl, she visited often and perhaps acquired her love of gardening.

One would see him on a hot summer day pattering among his hillside plants, garbed in overalls and battered straw hat, carefully tying brown paper bags around each bunch of purple Concord grapes to protect them from the birds. As I grew up in Evansville, citizens were accustomed to seeing him at Fourth and Main—the busiest corner in town—shuffling along in his black suit, carrying over his arm a market basket all but overflowing with gifts for friends: prizewinning golden bantam corn, enormous beefy red tomatoes topped by luscious, mouth-watering purple grapes. Over it all was folded The New York Times, picked up each day when he came to town. But Pop Pop, having crossed at that corner for some fifty years, paid no attention to traffic lights when they were introduced. Drivers learned to wait while the bent, white-haired old gentleman with the market basket shuffled slowly across the intersection.

Judge Iglehart spent some months in the hospital, before his death, and a nurse reported that “she had received a liberal education, as he required her to read the entire New York Times to her every day.”

New York City, where I and my siblings would grow up, was already part of the world my mother knew as a girl.

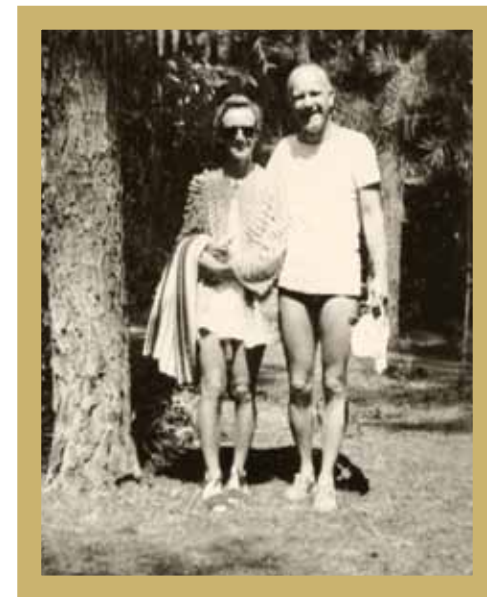


In a different time and place Virginia Iglehart might have been a “career girl.” But not in southern Indiana during the late 1930s where she was at loose ends after completing her education. The job at Evansville College was seen by family and friends as a way to make herself useful until the right man came along. It also reflected a desire for something more, as did the year studying in New York City and the cancelled trip abroad. In Virginia’s social

world there were few acceptable paths. Leaving Evansville on her own simply wasn’t conceivable. Like many women, she struck a bargain with marriage.

A man from another generation, an approved family friend, my father offered to rescue her from southern Indiana. It meant moving to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and assuming the life of a mother and faculty wife. But her suitor was ambitious and promised a wider world: the New York theatre and opera he loved, a life of ideas and travel. Jimmy Clifford, desperate to marry, knew this exciting world was his trump card, and he played it well.

Did my parents fall in love? I doubt there was a *coup de foudre*. A gifted young woman with a blocked future, a man making up for lost time... She talks about their courtship with a certain irony, a shrug and a smile, a sense of something inevitable. With time and the formation of an affectionate partnership, love certainly took shape.



Listening to the taped reminiscences, her cool retrospective story, I want something more. Romance? Ambition? Desire? She offers none of that. Do I expect a feminist story of frustrated independence, a blocked career? She remembers practical choices.

Mom was creative and curious, but never a rebel or an iconoclast. She accepted life and worked to make it better. Her character was a combination, I now think, of shyness and realism. She kept her own counsel, letting others do the talking. And if a job needed to be done, or a child comforted in the middle of the night, she was there.



Virginia had role-models. Her own mother, stern and self-denying, was married to a garrulous, and demanding, community leader. Gertrude Iglehart, as recalled by her daughter, was always active. She “truly lived for others.” Virginia admired her mother, and felt both guilty and resentful because she could never measure up. Finding her way as a “new woman” in conservative Evansville can’t have been easy. There would be small transgressions. She remembered her mother saying “I think you’re perfect in every way, except for that cigarette always in your hand...”

Her father’s sister, Lockie, offered something different. She “enjoyed ill health” and lived in the country where she indulged a love of poetry, art, gardening, and star-gazing. She traveled in Europe. Her niece, a frequent visitor during the summer or on week-ends, soon acquired similar tastes. They became friends. But “Tante” was eccentric and a bit irresponsible: not, people thought, the best role-model...

Virginia’s mother-in-law, Emily Orr Clifford, was a more formidable presence. In the 1890s, as a young woman, she had traveled around the world, the guest of a well-connected college friend.

Impressed by the missionaries she encountered, she became a liberal, Christian, internationalist. While raising her two sons, and later as a widow, Mrs. Clifford led a civic life—active in church projects and as a founding trustee of Evansville College. Virginia believed she had virtually ordered her son to propose marriage.

My mother always expressed admiration for this woman of character, committed to family, community service, and world citizenship. Old-fashioned in her values, and a pacifist, toward the end of her life Grandmother Clifford evolved in the direction of the United Nations and liberal ecumenism. During these post-war years she lived with us in New York City. Her room, with its atmosphere of antique furniture and exotic things from China and India, was a special world—a place she could retreat, and where visitors of all ages were welcome.



Among the memoirs my mother wrote is an affectionate portrait of her mother-in-law evoking the dignified, white-haired lady’s final years. Virginia appreciated this strong-minded octogenarian’s willingness to entertain and educate two rambunctious grandchildren, her general domestic helpfulness, and especially her instinct for when to withdraw and withhold criticism.

Grandmother Clifford died of cancer at eighty-four. My mother’s account of her final months reveals something of the loyalty shared by two women of very different generations. And it shows Virginia as a writer. She called her narrative “A Good Death.”

...As she began to require constant care, a nurse came in during the day. I was distressed at the thought that she would now starve to death, but after two weeks of no food at all and little water, she did not suffer. In time, she was disturbed by hallucinations. I, as night nurse, slept on a cot in the hall just outside her door, where I could hear the slightest

sound or call for help. One night she called me in to hear her say, "Who are all these ladies sitting around my bed? Do you see their pretty hats? They keep sitting there. Please tell them to go away." I obliged, asking them to leave, one by one, until at last Grandmother was satisfied and, with the help of an injection, was able to relax and sleep. The next day she said, "I know who those ladies were. They were here for my funeral." These disturbances were rare, but once she cried out "I'm ready, Jesus, come get me!"

Time passed slowly. About six weeks after James's return [from a research trip to England] she spoke no more, and did not seem to know who was in the room with her. Our voices or that of the nurse received no response. The children, who realized that she was ill and now could not talk with them, stopped coming to her room. Friends would telephone to inquire but ceased coming in to visit. Except for her outbursts, usually at night, and the voices of children at play, the house was extremely quiet. She was slipping away from us, but somehow death was slow in coming.

After I called the church for the name of an undertaker, the minister who did the parish calling came to see her. I told Dr. Tibbetts, an older man who she knew and liked, it was useless as she knew no one. But I took him into her, and he sat quietly on the edge of her bed, took her hand and slowly and clearly recited the 23rd Psalm. As he finished, she opened her eyes (for the first time in many days), and said clearly, "Thank you." It was the release she needed. That night was her last.

But it was a dramatic scene, that last night. The minister, as he left, warned me that I must tell the children, prepare them for the end. Emily somehow sensing that something was about to happen had stayed home from school for three days, not ill, but refusing to go. She was just quietly playing in bed. I did tell her that evening. Through her tears she said, "When I grow up I want to be just like Grandmother."

As I was preparing our patient for the night I found she had seemingly relapsed into her more or less unconscious state. I leaned over close to her and told her what Emily had said. (What ran through my mind was the thought of the many times these two independent women, these two Emilys, had clashed, and of Grandmother's exasperation with her rebellious granddaughter. She had often said, "I give up! I can do nothing with this child!") To my surprise, this weak, now emaciated old lady who had not had the strength to lift her hand, suddenly reached up and wound an arm around my neck, pulling me down to her. I was in a vice-like grip for some minutes, unable to slip out. Finally, I removed her arm and tucked her in for the night. In a last burst of strength no one could have predicted, she was telling me that she had heard and appreciated what I said.

During the night, I detected a pronounced change in her breathing. She had entered into a coma. In the morning as James and I together watched, her breathing stopped.

What was my mother's rush of feelings in that passionate death-grip?



Vermont summer. Virginia in the kitchen making lunch for family and guests. A line of sandwiches on the counter. Someone calls, "Three more for lunch," as a car drives up. She reaches for the peanut butter and jelly.

New York winter. The children finally in bed, Ginny Clifford sits at her desk in the hallway of our apartment. Long telephone calls to friends: planning, organizing...

In both images a cigarette is burning, between her long fingers or in an ashtray. She had taken up smoking as a young woman — to be fashionable? Thin? modern? Because she enjoyed it? Was it an act of independence? Later when the emphysema set in, Mom's bouts of depression were surely connected to feelings of helplessness and to a sense of shame for having brought this on herself, for being a burden on those around her.

During most of her adult years, Virginia seemed happy. She accepted her life and didn't want to look into it much. Did she experience uncertainty, guilt, anger, or regret? Certainly, her brother's recurring mental illness and premature death were a source of anguish. But if she felt pain she kept it to herself. Her marriage was a good one: with steady support and affection, children, interesting people and places. Was she sometimes irritated by her voluble husband's tendency to take up space? (Reminiscing once on tape she tartly remarked: "Well, I married two men who loved to talk about themselves!") We children never heard any complaints, only a certain abruptness at times, an impatience with self-indulgence.

Virginia Clifford earned a reputation as an editor of academic books and articles. She valued clear expression, cleaning up the sentences of my father and many others over the years. There were constant requests for help. She sometimes complained: "Why can't they just learn to write clearly?" After retiring she compiled family stories and worked on her mother-in-law's travel journals. Nothing ever saw print. Mom wrote beautifully, but without confidence.

When Virginia had been a widow for nearly a decade, an old friend, Louis Benezet, began courting her. She said, simply: "No thanks. I've had my marriage." She had gotten used to life "without a husband under foot." Only after her suitor persisted for a half-dozen years did she agree, trading independence for

companionship. The couple moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, spending summers in Vermont, with occasional trips abroad. A pre-nuptial agreement guaranteed the wife's right to travel on her own, for up to three months in any year. Virginia, who took her marriage vows very seriously, insisted this be in writing. She never used her escape clause.



Like many children, I saw my parents as a unit: the indivisible, unquestionable source of my happiness. My father, enthusiastic and outgoing, was always center stage. My mother, in the wings, playing a host of supporting roles. Now I find myself struggling, with an unfamiliar urgency, to separate her from him, to discover a separate person.

Trying to get closer in her declining years has made me more conscious of our differences. I'm a child of the sixties, needing to let it all hang out. And she's from another time, the daughter of churchgoers, a woman whose sense of discretion is best captured by the French, *pudeur*. No revelations, no complaints... But when, I wonder, does restraint shade into denial? Was her reticence about her marriage a sign of repression? Or was she consciously withholding unresolved feelings, afraid I would exaggerate their importance? Maybe what really happened long ago was now simply unclear, even to her. How to weigh the turning points, the different pressures, as our life-choices are made, by us and for us? Better not reopen the story. Hold onto the version we've lived with.

Of course, my post-mortem is less a search for historical truth than it is a work of desire: a child's need to make sense of his parent's life and death, to turn an unfinished relationship into a story, to create intimacy from silence.

FIRE

The day after her death, Emily, Joe and I go through Mom's clothes.

We pile them in the middle of the bed, remembering her in some of the dresses — at church, a picnic, a night out. We find a sweater, stretched at the elbows exactly where her arms bent. A dark velvet gown still hugging an absent body. A summer frock many times washed and hung on the line. Flower-patterned blouse, thread-bare scarf, cracked belt, shiny raincoat.

Should we save a few of these, like old close-ups? But which ones? To hold them is to touch... what? A form, a scent, a caress. Memories of a person walking, sitting, sleeping, bending... all the smooth, quick, settled, times that once made up a life.

Hanging there the clothes seem to be just waiting for a touch of flesh, a breath to fill them.

But as we take each garment from its hanger and add it to the pile, an alien shape grows on the deathbed. And all Mom's many times—her evenings and afternoons, sunny and rainy days, winters and summers —congeal in a heaped body.

Hurriedly we stuff the thing into black plastic bags.



My mother donated her corpse for medical research and teaching. (My father had done the same.) We never discussed the decision, her reasons. Did Mom feel that the body is just a material envelope for the soul? Or that nothing physical really “matters?” Perhaps she saw her remains as serving a useful purpose (her practical, unsentimental side). Or was it a wish to be as little trouble

as possible? To be whisked away? Did she believe, idealistically, in the good that medical science can do?

All of these, perhaps. In retrospect I wonder what notion of self makes it possible to think of “giving” one's own “body.” What abstraction of mind or spirit from the material world? This common sense (for a rationalistic, enlightened family) makes less and less sense to me. Another thing we didn't talk about.

She might have said: “It doesn't really matter, Jamie. You know, someone has to do it. They need bodies for teaching.”

Several hours after Mom died, two polite men from a mortuary arrived to remove her, for refrigeration, en route to the University of California, San Francisco, Medical School. We dressed Virginia Clifford in a red flowered bathrobe, knowing she wouldn't want to be seen in pajamas.



In the middle of an April night, the neighbors telephoned Mom to say that our old Vermont place had burned to the ground. She waited until the next day to call us. The news seemed distant, like something heard on the radio. We didn't talk long. Not much to say.

No one knows why the fire started. The place was unoccupied, but some repair work done that afternoon by plumbers may have left a spark under the floorboards. By midnight the glow in the sky was visible miles away.

The house was 170 years old: two stories and a large attic. It held forty summers of our family life, a place filled with memories: warm sunlight pouring in through the curtains, a screen-door banging. It was made of enormous, hand-hewn timbers which burned very hot, the firefighters said.

A neighbor told us that she wept, shivering at the edge of the heat, as the old place was consumed. All we can do is imagine the flames and sparks roaring up to mingle with stars in the dark.



Mom had winnowed her possessions when she left New York and began spending winters in the California condominium. Then the Vermont fire consumed the rest. After her death, Joe, Emily and I divide up a few pieces of furniture (memories of the New York apartment where we grew up) and some Chinese and Japanese artworks (from our grandmother's world tour). There's a box of fading photos, a few souvenirs, legal documents (trust, living will, powers of attorney, all up to date), and a few typed reminiscences of family life. Little to pass on.

A clean break. It would be her way. But the tasks of mourning aren't clean. One can imagine that the physical body doesn't matter. But it does. Left-over things, with nowhere to go, can haunt you.

I think of us stuffing Mom's clothes into garbage bags as I read Jaime de Angulo's 1921 memoir (*Indians in Overalls*) which describes Pitt River Indians in California ritually burning a deceased woman's possessions. In a collective catharsis, everything, old and new, has to go. And an essay by the Pitt River/Maidu artist Judith Lowry in *News from Native California* (Fall 2000) tells of reviving this ceremony following her father's death.

After the funeral, my father's possessions had occupied the center of my studio for weeks, in an orderly pile, as solidly immovable as a small monument. I could not bear to think of his things tossed away in the county dump or waiting to be picked over in some thrift store. Yet I could not work around them. I could not remove them from my sight. Gradually, it came to me that the only thing to do was to burn them.

Ritual burnings had faded in tribal tradition. But after consultation with elders, she and other family members burned Leonard Lowry's things: military memorabilia, cowboy boots, baseball hats from tribal or veterans' meetings, a ceremonial pipe, worn jackets, shirts, work gloves... all consumed by flames at an emotional gathering on tribal land.



What should we do with this cardboard box done up with rubber bands? Inside, small rocks in disintegrating paper envelopes, each carefully labeled: from Iona and Mull in the Hebrides, tesserae from the Roman forum and Lazarus's Tomb in Jordan, a fragrant stone picked up in the Bibémus Quarry in Provence (where we tracked Cézanne), pebbles from New Zealand's Mt. Cook and a temple in Bangkok, flakes from Qumran, a tight little packet, "dead sea stone"...

And where to put a stray page covered with colored pencil sketches, carefully identified and dated December 1989: "an image—completely illusionary, seen on white ceiling one afternoon," followed by nine differently tinted versions, each "recreated by blinking the eyes...?"



I don't like to think about what happened to my mother's body after it was wheeled out of her room that night. And I wonder if we could have found something else to do with her physical remains. Something for us, her survivors.

Our only burning was the midnight blaze in Vermont. No family there to wail.

We might have scattered my mother's ashes in the pasture behind her summer flower garden. That place still links us, her children dispersed across a continent.

A GOOD BOY

He thought that when his mother finally died he would then, perhaps, touch a depth of feeling denied him, so far, in life. And while thinking this, he also understood how unlikely it was that his basic pattern of emotions would change. Or, if it did change, and if he experienced the feelings that had never really found expression after his father's death; if he managed somehow to lose control, wasn't it likely that his ability to symbolize, to grasp, what was happening to him would evaporate and that he'd be left in a numb, rudderless state?

For his most fervent hope was that his mother's dying might provoke in his experience, and especially in his writing, an intensity that had always been lacking, that had denied him the crucial ingredient of poetry, and that made all his more-or-less skillful conceits and maneuvers, finally, a kind of cleverness. This hope persisted against all lucidity, all cold-blooded understanding that one does not radically change so late in life.

And he knew this hope was just another form of procrastination, that the poetry would never be real, never be charged in the way needed to animate its irony and stylish control. This he knew, and still wanted something else. But not enough, apparently, to start right away. How would he deal with the disappointment of finding that the emotions (grief? remorse? anger? shame? Relief?) to be unleashed by his mother's death were simply missing, or permanently stunted?

By analyzing his failure? By squeezing out more faded words?



I write the above in a notebook, late one evening in our rebuilt Vermont house. Judith, Ben and I have been staying here for a few weeks, and we have the place to ourselves since my mother, in California, can no longer travel. The house, constructed after the old

one went up in flames, sits just alongside the former foundation which, filled with debris, is no longer a good place to build. Having assembled the new structure with our own hands, we know it intimately; yet it feels alien. We see familiar meadows through the windows, but slightly off-center.

During her few summers in this house, Virginia furnished all the rooms with new and used things, bought or given by friends. The place is rented every winter to a family that likes to ski. Their Christmas ornaments are in the basement. It's a good house, but without accumulated life — to give it consistency and depth.

In drawers and closets, Mom's stuff: clothes, envelopes, address stamps, dried up pens, stiff shoes. Put away for next summer.

This melancholy ambiance, the sense of blocked renewal, surely contributed to the passage I wrote that evening. And now, rereading this attempt to be honest, I see that it re-enacts the very malaise it wants to escape. Writing in the third person, I keep my feelings at a distance. And the mannered style is an unconscious pastiche of Michel Leiris, the French writer I've studied and translated, someone known for endless self-analysis.

The truth-telling isn't even in my own voice. But worse than having to confront this strained performance is the admission it contains — that I've been hoping to exploit my mother's death to make myself a better writer.



What would Virginia think of this whole post-mortem?

Among the very few things she left behind are some handwritten notes, jotted down after a difficult conversation we had in the 1970s. She kept so little, I can only assume these are for me.

During a brief period of psychotherapy in my late 20s, I probed below the surface of a happy childhood. I had grown up in an atmosphere of unconditional approval, always rewarded with encouragement: a good boy.

But now I saw the cost. In our family, open emotions seldom went beyond sentimentality: crying over Dickens's Little Nell, or the death of Charlotte the spider. There was a seal on deeper feelings, an avoidance of conflict. My family's respectful distances had made me into an emotionally superficial person. I blamed my parents.

More *Sturm und Drang*, I felt, would have been a sign of deeper caring, of taking each other more seriously. I interpreted my mother's tactful parenting as indifference. I confronted her, one evening when she visited me in graduate school, after dinner and wine.

My complaint was heavy-handed, aggressive. At one point I reduced her to tears.

The text she preserved gives her side of the conversation.

She says that I am "regress(ing) into adolescent rejection." She tries to explain how, not wanting to "pry" into my adolescent life, she had backed off. This made me think she didn't care. Yet when she did sometimes ask about personal things, I rebuffed her.

— *all the doors I tried to keep open then, that were slammed in my face! Finally parent recognizes it is their life, they must live it.*

— *J, wants to be respected as an individual, yet unwilling to accept me as I am. Highly critical, wants to change me. He is right, of course, but should be able to accept where I can't change.*

Unnerved by what had momentarily opened between us. We both drew back, as if nothing had happened.

Now, much later, is anything different? Can Mom see that I am starting to understand her way of being both loving and private.

I hear her saying, sometimes with irritation, sometimes with a smile: “Oh, Jamie, just leave it alone. Just let go of all that.”

— *J. desperately needs perspective, humor. In present situation, no humor about self or life. Compulsive self-analysis all the time. I wish he could throw himself into some activity... The examined life may not be any fun at all.*

At least I learned to smile with her when she'd say, slipping in and out of dementia: “Well, Jamie, you always were a good boy.”

PRAYER

Oh, dear Mother
who art in Heaven

I ask you to forgive me
for being such an asshole

For never really asking
what you wanted

For always being so
earnest and tiresome

Forgive me my lectures
as I forgive your inattention

And now that you're dead and
no longer my mother

Now that you're
everyone

Maybe we can just be
friends?

RAVENNA

“But Mrs. Clifford,” the tour leader said, “We won’t be stopping in Ravenna.”

It was marked on the travel plan, but the bus filled with English people needed to reach Venice in time for Tea.

She wept, silently.



Two summers after Virginia’s death we make a pilgrimage, my family and I, to the great mosaics she saw only in imagination.

S. Vitale, The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, The Arian Baptistry, S. Apollinare Nuovo, S. Apollinare in Classe... The buildings are made of dull brick: massive, brown forms. Inside, an amazing, intricate universe. Worlds of sparkling light and swirled marble, overflowing with images: vibrant green, oceanic blue, bright gold, silver, red, ivory, white.

The fifth- and sixth-century pictures seem to have been made yesterday, their refracting, reflecting surfaces alive, different from every point of view, at each time of day.

Whole worlds of light. S. Vitale: tall amber. Gallo Placidia: golden alabaster. The Baptistry: white electric. S. Apollinare Nuovo: cool gray. S. Apollinare in Classe: pastel sun. Luminosity captured, relayed by thousands of tesserae, precisely angled facets of stone and glass.

Virginia always noticed the play of sun over grass; in clouds, across mountains, the passage of shadows...



In two famous poems, “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium,” W. B. Yeats imagined a spiritual life. He invoked the Age of Justinian, Ravenna’s heyday, using images of art and splendor: a superbly fashioned golden bird on a golden bough in the emperor’s palace, the immense basilica of Hagia Sophia, “a starlit or a moonlit dome” which “disdains/All that man is,/All mere complexities,/The fury and the mire of human veins” Nature and the merely human, are left behind.

How different from the vision I discover in Ravenna — as if Virginia’s eyes were looking through mine.

In the apse of S. Vitale a young Christ perches on a turquoise watery orb. In Galla Placidia the Good Shepherd rests among stones and shrubs, tenderly petting his sheep. S. Vitale, and especially the wide apse of S. Apollinare in Classe, are drenched in green. Even at the more austere S. Apollinare Nuovo with its ranks of martyrs and virgins, each figure has been framed by a delicate palm whose blue-green fronds brush the gold beyond. The saints walk across a lawn strewn with flowers and small animals.

Deep blues and greens are shot through with sparkling tesserae of gold, white and red. A blossoming flower, forever perfect, fades with each shadow, and is renewed. Eternity, like light, a way of changing...

In the vault of S. Vitale, a plenitude of land and sea life: running hare, fawn, billy-goat, panther, quail, swallow, parrot, owl, dove. And so much else: small birds fluttering, perched, drinking; a frog and heron splashing in a little swamp, just beneath Moses on the mountaintop.

Virginia’s sympathy for small creatures: birds, chipmunks, and moles; the anxiously watched robin’s nest every June in her lilac

bush; the field-mice who wintered, and rearranged things, in her summer home...



At S. Vitale we gaze on globes of blue in which gold crosses float, we see the four rivers of paradise and dozens of lime-green dolphins twined like cornucopias around heads of Christ and the apostles. Here, sacred space isn't the glittering backdrop of Eternity. It's a vibrant world of flora and fauna, mountains and oceans.

S. Apollinare in Classe: Each humble shrub or spreading tree expresses a moment of being: flower half open, bird just alighting, stone set in a particular light...

Every summer, Virginia is forever digging, pruning, transplanting her own earthly paradise of colors.

Her matter-of-fact "vision" of life-in-death and death-in-life, expresses a reality that has nothing to do with elevated spirituality or transcendence. Its energetic, moving light abolishes nothing, leaves nothing behind. Everything's present and redeemed, including existence at its most mundane. Ravenna's mosaics sparkle with this vision: the divinity of each shrub and frog, tiny flowers sprouting at the feet of saints.

And in the deep blue firmament of Galla Placidia's Mausoleum: breathing, pulsing stars, red, white, green, and gold: glowing coals, exploding buds...



Here in Ravenna, still searching for Virginia, for the first time I feel the need for a religious language. But how little I really know about her spiritual life — another thing we didn't talk about. Did she really believe in the incarnated Jesus? That He rose from the dead to save humanity?

Virginia was raised in a Christian household. She would become a lay activist in soulful, mixed-race Presbyterian churches in New York and later Marin City, California. Her tone was always practical, never "spiritual." At home, we didn't pray, except for grace at Thanksgiving.

Summers, she skipped church and worked in her flower garden.

Virginia's belief (if that's the right word) was personal. Her church-going seemed to be primarily about community participation, her spirituality about natural beauty. A Franciscan vision of simplicity, perhaps. Everyday sacredness, and service.

It seems that her faith both affirmed the tradition she was born into and overflowed it. Her Christianity was just one path, among many, to a divinity as universal and multiple as light itself.

Perhaps... I really don't know.

I imagine her standing beside me, gazing at these gentle Christs, tiny flowers, fluttering birds, all the greens and blues...

PRESENCE

I haven't been speaking for my mother, just "speaking nearby," as Trinh T. Minh-ha said about her films of Africa.

And strangely, the distance we kept during her long death has made me feel closer. Little by little, I gave up trying to penetrate an inner experience. It was enough, now and then, to lie beside her on the big bed, looking up at the ceiling.

Together... But mostly apart.

Mom seemed increasingly to be ruled by a physical process separate from what was recognizable as consciousness. Her various bodily rhythms, internal and external parts, were going their own ways. The outward changes, devastating.

Our usual language of appearance soon became irrelevant: words like beautiful, healthy, ugly, glowing, worn, animated, depressed... made little sense. Her transformed condition imposed its own presence — engrossing, powerful — which I could neither ignore nor accept. Something inhuman, even monstrous, seemed to be happening.

Now, two months after her death, I get some help from a Francis Bacon retrospective exhibition, at the San Francisco Palace of the Legion of Honor. An artist Virginia probably didn't like much.



The twisted flesh rests on tables or platforms, some like hospital gurneys. Bacon's people are isolated: reduced to shrunken, living heaps.

Geometrical "indications" of three-dimensional space surround the bodies. Unheimlich apparatuses support the leaking flesh. Everyone perched, caged, enthroned, suspended, wheeled around.

I see my mother there, as she squirms on her protruding spine, stretched on a big bed in a small room. Within this rectangular space she's a blur of pink silk pajamas: "awake," on her back, eyes closed or partly open; "asleep," curled on her side. Existing... Now and again she struggles to slump on a toilet seat. Face or hands suddenly bruise in myriad colors.

Nearly all "personal," features succumb to Bacon's brush or trowel: a draining of recognizable form, return to basic flesh and bone. Just a few traces — a look, a gesture — bare reminders of a self. A red eye stares out over gobbled paint.

I see my mother's delicate form slowly smudged, bruised, torn: insides turning out, flayed...

Bacon's Pops: mouths frozen wide, the body's wet tube exposed. His people hug their knees or chests, as if to support sagging bags — the ability to maintain a human profile constantly in doubt. Skin's wrecked surface: paint pushed around.

In the presence of these paintings I recognize Mom's abject, but somehow vital, transforming body: her bruised cheeks, lumpy jaw, watered eyes, blotched arms: cellophane arteries, the spasmodic throbbing of sheer life.

I have to accept it all, even the black tongue rolled back in her throat as she gasps for air, ribcage thrust up, head snapped back; accept an inseparable revulsion and love, distance and presence.



Newspaper story: the wreckage of a small plane, carrying three people, has been recovered from the ocean floor. A garment bag, dried out, is still whole. But the human forms, the living organisms, have been irreparably damaged, smashed inside and out.

Francis Bacon is acutely aware of the body's breakability. Yet, his forms are intensely, with great effort, going on living. In a similar way my mother dies, over five years—the thin, bruised, brittle (often beautifully brittle), surfaces of her body strangely mesmerizing. There's a new feeling of lightness. And simultaneously, a terrible sense of the grinding machine, the stubborn force that seems not to know when or how to stop.

Near the end, a sort of impersonal “will” asserts itself with each breath-spasm. It's not about “clinging to life” or “fighting” the disease, or “hanging on” for loved ones. We're beyond these hopeful infusions of agency and meaning into mere existence. The “will to live.” No, not a will at all, this persistence, but something more like a psychic-muscular habit. And progressively, haltingly, another mind emerges, as the fleshy brain, section by section, hardens and closes down, learning to cease.

This “mind” turns to different preoccupations than those of articulate consciousness. The symbolizing functions are still revived at times; but less and less, as the main labor of living recovers a state more like that in utero, a return to basic muscular and metabolic functions. In the womb, an organism “learns” what it's like to have a heart, a stomach, a liver, ears, a brain, vessels carrying fluids, nerves transmitting pain, muscles tensing, relaxing.

Then in the process of dying, consciousness melts back into those basic processes. The distance, or the privacy, people sense in a dying person may be the effect of a material re-absorption of mind. And all the wishful talk, by the living, of going to “another place,” attaining a “spiritual” level, the “soul leaving the body,” is just rationalization of the relentless physical shift.

This plowing under of mind is intolerable to those clinging to the person they have known, a being endowed with will, interiority, or spirit. But personality fades as living reverts to the original somatic

work: birth in reverse. Dying isn't like being born, if that's understood as waking into some kind of new life. Rather, it's a slow absorption in physical processes of the endgame: closing, purging, shutting down.

The violently embodied experiences and feelings Bacon paints are about the simultaneity of dying and living. And the opposition of the two is —with each excruciating breath and throb of blood —effaced, reworked.



On the last afternoon of her life, I take two snapshots. (Mom's too far gone to know.) Her blotched skin, protruding bones, dark mouth... Front and side. Like a forensic anthropologist. This is perhaps my ultimate act of distancing. But it's also a way to stay nearby. I need to remember how she was: the haunting, repellent, fascinating presence of this all-but-dead living being. The unsparing photos help me confront what's happening with a certain realism, rather than converting it into spiritual meanings or a moral fable.

Did Virginia recover her vision of death as life, light, the great endless laugh? It's not for anyone to say.

Now as I try to think about her dying —not her death (a metaphysical “event”), but the actual transformation I saw, heard, smelled, and felt over these years —I find that I really know only the physical effects. These are the wounds that I, Doubting Thomas, need to touch.

And it's probably my closest contact with my mother. It comes when I stop projecting images behind her eyes, inventing emotions for the heaving chest.

She keeps her privacy.

DIARY

6/2/99

On Wednesday, mid-afternoon, she starts to go.

Around her bed: Gregor (an old friend), Louis, me, and Elsa holding her hand...

Elsa who, in her hospice work, has seen people die, nods when I ask: "Can she hear me?"

Mom lies on her back. A pillow with yellow iris. Her pink silk pajamas, oxygen canula... a sheet drawn up to her breast.

She seems to do nothing except breathe. Jaws frozen open, eyes tight, lids red, cheeks waxy. There's a puffiness in her lower jaw; ears drying out; the artery in her neck still pulses under transparent skin; her mouth's a hole; inside, a glimpse of gold, and the black tongue rolled back.

Breath comes hard, as always, but now Virginia's whole trunk is violently heaving, gathering itself to gasp, devour what it can... Then comes an even more brutal effort to expel CO₂: the diaphragm thrust out, head thrown back.

Between the spasmodic breaths come shorter, smaller pulses which capture virtually no air.

The big gasps still deliver something to the blood through ravaged lungs. Her feet are cold. Arms and legs warm... The intervals between breaths seem to be lengthening.

Emily is stuck in traffic, rushing from San Francisco airport in a taxi. She uses the driver's mobile phone, and we put a cordless instrument to Mom's ear. Does she hear anything? Does she know



Ravenna: Sant'Apollinare in Classe (detail)

who, or what, it is, this hard thing pressed against her head? Her daughter's tiny, distant voice.

For the next hour I talk to her, up close. "We're all here. We love you. If you need to go, that's fine, but Emily and Joe are coming."

And as I lean over to say these things, close to her rigid face, I almost hear her: "Oh leave me alone, Jamie. Enough of that stuff."



But there's no clue to what she's feeling — no gesture, eyes tight. I continue talking, searching for vivid images, mostly from Vermont.

The summer sky. The leafy trees. Our house (the old one). Her flower garden. Poppies, iris, lupine... The road with grass down the middle. The stream and its wooden bridge. The little cemetery we always walked to. All the people. Name after name, face after face. Old apple trees, hayfields, cow pastures, Indian paintbrush, Queen Anne's lace... And always the sky: blue with puffy clouds. Summer light: dark thunderstorms, sunset drenching the mowed fields. Fireflies in the barn-site, merging with a starry night...

She seems, after each image, to struggle for a deeper breath, each gasp an achievement. Is she listening? The others say she's holding on. Who knows what's behind the clenched eyes?

Emily is suddenly in the room. She cradles her mother like a small child.

Joe's flight has been cancelled. From the Portland airport, he too speaks through the tiny plastic holes of the telephone into his mother's ear.

We tell her he's coming, on the next plane, to be here by 8PM. If she wants to go that's OK. But...She stays. Life zero-degree. Nothing-but-breathing.

We put moisturizing ointment inside brittle lips and swab out her mouth, which has a bad smell. The black tongue's still rolled back. There's nothing more to say. Adjust pillows. Straighten the breathing tube when it pulls on her nostrils. Nothing to do but watch these fitful upheavals of chest and diaphragm. We look on, in the half-light. Oxygen machine throbbing.

Joe is here. When he takes his mother's hand the rigid face, eyes still tight, gives a little. Her mouth relaxes in a tiny act of... what? weeping? Recognition? Release?



She'll die three hours later.

We try to make Mom comfortable in the darkened room. She seems more calm, stable at this very low ebb. Breathing less, with less effort.

We share an improvised supper, Louis, Emily, Joe, and myself. (Gregor and Elsa have said goodbye.) One of us remains at the bedside. The others chat in an absurdly normal way.

No idea how long or what next.

Fluid seems to be building up in the back of Mom's throat — a new gargling sound with each breath. We move her on her side, which seems to help a little, propped in place with pillows.

The Hospice nurse on call suggests we elevate her.

She has spit up some yellowish fluid. It stains her pillow and gets in her hair.

We struggle to elevate her head and chest. She sags with a new heaviness. Thinking how Mom would hate to appear this way, I try to rinse her hair where the fluid has dried. But I only manage to tug hard on the roots. She shows no feeling.

Now each breath is an involuntary spasm in a chain of muscles running along her right flank and up the right side of her face. The left side has stilled. It's as if the nervous system's governing mechanisms were shutting off and living had become a random muscular process.

Breathing sporadic, as CO₂ takes over the blood and finally smothers a lifetime of ceaseless movement. But something, somehow, continues...

We have divided up the night into "watches." Louis and Emily, exhausted, have gone to bed.

As Joe and I sit with Mom, propped up and listing heavily to the left, her dark mouth locked open, breath subsiding except for irregular gasps, we notice that one closed eye has fallen open.

We call Emily and Louis.

Transfixed, we watch her die.



The periods of stuttering tiny intakes lengthen. Larger spasms fewer. Yet they keep coming. Just one more meager gift of air... from a distant world. We don't speak.

Watching.

Now there are longer pauses between the spasms. A couple of shudders...

Gap.

Another breath.

Gap, longer.

The empty eye stares.

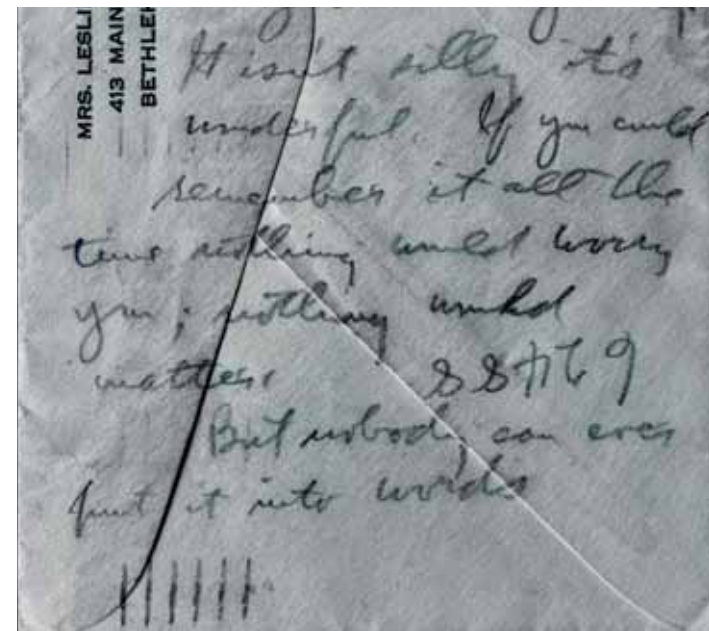
Dark, rigid mouth, waxy skin. The room is illumined by cold fluorescent light through a crack in the bathroom door.

Everything's still. A longer pause. Another breath.

Longer...

Thirty seconds.....

Louis says, "She's gone."



JLC



Tears are often found where there is little sorrow,
And the deepest sorrow without any tears.

~ Samuel Johnson

PROLOGUE



I was in Paris when my father died, unexpectedly. April 7th 1978. He was seventy-seven.

Having completed a PhD the previous June, I was finishing the research needed to revise my thesis for publication. I can't remember where I was when a friend passed on the message: call your mother in New York.

Mom told me that Dad had just come home from a luncheon downtown with his editor at McGraw Hill Press where he handed over the final manuscript of his book, *Dictionary Johnson*. Entering the bedroom to take an afternoon nap, his heart failed. Mom found him on the floor when she returned later that afternoon.

She sat with him for a while, before calling to have the body removed (he had donated it for scientific research). Several good friends, all recent widows, quickly gathered. Mom told me that she felt well-supported and calm. She urged me not to return right away. It was important, she insisted, that I accomplish as much as possible for my book. There would be a memorial service in a month. The family could gather then.

I acquiesced, told few friends, and threw myself into the research. There were no tears. Just numbness. As far as I can remember...

The book Dad had just finished was the culmination of his life's work. Obituaries described a young man from Evansville Indiana, trained in science and a practicing engineer, who was inspired by a chance reading of Boswell to change course and become a professor of eighteenth-century English literature. Samuel Johnson was his passion. A biographer, James L. Clifford worked to fill-in the



My father is sitting on the ground in front of a red painted, clapboard wall. He's wearing his old summer clothes—khaki trousers, a worn white shirt, and scuffed, two-tone saddle shoes. Sleeves rolled up, elbows resting on his knees, he's holding a paper cup in one hand and something to eat in the other. A break from work.

Squinting into the sun, smiling toward the camera, his bald head and wispy white hairs are uncovered. Dad's round glasses with translucent rims (along with his shoes) tell me it's probably the mid 1950s.

This is how he appeared to me then. Active. Hands and forearms strong.

As a boy, I helped him with tasks around our Vermont house. We dug up rocks and leveled the baseball field across the road. The barbed wire fences that kept our neighbor's cows from straying always needed repair. I stretched the wire while he drove in staples. On carpentry projects, he sawed and I held the board, or helped with hammering nails. He knew how to use a plane.

Dad could still hit a line-drive against fast pitching. And at our swimming place, he dove from the raft with a big splash.

He was capable, tall, and strong--until, almost overnight, he began to seem fragile...small. I no longer knew how to be his son.

many blank areas of Boswell's canonical *Life of Johnson*. His first book would be devoted to Johnson's friend (and Boswell's rival) *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)*. The second, *Young Sam Johnson*, a scholarly and popular success, brought its protagonist to the age of forty, on the verge of his most important creative work. My father's final book focused on the 1750s, ending in 1763 when Johnson met Boswell. During these crucial "middle years" Johnson produced his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* and wrote many essays, a novel, influential biographical studies and literary criticism. Dad wanted to know everything possible about his subject's life, social networks, and material world. The task seemed endless: there were frustrating gaps, and "new facts," he said, were always turning up.

We wondered if he would ever be able to pull it all together and finally hand Johnson over to Boswell? In retrospect, there were signs during his final year that he knew the time had come. Those around him noticed a new urgency—hard, concentrated work to finish chapters, dotting every i, crossing every t. He looked tired, napping frequently. "We can do that after April 7th," he would say when activities were suggested that might interrupt the work. The date with his editor was firm.

Did he sense another deadline? Now or never?

Dad expected, wanted, to live longer. There were deferred projects, of scholarship and family history. But this book was the essential task. His life ended on the very day of its completion. I, at least, felt he must have died content: a happy ending for a happy life. This was a conclusion I could live with. But what did I really know?

As a boy, I believed he had led a good, even heroic, life. Having mastered science, he turned to literature. Along the way, he flirted

with careers in baseball, opera, even becoming a latter-day cowboy. The family myths were partly supported by facts. My father seemed to have gone from strength to strength. Only much later, composing this memoir, would I discover that failure, illness, and depression were essential to his story.

His success was real, but much more shadowed and complex than I could imagine.

Dad's late marriage, in 1940, was always presented as a kind of miracle cure. His physical and psychic afflictions suddenly vanished. The father I knew was strong, involved with his family, and enthusiastic. He gave me, his second child and first son, endless encouragement and praise. I flourished in his approval, and depended on it.

He also gave me his name. James L. Clifford was widely known as Jim (and to old friends, Jimmy), so I would be called Jamie (after Jamie Boswell). In college, I shed this childhood name for Jim. And as a published academic author I became, finally, James. Then, in a gesture of independence, I suppressed my middle initial "T," leaving him the distinguishing "L." I would be the unmarked "James Clifford."

A certain entangled competition has driven my professional career. My father was simultaneously an inspiration and an obstacle. To make my own way in the academic humanities I needed to keep him at a distance. For more than forty years I avoided his scholarship, at most dipping into his books. Some I've still not gotten around to. I stayed away from his beloved eighteenth century and replaced his Anglophilia with a love of things French. If he was a literary historian, I became an anthropological critic. If his concerns were empirical, mine would be theoretical. Yet these differences couldn't erase an underlying kinship. With the succeeding

years, has become ever more apparent to me that our intellectual attitudes, personalities, and life courses have been linked in countless ways.

The praise Dad bestowed so freely was empowering, a source of confidence. But it also created a fear of losing approval, a need to be admired. Transgression would always have to be careful, violent arguments avoided. At times I struggled consciously to shed this personality structure, shared with my father. But most of the time I avoided confronting his influence, keeping him at a distance through idealization and intentional ignorance.

Writing this memoir is an attempt to get behind the frozen images of my caring father and academic alter-ego, to learn something about who he was and how he became that way. It's not a delayed rebellion or an oedipal reckoning. Too late for that.

Why now, in the moratorium imposed by COVID-19, have I finally taken up the task of engaging with my father's life, his achievements and his struggles? Is it because soon I will be as old as he was when he suddenly died?

I wonder if I will be able, finally, to pierce the numbness I felt then. To finally grieve — discovering a path to acceptance and to love.



The writing that follows is about my father, his life and times. While I'll try not to invent anything, I don't have the patience or the perspective to be a proper biographer. I can only write from my own experience, ambivalently. So, this will also be about me, in relation to him — a partial, subjective realism.

Part One tells the story of my father's life, focusing on his crucial career shift from science to literature. The writing is descriptive, a more-or-less coherent summary. Part Two retells the story in

more analytical detail. It draws on documents, on conversations, and especially on an intimate journal from the 1930s. I try to understand the dynamics of Dad's family and the physical and psychological challenges he confronted during transitional years spent in Arizona and New York. His struggles with gender and sexuality emerge with particular clarity. Part Three touches on the racial and social histories of Southern Indiana, structures of whiteness that shaped the Clifford family. Part Four focuses more directly on my fraught relationship with my father.

What I know is based on the memorabilia that my mother preserved. A generation younger than her husband, Virginia Iglehart also grew up in Evansville Indiana and shared his social and familial background. I was able to talk with her about her marriage her not long before she died in 1999. She spoke frankly, but without revealing any dark secrets. My father's purely academic correspondence and manuscripts, which I haven't consulted, are held by Columbia University's Butler Library. I vividly recall family stories told by my paternal grandmother, Emily Orr Clifford, to my sister and me in the late 1940s and early 1950s when she lived with us in New York City. Her own remarkable life, inseparable from her son's, is woven through my account. My cousin, Alice Blachly who, in her nineties, is my last contact with an earlier generation, provided details about her "Uncle Jimmy" and his early life in Indiana. I have drawn on the oral history my father recorded a few years before his death, and I rely extensively on the journal he kept between 1932 and 1938. Of course, everything is colored by my own memories.

My older sister, Emily, and younger brother, Joe, have their own stories to tell. They recall our father in ways that limit and enrich my own memories. But I can't speak for them. My project is not a family history. For better and worse, I've kept the focus on a particular father-retrieval-operation.

PART ONE

THE STORY





JAMES LOWRY CLIFFORD was born in 1901 in Evansville, Indiana, a small city on the Ohio River that was in the midst of social change and commercial growth. It was becoming a “modern” place. The great river, crossed by ferries and soon by a bridge, served as a thoroughfare bringing commodities, raw materials, and people, from the East, the West, and especially from Kentucky to the South. James (“Jimmy,” later “Jim”) and his older brother George grew up in Evansville and attended Wabash College in Crawfordsville, near Indianapolis. While both eventually moved to the Northeast, their upbringing in Southern Indiana left an indelible mark.

The Cliffords were upper-middle class progressives in what was in many ways a “Southern” place (the Mason-Dixon Line followed the Ohio River). George S. Clifford and Emily Orr Clifford were Presbyterians, he a church Elder, she a Sunday-school teacher. They supported Women’s Suffrage, Prohibition, and after 1917 The League of Nations. George, who co-owned a wholesale hardware business, was a respected civic leader with what many called a “scholarly” avocation — a love of science, especially astronomy and ornithology. His liberal vision was best realized in his agitation to bring an institution of higher education to Southern Indiana. Recognized as “the Father of Evansville College” (now University) he was actively seconded in this project by his wife.

Emily was a woman of strong ethical convictions and unusual breadth of experience. Before her marriage, she traveled to many places in the United States and to Mexico. In 1893 she accompanied a college friend who was the daughter of George W. Foster, recently-retired as Secretary of State, on a round-the-world trip.



Her civic activism rivaled her husband’s. She took a leading role in The Red Cross, The Public Health Nursing Association, the Society of Fine Arts, the Historical Society, and the Musician’s Club. After her husband’s death in 1927, Emily joined the Evansville College Board of Trustees, its first, and for many years only, female member. My mother, who met Mrs. Clifford in 1939 while working for the College, recalls her as kind, principled, and always straightforward: “No one could refuse her.”

Jimmy Clifford’s parents belonged to a social set that called itself “The Pink Poppers” (no liquor, only “Pink Pop”). These convivial families gathered at parties and for picnics on the Ohio River, a good place to cool off in Evansville’s sweltering summers. They enjoyed swimming, games, singing, amateur theatre, and corny Hoosier humor. The group included prominent members of Evansville society such as the Orrs, Emily’s family—industrialists, property owners, and later state political leaders.

Jimmy was thin, and susceptible to illness. Rick McGinnis, his best friend, recalled that whenever a small group of boys camped

overnight on a sand bar in the river he went home to sleep. Jimmy's mother, concerned for his health, insisted. Later, he missed a year of college when, suspected of having TB, he spent the winter on a rest-cure in North Carolina. Nonetheless, a good athlete, at Wabash College he ran on the varsity track team. And he especially loved baseball—pitching in intra-mural games at college and later graduate school. His fine singing voice led him to audition for a traveling opera company. (The story goes that while his rendition of a Donizetti aria passed muster, the final verdict was: “Mr. Clifford, you have a very nice lyric tenor voice but you do not have a big enough neck.”) Opera was a life-long passion. He performed enthusiastically in musical productions, and at social gatherings. There were barbershop quartets in college, and evenings of Gilbert and Sullivan.



Midwesterners in Venice, 1923. Jim is in the back row, hair parted in the center. His mother is seated, front left, his father, partly hidden, back row left.

After graduating from Wabash College in 1923, Jimmy accompanied his parents on a European trip. Then, urged by his father, he followed his brother George to MIT where he earned a second

bachelor's degree, with honors, in chemical engineering. He would recall much later, with amusement, that in six years of college he took just one English course. At MIT, his studies were unchallenging (math and science came easy); however, Boston provided cultural excitement. Jimmy acted and sang in amateur theatre groups and performed in the chorus of *Aida* during a visit from the Metropolitan Opera. In a late interview he recalled that during a single year he attended one hundred and three operas, concerts, and plays. Some of these were no doubt dates with women, as he pursued what would be a long and frustrating search for “the right girl.”

His handsome and talented brother George married in his twenties and soon began a family. (He would become a senior engineer for DuPont.) Jimmy, while stymied in his search for romantic love, was social and outgoing. He enjoyed conversation, sports, and singing, especially during the summers he spent in Evansville in the early and mid-1920s. He and his friend Rick were known as the “Clifford-McGinnis Entertainment Duo,” always ready to



Clifford and McGinnis, circa 1925.

amuse friends and visitors with parties, excursions, games, and practical jokes.

After MIT Jim found employment in Boston as a chemical engineer. His career seemed on course. But soon everything fell apart.

In 1927 he answered his father's call to return home. He would manage a recently-acquired small enterprise, the Young Car Company, which manufactured small rail cars used in mining. But just as the new manager arrived, the company was idled by a six-month miners' strike. It was a constant struggle to keep people employed. Then when the strike ended, a flood of new orders arrived, and the operation had to work day and night. Jim expended every ounce of energy until his morale and physical constitution, never strong, broke down.

Meanwhile, his father was battling cancer. "When he died, I was done," Jim later recalled in an oral history. In 1928, his health damaged, his father gone, and his management experience a bad memory, he confronted reality: science and engineering could no longer sustain him. The psychological and somatic components of this conclusion were, certainly, entangled and complex. Science had been his father's passion. His son dutifully followed suit, taking the path of least resistance. Now he was at an impasse: the career he had trained for led nowhere.

What else could he do? His father had always been an essential guide — admirable, supportive, and always beyond question. Now Jim was on his own. Without a profession or reliable health, he faced the prospect of failure. This personal impasse would soon be intensified by The Great Depression which closed off opportunities for so many.

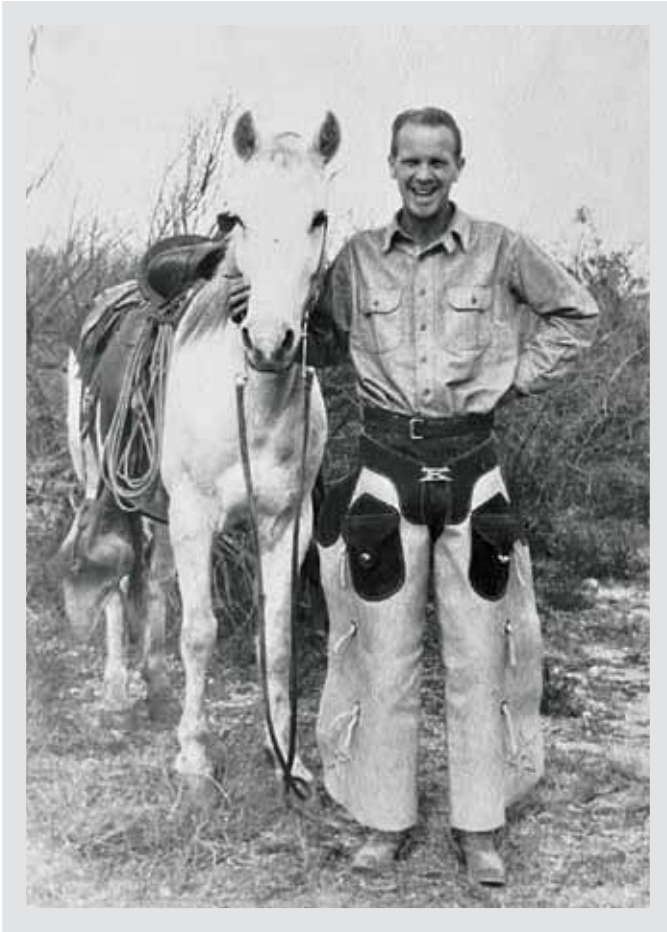
Jim's first priority was to regain physical strength. In the fall of 1928 he escaped to Arizona, a common destination for Evansville

people in search of a healthy climate. Near Tucson, he found a job driving a truck on a dude ranch.

The next six years would be a period of transition and uncertainty, spent in Arizona and New York City, with occasional visits to Evansville. My father's life was no longer rooted in Indiana, but he had not yet found a new center or achieved success in a new vocation. Recurring ear trouble, gastro-intestinal pain, and other mysterious ailments were demoralizing and at times debilitating. For more than a decade, Jim struggled to overcome anxiety and, at times, despair. His mother would be a crucial ally. His parents had always been a close-knit unit. Now she filled the void left by her husband's death, offering guidance, sympathy and financial support. Jim relied on her patience and unwavering belief in his potential.

A seed had been planted. Before leaving Indiana, he underwent an operation that required a week's recovery in the hospital. Jim searched for a lengthy book to pass the time, and not finding a copy of *War and Peace*, settled for Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. This stroke of luck, he later said, changed his life. He would eventually become a Johnsonian. But in 1928, no such hindsight was available. The future was radically uncertain.

At the Circle Z Ranch in Arizona, Jim enjoyed an active, outdoor existence. The climate was salutary: his strength returned. Always outgoing, he made friends among the other ranch employees and the wealthy guests, imbibing cowboy ambiance and lore. He learned to twirl a lariat, acquired a horse and a ten-gallon hat, explored the surrounding desert and enthusiastically sang the "cowboy songs" that John Lomax was collecting at the time. Nostalgia for "The Old West" was in full swing.



With his horse, "Tailor Legs."

Jim was in no hurry to get back to Evansville, with its humidity, bad air and memories of failure. In the spring of 1930, he found a way to support himself and stay longer in the Southwest. A small prep school in Tucson, needed a substitute master to teach math and, on short notice, English. The latter was a stretch, but Jim was an avid reader who had been introduced to canonical novels by his parents. He thought he could manage. Teaching elementary algebra was a bore, but talking about literary works turned out to

be exciting. After several months "fooling them," as he later put it, Jim was hired for the following year.

The novice teacher thought that he should learn something about literature and the English language. So that July, with his mother's financial support, he enrolled in Columbia University's Summer School. The course he enjoyed most was English Grammar, where diagramming sentences appealed to the engineer's analytic mind. He also took a class on short story writing, which was more difficult. He had already been experimenting with fiction, and would accumulate a small pile of publisher's rejections. He dreamed of writing a historical novel about Southern Indiana and life along the Ohio River.

At Evans School, Jim taught math and English and enjoyed playing polo and baseball with the students. As his journal recorded in some detail, life around Tucson meant socializing with the well-heeled. There were gatherings at the famous Arizona Inn, camping trips, and dinner parties. The unattached bachelor entertained a variety of young women with conversation and song, energetically spinning them on the dance floor. He read constantly: fiction, essays, and, later, eighteenth-century and romantic English authors. He copied passages into his journal, often adding personal commentary.

A new path ahead was becoming imaginable. In the fall of 1931, Jim took a year off from teaching to pursue an MA in English at Columbia. He loved working with literature, though his health suffered from the climate and from recurring anxiety about this new career. He was starting from scratch. He had studied only math and science and was hopeless at learning languages.

In July 1932, he passed his MA exams and submitted a thesis on Hester Thrane-Piozzi, who would ultimately become the topic of

his doctoral dissertation. Looking back much later, he judged his MA “not very good.” It was enough, however, to nourish a growing ambition and to justify his enrollment in the PhD program a year later.

The academic year at Columbia had been exhausting. Short of funds, Jim returned to Arizona for another round of teaching and health-restoration. He still loved the relaxed socializing, the polo and baseball, the camping and riding in the desert and surrounding hills. His friendships at the school were satisfying, but his journals during this period record growing dissatisfaction with secondary school teaching. At an elite establishment like Evans School, the boys tended to be entitled and undisciplined.

He and his mother had decided that, finances permitting, he would enter the doctoral program at Columbia. To this end, Jim saved half his salary. In his cabin at the school, he read intensely, mostly works necessary for a PhD in English literature: Pope, Swift, Addison, Johnson and other essayists. Also, the Romantics: Blake, Byron, Wordsworth, and Shelly.

The prospect of doctoral work was, however, daunting. The former engineer had started late: there was so much to read, so many new skills to acquire. Without any foreign languages, Jim wondered how he could possibly pass the Middle English, Latin, French, and German requirements. His resolve wavered, and he seriously considered staying in Arizona, where at least he was healthy and had come to love the physical environment. But his mother urged him to set his sights higher, and her encouragement strengthened his own ambition. Perhaps it was not too late to make his mark. In his journals he frequently hoped he might contribute something of permanent value through writing. Whenever he encountered a late-coming author he underlined the fact and took courage.

Jim’s new professional interest in literature was a decisive rejection of the scientific path his father had mapped for him. And the Arizona years were a break with Evansville, no longer the center of his world. He was inspired by reading Wordsworth on the poet’s search for a vocation — the long struggle to discover what one had to say that mattered. This, he felt, was his challenge.

During the next two years in New York, he worked hard, taking an Anglo-Saxon course three times before doing well enough. In the eighteenth-century seminars he found his feet, building up a solid knowledge base. Always an energetic networker, Jim made friends with manuscript collectors and scholars in Boston, New Haven, and New York. Health problems continuously undermined his resilience, but he found distraction in the city’s music and theatre. Somehow, he got through his language exams. In the fall of 1934, his mother joined him in New York as he crammed for the PhD orals, which he passed at the start of the following year. His performance was anything but a triumph.

In the exam’s wake, the bruised candidate despaired over his career prospects. Who would hire a stumbling late-comer? “Mother,” he recalled, “looked after me” as he struggled to regain confidence. Then a lucky break opened the way forward. His strongest ally on the faculty became acting department chair and arranged for a traveling fellowship to support research in England. That opportunity, Jim later recalled, “made my name.” The trove of manuscripts related to Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi that he discovered would be the foundation for his first, successful, book.

In July 1935 Jim was on a trans-Atlantic steamship, accompanied by a younger cousin, Bob Orr. In England, he made contact with Johnson scholars, beginning to create the personal networks that would become a signature of his scholarly career. The two young men bicycled around Wales where the widowed Mrs. Thrale had

retired with her second husband, Gabriel Piozzi. The details of his discoveries are vividly narrated in his memoir and meditation on biography, *From Puzzles to Portraits* (1970). The time in England and Wales confirmed his preference for the empirical, “outside” research of a “literary detective.” (“I am not a critic or an aesthete,” he often said, introducing his historical approach.) Intense research and networking progressed throughout the winter but, as always, with a price. By late Spring of 1936, the mysterious ear trouble had returned. Increasingly incapacitated, Jim struggled to work an hour or two a day.

His old friend McGinness arrived to help him recover and to bring him home. In Evansville, Jim lived with his mother and, as strength returned, worked to turn the voluminous materials he had accumulated into a dissertation. It was becoming clear that the life of Mrs. Thrale-Piozzi he was writing would be a long manuscript.

In 1937, Jim needed a job, and the Depression was a bad time for a still-unpublished, not-so-young scholar to be looking for an academic position. He managed, however, to find employment at Lehigh University, where his background in science was appreciated. He could teach English to engineers.

Over the next three years, based at Lehigh, Jim returned to England each summer to consult manuscripts and confer with scholars. The biography that was taking shape, based on diaries, family notebooks and letters, would be much more than a story focused on Hester Thrale’s famous friendship with Samuel Johnson. It explored the details of an 18th century woman’s daily life—her many pregnancies, surviving children, financial arrangements, and struggles for independence. Forty years later, feminist scholarship brought the book new attention, and it was republished as a contribution to Women’s social history.

At the end of Jim’s second year at Lehigh, a professional breakthrough brought promotion to Assistant Professor. Oxford University Press learned of the biography he was writing and expressed interest. With this encouragement, during 1937-38 the nearly finished dissertation morphed into a book manuscript. George Sherburne, a Columbia professor who would become a close friend, offered editorial help, and by the summer of 1939 the manuscript was reviewed, accepted and delivered.

When war broke out, Jim assumed that a scholarly project such as his would go into cold storage. But the Press kept to schedule, and *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)*, all 495 pages, saw the light in 1941. It would be well received, including a generous review by Virginia Woolf in *The New Statesman*.

In 1940, wartime England was off-limits, so Jim spent the summer in Evansville, his first in several years. Now he was an Assistant Professor with a book in press. An ever-watchful mother had been writing letters about a “wonderful girl” she was collaborating with on development projects for Evansville College. Virginia Iglehart, the daughter of family friends, had grown up. After college, she spent a year studying psychology at Columbia. Back home, her European travel plans cancelled because of the war, she took a volunteer job at the College. At loose ends, she was ready to leave the confines of Evansville.

At a garden party Mrs. Clifford introduced this attractive young woman to an enthusiastic bachelor fifteen years her senior. They dated. Jim was in a hurry. he talked nonstop about his life, about England, about New York, about music, even about the index he was preparing for his book. By late July the couple was engaged, and a month later, married. Jim’s niece Alice, who was Virginia’s bridesmaid, recalled the groom’s stunned reaction: “What does a class-A girl like her see in a class-C egg like me?”



Jim, my mother recalled, was “odd,” utterly unlike her previous boyfriends. But he promised her a wider world. Whatever mix of romantic attraction and strategic calculation went into the marriage, it turned out well. Their shared life, centered in New York and Vermont, was satisfying to both partners. But Virginia’s first five years as a faculty wife at Lehigh, soon with a child, a second three years later, could not have been easy.

Much later, in his oral history, Jim reflected on a tension between his career and their domestic life. He was ambitious, determined

to catch up in his profession, but also more than ready to start a family. Virginia, he said, “sacrificed” for his career, putting any plans of her own on hold. Much later, with children out of the house, she would earn a graduate degree and become an administrator at the politically progressive Union Theological Seminary in New York. Jim was happy, he said, to encourage these developments, given everything she had done in support of his work. He always recognized her crucial contributions as an editor for whatever he published after the Thrale-Piozzi biography.

The latecomer’s career advancement in the 1940s was spectacular. As a junior professor at Lehigh he founded *The Johnsonian Newsletter*, a review of recent scholarship and literary gossip that would become a widely imitated model of its kind. Over more than three decades “JNL” was a key networking tool for its editor. An energetic and loyal correspondent, he soon became a central figure in Johnson studies.

Already, in the early 1940s, his instinct for outreach bore fruit. Jim learned that Joseph Wood Krutch, a prominent critic and Columbia professor who would later become famous for nature-writing, was working on a biography of Samuel Johnson. He wrote a friendly note, offering assistance. To his surprise, Krutch was open to the offer from a younger scholar. They met, hit it off, and Jim commented usefully on the manuscript. In 1944, he received a phone call from the *New York Times*, asking him to write a review of the just-published biography. “Virginia and I got right to work,” he recalled. The result — laudatory, scholarly, and engaging — appeared on the front page of the Sunday book section. It gave the unknown Lehigh professor wide exposure, and credibility with Krutch’s influential friends.

At the time of the review’s publication, November 1944, Jim was commuting to New York twice a week to teach an

Eighteenth-Century Literature course at Barnard College. The following year he accepted a full-time position, with tenure, and the family moved to Morningside Heights on the upper West Side. Two years later, a job feeler from Cornell, the retirement of his PhD advisor, Ernest Hunter Wright, and support from Krutch and his friends, brought Jim to Columbia. Just five years after earning his PhD, he was already a full professor in the graduate school, the result of hard work, fortunate timing, and the old-boy network. Jim remained at Columbia, teaching graduate seminars and directing research, until he retired in 1973 as the department's longest-serving senior professor. He never gave up the undergraduate 18th Century lecture at Barnard, a beloved course for the instructor and for many students.

In 1956 my father's widely appreciated *Young Sam Johnson* was published, followed by books on biography, edited collections, and frequent articles. (A full account by Dennis Paoli in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 103, provides the best summation and analysis of his contributions.) Family life was enriching, especially during long summers in Vermont, spent with Virginia and their three children, Emily, Jamie, and Joe.

Dramatically, Jim's persistent health problems disappeared. He credited his marriage: "Virginia cured me." In retrospect, the psychological components of his ear, eye, intestinal, and skin maladies seem evident. Yet the afflictions were genuinely debilitating. His life during the 1930s was shaped by tangled medical, psychic, and historical forces, impossible to pry apart. Dad's difficult transition from chemical engineer to professor of English Literature enjoyed no guarantee of success. So much was uncertain, personally and in the wider world. He prevailed thanks to stubborn ambition, resilient optimism, maternal and spousal support and, he always insisted, good luck.

"CLIFFORD'S ALL STARS"

Dad loved baseball, and he passed the bug to me.

In New York, we took the IRT subway to 157th St. and walked East to a long staircase descending the cliffs above the Polo Grounds. Across the East River we could see the home of our hated rivals, Yankee Stadium. I grew up a Giants fan, with Willie Mays my hero. After the team moved to San Francisco in 1957, we transferred our allegiance to the hapless, New York Mets. Dad always said: "When in doubt root for the underdog."

Jimmy Clifford, a pitcher in college, played on his school team in Arizona, and in intramural sports at Columbia. The family story was that he could have been a pro, but his best pitch, the spitball, was banned. (He had a piece of "slippery elm" to prove it.)

When we first arrived at our summer place in Vermont in 1951, there was a lot to do to make a run-down house comfortable and remove a ruined barn. But equally important was the ball field. When a bulldozer finished scraping a nearby cow pasture, the real work started. Summer after summer, we dug out rocks that were pushed up by the winter frost. Dad built a backstop, benches, and a box to hold bats, balls, and catcher's pads. The diamond was major-league scale, its pitcher's mound carefully measured, its foul lines and bases marked with lime. Center field sloped downhill, then up.

Every Sunday morning an informal father-son game materialized—a mix of farming families and summer people. The boys played hardball while girls cantered up and down the road on rented horses. During the week, in the long evenings, we

gathered to play “scrub” and shag flies until the ball was barely visible against a fading sky.

Dad no longer pitched. But he could still hit sharp line drives and was a more disciplined batter, I had to admit, than I was. When he connected, a younger boy ran to first.

A ragtag team of teenagers, played games against the boys from a nearby summer camp. No one could ever agree on a name, so the camp’s director anointed us “Clifford’s All-Stars.” He insisted his campers address Dad as “Professor Clifford.” Everyone else, young and old, called him “Jim.”

PART TWO

THE STORY RETOLD

(Or, What I Learned)





I GREW UP IN A HAPPY FAMILY and knew nothing of my father's travails.

What I heard was a success story: the young engineer who became a distinguished English Professor had managed his career change brilliantly. Dad's late marriage was somehow all in the plan. He waited to fall in love until he had caught up professionally and was ready to be an engaged parent. What I experienced confirmed this simplified tale.

Like his own father, he exposed his children to science, literature, theatre, music, sports, travel... As his first son, I received constant pedagogical attention. My mother's approach to parenting was more psychological. She noted, and analyzed, my Sister's dreams. When we awoke from nightmares, she was the one who came to our bedside. Overall, family life was serene. My sister Emily's childhood stubbornness and emotionality (connected, perhaps, to my arrival when she was three) was contained, at least on the surface. Our parents never argued, not in public.

My father said that if they disagreed, "I always gave in." Virginia put it differently: "We did not quarrel. When an argument began to build up, he would simply stop, refuse to continue..." He had learned that becoming overwrought could take a physical toll. He left many decisions to his well-organized wife, and no doubt got his way with others through passive withdrawal. Dad watched his health. Excitable and enthusiastic, he avoided conflict, keeping his emotions under control.

Of all this I knew nothing. My parents' affective relations were a complete blank—what went on in their bedroom an obscurity that I had no interest in probing. Our happy family life ran its course—winters in New York, summers in Vermont, sabbaticals in England. I stayed in school, with occasional mild rebellions, all the way to becoming a professor. Whatever surface radicalism I cultivated never shook this seemingly predestined path, the naturalness of life with tenure. My father seemed a happy man, leading an existence worth emulating. While I took my distance from him intellectually, I never questioned his fundamental life-model.

Like him, I married at forty. During my thirties, academic ambition took precedence over (and was often an escape from) romantic entanglement. I measured my own academic success against his and wanted to believe I was ahead in the competition. Now I can see that I enjoyed every advantage. The way forward was smooth. I didn't have to start over in mid-career.. I enjoyed stable health. I attended graduate school and found a good job at a moment when the post-war expansion of American universities was still underway, a time very unlike the economic depression and war-time disruption my father confronted.

At the time of his death in 1978, I was just beginning my career of teaching and publication. Over the next forty years I would write books and establish a reputation, with comparative glances at my paternal model. A suppressed feeling of shame accompanied my desire to surpass him, and I never confronted my blocked emotional response to his death. I lived with an idealized and simplified image. How little I knew my father.

What follows are some of the things I've learned, belatedly.

FAMILY

To better understand my father's character, and particularly his remarkable resilience in the face of adversity, I've had to become more familiar with the environment that shaped him. Childhood in a close, supportive family provided a lifelong foundation of security and encouragement. His parents embodied an ideal of loving commitment and civic activism. Jimmy worshiped them and aspired to follow in their footsteps. Like all ideals, their example was both inspiring and confining.

George Clifford and Emily Orr were married in 1893, with two sons, George and Jimmy, born in 1897 and 1901. The Clifford and Orr families were well-established in Evansville, and the wholesale hardware business George co-owned with his brother provided a comfortable living. Around the turn of the century, in search of relief from the heat, the Cliffords bought a decrepit farm on a hill outside of town. Over the next decade, they replaced the farmhouse, repaired the barn, and created a beautiful landscape. The family would spend long summers at "Ballyrea" (the name derived from an old family home in Ireland). Here "Father," as Jimmy invariably called him, was close enough to commute to work in the city. Emily dreamed of a garden paradise, and she worked hard, with hired help, to make it a reality. There were old trees, green lawns, many flowering shrubs, and several pergolas.

The new house featured two large porches, with its rooms designed to maximize cross ventilation. Above the attic, a platform with railings: "the observatory." Here, on clear nights, George Sr. instructed the boys and any interested visitors in the use of his telescopes. The baseball field and tennis court were heavily used by children, friends and family. In later years, Emily hosted garden parties and receptions for groups from Evansville College.



In the barn, a cow provided fresh milk, tended by Richard Landers, a gardener and general handyman. "Old Richard" was a former slave who, over more than three decades, came to be considered "one of the family." (More about his story below.) At the Clifford house in town, the loft of another barn was converted to a physics/chemistry laboratory where, with paternal guidance, the boys conducted experiments. One unsanctioned project, the making of a bomb, ended with a window-rattling explosion and a visit from the fire department. Jimmy's scientific interests ran to physics: he published articles as a teenager which were collected in a book, *Experiments in Atomic Science for the Amateur* (1930).



Dad deeply admired his father, and with reason. In addition to founding Evansville College, George S. Clifford was a leader in organizations such as the Evansville Academy of Science, The Audubon Society, the YWCA, the County and State Board of Charities, and various other business and civic bodies. He had a reputation for independence, for standing alone against the party bosses at Democratic conventions. During the First World War he was drafted to Chair the County Council of Defense (a task that required absolute even-handedness in the allocation of rationed resources). A patriot, he ardently supported the League of Nations.

By encouraging his sons in science, George Clifford was, in effect, following a road not taken. His parents died when he was a child,

and he was raised by relatives in one of the fancier big houses of Evansville, “Morgan Manor.” The young man was drawn to natural science, a career path not acceptable in his social world. He studied law at Vanderbilt University, without enthusiasm. After passing the Indiana Bar, he never practiced as a lawyer and soon went into business.

Morgan Manor enjoyed a reputation for liberality. George Clifford was known to frequent saloons and attend horse races. When he courted Emily Orr, he had difficulty persuading her that he could live up to her moral standards. In the letters they exchanged during her round-the-world trip in the early 1890s she expressed her doubts. At one point she broke off their engagement, but relented in response to his entreaties. Around Evansville, it was said that she married George in order to “reform” him. She preferred to say that she “brought out his good qualities” of scholarship, educational vision, and civic leadership. She wrote that her husband was “at heart an idealist and a reformer rather than a practical business man.” “By temperament he was a scholar, interested in education and science, especially astronomy, and kept always abreast of recent theories. Yet he ever retained his devout Christian faith, regarding Evolution as further evidence of a wise Creator.”

Emily’s morality was firm, but not narrow. She had spent a year at Wellesley and had traveled the world. The environment in which the Cliffords raised their two sons was rich with scientific, literary, and musical stimulation. George and Jimmy enjoyed considerable freedom to invent projects, play sports, and socialize with friends. In the evenings, their parents read aloud from popular Victorian novels: Dickens, Thackeray, Bulwer-Lytton... His mother recalled that by the age of eleven, Jimmy had read, on his own, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and was deep into *Dombey and Son*.

On Sundays, however, the family gathered to hear something more “serious:” Motley’s multi-volume history of the Dutch Republic (Protestants resisting Catholic tyranny), Chesterfield’s letters to

his son, or philosophers like Bishop Butler. My father acquired a Christian ethical core from his parents, and their example was reinforced by reading history and moral philosophy rather than by churchgoing. The father I knew, growing up in New York, was never overtly religious. He enjoyed sermons at Union Theological Seminary by intellectuals like Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, and he loved to sing hymns and Christmas Carols. Except for a traditional family grace recited each Thanksgiving, there were no prayers or invocations of the Bible in our household. The protestant faith Dad inherited seems to have been something like eighteenth-century “Deism:” God conceived as a remote spiritual force (like his own father’s wise creator of Evolution), a source of rational and moral order.

His mother’s Christian belief was more manifest, with charity and social responsibility its guiding rules. A Sunday-school teacher, Emily knew how to make Bible stories relevant to everyday situations. Her international perspective had been inspired by the Presbyterian missionaries she met in Asia on her world-tour. It expressed itself, late in life, as admiration for the United Nations. In her seventies, she continued to work on behalf of Evansville University and in various charitable organizations. But age took its toll. Living alone, her eyesight failing, in 1946 she at last agreed to move to our New York apartment at 25 Claremont Avenue.

She brought with her the family attachments and liberal Christian values that had defined my father’s childhood world. Discreetly but firmly, she passed them on to us.

Grandmother’s Room

“Mother Clifford” brought a selection of furniture and memorabilia from Evansville to New York—only what would fit in the limited space she occupied for five years until her death at 84.

Grandmother’s room was a special place. Behind its clouded glass door, time stopped. The old furniture and low lighting, contrasted with the blond, Danish modern furnishings elsewhere in the sunny apartment. Emily and I, who were five and two when she arrived, were welcome in her world. We climbed up onto the fourposter bed in the early morning, giving our parents a bit more sleeping time. Grandmother told us stories and shared an apple she kept on her night table, sliced with a pearl-handled paring knife.

Her stories were from the Bible—also tales of two boys, George and Jimmy, their escapades at her beloved Ballyrea. She told us about her round-the-world trip as a young woman. (The room was full of Chinese, Indian, and Japanese things, which we were free to touch.) I still recall her story about hoping for a view of Mt. Everest. Disappointed, again and again, by cloud-cover, she finally gave up. Then miraculously, the clouds lifted.

Grandmother didn’t meddle in family decisions and tried to be tactfully helpful. She observed her grandchildren closely and sent regular, witty, reports to my mother’s parents in Evansville. When she ventured outside, dressed in black with a cane, I would go along, age 5, to be her “eyes” crossing the street.

As old people often do, she spoke to her grandchildren as if they were grownups. After the Korean War broke out in 1950, she

JOURNALS

Among the memorabilia preserved by my father were journals he kept in the early and mid-1930s. They document professional uncertainty, health travails, and emotional struggles. What I know about Dad's "inner life" comes largely from this source.

I had long been aware of these journals, but for forty years following his death, I somehow never got around to opening them. Was I afraid of finding an embarrassing secret? Wary of confronting his weaknesses? Discovering, perhaps, a similarity too close for comfort?

My father's journals fill three bound notebooks, each three hundred pages of legible script. Written in Evansville, Arizona, and New York City, they span the years 1932–1935. There is also an addendum from 1938 when he was teaching at Lehigh. He writes about many things: daily activities (with an emphasis on socializing and entertainment); reports on reading (including summaries, copied quotations, and personal reflections); moral or philosophical speculations; accounts of a fraught romantic life; recurring worries about health and career; expressions of despair (and hope).

The journal seems to have been a place Dad could grapple with present dilemmas and translate them, he hoped, into a record of enduring value.

What can I do? That question often perplexes me and foils my every move. So far, I cannot tell. But...I feel perhaps the intimate story of a human heart caught in the bewilderment of present-day problems, as shown in a daily journal, will be of some use to students of life and manners in the centuries to come.

I'm probably wrong, he quickly adds, this journal will likely languish in obscurity, its style and thought insufficient to arouse

listened to radio reports of casualties. A pacifist, she spoke to me seriously about the waste of human lives. At one point we battled over whether I would be allowed a toy pistol, like all my friends. After I begged tearfully and promised not to shoot anyone, she relented.

The morning after she died, my mother asked if I'd like to "say goodbye to Grandmother" before she was taken away. I shook my head, too busy listening to a favorite radio program, "Big John and Sparky." Months later, Mom calmed me when I awoke at night sobbing, overcome by guilt.

I have no recollection of my father's grief for the mother he had relied on through thick and thin. When it became clear that her days were numbered, Dad was on research leave in England. She hung on, not wishing to interrupt his work. When he returned, she insisted on greeting her son while sitting up in a chair.

interest. Yet (the characteristic upswing) “by constant practice and search for perfection, possibly I may produce some few words which will live.”

Early in the first journal, we find notes about eighteenth-century memoirs and diaries, especially those of Boswell whose newly-discovered manuscripts Jim consults as a graduate student in New York. Perhaps he can identify with someone whose personal life is often a mess but who nonetheless manages to create an enduring masterpiece. Boswell’s charm and outgoing nature certainly resonate. So does his accounts of falling in and out of love, oscillating between infatuation and dismissiveness in his relations with women. However, unlike Boswell the womanizer my father leaves no evidence in his journals of amorous experiences that go beyond flirtatious conversation, close dancing, and the occasional kiss.

Sometimes the journal is a chronicle of its times. There is a long account, based on radio broadcasts, of the fiercely disputed Democratic Party Convention that nominated Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. Occasionally, its author strains for moral or intellectual insights, channeling Johnson, Burke or Emerson. He works on his style, re-reading what he has written and adding critical marginalia: “stilted,” “poor writing.”

And frequently he abandons literary pretension and gives himself over to despair.

Coming home from the movie I talked with mother. For once in my life I completely broke down and blurted out all my miserable heart yearnings. Feeling that youth is fast slipping away, I mourn the loss of love and romance. The one thing in life I want is romance — and I will probably miss it with the fleeting years. What young girl with romantic sentimental ideas would ever fall in love with an aging shell, an unattractive hulk such

as I possess? My hair fast disappearing, defects all over my skin and face, my digestion forever ruined, and my colon a constant source of trouble, together with my complete lack of any sexual attractiveness, what have I to offer to a normal, healthy young woman? If I had plenty of money probably someone would marry me for security. But with no economic advantages either, I am a dismal case. Someday I will possibly find some older, disillusioned woman who is seeking, not romance, but companionship, who will be ready to join forces with me in a pleasant union of minds, and occasional physical attraction. Not an alluring future, but the best I can demand.

Anguished feelings such as these belong to someone utterly unlike the father I knew. Their rawness is shocking. But turning the page, I find Jim back on his feet—off to meet his brother for lunch. He reports their conversation about business problems in the New Deal, then turns to counting syllables in Shelly’s poetry. Journal writing is a way to express, and to contain, depression. It can safely indulge outbursts like, “I am a ruined soul—a lost body—and a shaken spirit.”

Jim considers psychological causes for his mood swings and recurring physical symptoms. They must be due to “my worry over sex. This constant emotional indecision and oscillation is breaking me in pieces. Every year it gets worse.” The reference to “sex” is unusual, and it’s not clear how literally to understand the word. More often the journal relies on sublimated terms: “romance” or “passion.” Psychoanalysis is very much in the New York intellectual air, and Jim debates its value with one of his female companions, always rejecting Freud’s “dismal outlook on life.” If everything is the result of neurotic impulses, he writes, then human nobility, and thus real tragedy, is inconceivable. The plays of Eugene O’Neill he is attending on Broadway are, for all their brilliance, hemmed in by this cynical modern disposition.

Jim understands his own psychology as an unstable “combination of old Puritan ideals and romantic emotionalism.” “Puritanism” is a frequent shorthand for his family background — restraint in the service of high ideals, a quality associated primarily with his father. The choice of this word, with its connotations of moralism and repression, suggests ambivalence, an emerging separation.

It’s risky, of course, to diagnose neurotic symptoms from a distance, especially if one is their inheritor, but it seems to me that a few facts are clear.

At the time of Jim’s journal-writing, the father who guided his life-path had been dead for five years. Encouraged by his mother, he was exploring a new career and discovering that he loved literary study. In the journals, which begin three years after he had escaped to Arizona, “Father” never appears as an individual, a remembered human being, but is invoked as a model of nobility and benevolence — “the most marvelous and good man I have ever known.” The repeated eulogies seem to be a kind of screen, behind which the real person and his problematic influence are hidden. This was the man who guided his son along a scientific career he had wanted for himself, a path ending in breakdown and more than a decade of unreliable health.

Jim’s life fell apart just as his father was dying in 1927. Whatever resentment the son may have felt at paternal authority, and now, abandonment, would have been submerged by guilt. How could this lost father’s loving advice be rejected?

By 1931, however, working on an MA at Columbia, Jim has embarked on a very different course. As the scientific career is left behind, George S Clifford recedes in the journal. Has the paternal ghost been laid to rest? The continuing physical symptoms suggest not. But some hard-won distance is taken. As time goes

on, Emily Orr Clifford becomes the crucial anchor, a source of unwavering support and a firm sense of purpose. By the time of my father’s oral history, recorded much later, his father is barely mentioned. His mother appears often.

Both parents, together, provided the ideal, or perhaps the knot, within which Jim’s feelings about love and marriage were entangled. The apparent perfection of their union — they never bickered, and shared a high ethical and civic purpose — surely impeded their son’s search for a wife. His parents established an impossible standard. In fact, Jim never did manage to find a partner on his own. Every woman that attracted him failed to measure up, until his mother stepped in.

A Night at the Opera

We’re in the balcony at the Metropolitan Opera: Verdi’s Il Trovatore or perhaps La Traviata. Dad, Mom, possibly Emily, and me.

It’s rough going for a twelve-year-old in a scratchy flannel suit, especially La Traviata with its endless final act and death scene. Il Trovatore, at least, has sword fights, gypsies, clanging anvils, and a romantic hero.

There were no supertitles then, so I had to imagine what was being sung based on Dad’s quick plot summary. Who knows what I understood? Now, of course, I remember the legendary principals — Bjoerling, Milanov, Warren — with reverence. Back then, they seemed like ordinary, not-too-attractive-looking people with very loud voices.

ARIZONA

My father had prepared us by playing the arias on our Victrola at home. I must have recognized them. The melodies, at least, got through.

My one indelible recollection is leaving Il Trovatore, with relief, and descending long stairs from the balcony to the street. I'm pressed close to Dad in the moving crowd. Suddenly he begins to sing the opera's most excited tenor aria, "Di quella pira." The people around us smile, but all I want is to melt into the surrounding walls.

In the subway, as an express train rattles past, Dad goes to full volume and tries for the high C.

Today, a lover of opera, I treasure these excruciating moments.

Jim's years in the Southwest, 1929-1933, were a critical time in his transformation from engineer to English professor. He had a chance to slow down, to reflect on possible futures, and to try out different personae. Dad's "cowboy years" became part of Clifford family lore. As children, we were impressed by photos of our father in chaps, grinning alongside his horse. We could try on his enormous, sweat-stained, "ten gallon hat" or heft a heavy lariat and spurs. He sang sentimental cowboy songs and told stories of exploits like scaling, alone and by mistake, the "unclimbable" Enchanted Mesa, near Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. Watching Dad twirling a rope and jumping through made an impression.

In Arizona, Jim enjoyed a restorative, outdoor existence. He also pursued an active social life—with increasing ambivalence. While attracted to good looks, wealth, and elegance, he simultaneously condemned the Tucson elite on moral and intellectual grounds. Against their self-centered superficiality he held up the noble principles represented by his father and by the critics like Matthew Arnold that he was avidly reading. At the same time, the not-so-young bachelor worried that his moral/intellectual standards were impossibly high. No life-partner could possibly live up to them. By holding himself aloof wasn't he missing out on passionate romance? In any event, he doubted that an attractive girl would settle for "a poor high-school teacher with no sex appeal." Despite conclusions such as this, he continued to seek the company of women, throwing himself into energetic conversation and dancing. Conviviality—witty, intelligent talk—was his greatest pleasure, often combined with singing, long into the night.

Reading Dad's journal, I was surprised by how much inspiration he found in romantic literature, from Blake and Wordsworth to Emerson. I had always thought of him firmly anchored in the

previous, eighteenth century. He did, often, question the later writers (and his own romantic impulses) in terms derived from classicism and rationality. However, in writers like Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Swift he was discovering much to subvert any simple opposition of classic and romantic, science and sentiment. Personally, he didn't want to choose. His Arizona journal explored the paths of both "genius" and "scholarship." If he leaned toward the latter, its open-minded skepticism, he also yearned for passion, adventure, thrilling "discoveries."

One romantic figure stands out in the Arizona journals, his friend George Weller. Fresh from Harvard, Weller taught for a year at Evans School before moving on to a brilliant career as a novelist, a playwright, and a Pulitzer Prize winning war correspondent. Realizing that this was someone special, Jim recorded an extended portrait. At the school Weller was a misfit, keeping to himself, writing constantly, and exploring the surrounding desert on a gangly, indestructible horse he named "Ivan the Terrible." The duo seldom stayed on the trails.

Jim was perhaps Weller's only friend at the school, a bond based on their shared dislike of elitism. Weller had been very successful at Harvard, editing the student newspaper, and composing the famous Hasty Pudding show. But needing to work in the college dining room, he was a victim of class condescension. Jim believed that his own education at a non-elite midwestern college was a bond. The two friends argued over poetic freedom versus rational constraint and connected over baseball (not polo). As Jim got to know Weller, curiosity turned to admiration. His friend had already published a novel that Jim greatly admired, and he had spent the previous summer in Mexico living on a shoestring with farmers and fishermen. He could narrate his experiences there with unforgettable humor and vividness.

At the end of the school year the two friends drove together to San Diego and then Yosemite in Jim's old car, "Boris." They roughed it: 2000 miles, at a cost of \$20.00 each! Jim crossed paths with Weller later in New York and stayed distantly in touch, as his friend's journalistic career took him to the Balkans, Italy, and the Pacific theatre of World War Two. He would be the first Westerner to enter Nagasaki after the bombing,

Jim was clearly fascinated by his younger friend, a model of independence, originality, and sheer adventure. A romantic alter-ego, Weller could be admired from a safe distance by the emerging academic. Perhaps he helped Jim identify qualities that would guide his career as a literary historian toward what he would call a "scholar adventurer." Somehow scholarship, the patient accumulation and skeptical weighing of documentary information would be combined with the thrill of discovery.

Jim was feeling his way toward an expressive form that suited his inclination and talent. In Arizona he confronted his desire to write creatively, especially the long-projected Southern Indiana regional novel. It would be centered on his father's experience. "Perhaps my message to the world is the recreation in fiction of the glory of such a life as that of my father. Possibly everything so far has been preparing me for this great work." The project's psychological stakes were high.

By the time he left Arizona for full-time graduate school, Jim had recorded serious doubts about his ability to produce original fiction. Yet something of the abandoned Southern Indiana novel survived in his scholarship. Biography, writing history through an exemplary life, would come to define his academic approach.

NEW YORK

During the summer of 1933, before he began the PhD, Jim's mother tutored him in Latin. Progress was excruciatingly slow. Wracked by anxiety, he couldn't concentrate. The usual Evansville socializing—tennis, parties, swimming at the river—no longer satisfied. Anxious about the future, his affective life was in shambles. He struggled with violently mixed feelings about a girlfriend, ten years younger, who had been a frequent date in prior years. She belonged to one of the "Pink Popper" families, and his relations with her were avuncular. Now, she was back from Wellesley with new college companions—changed in ways that both attracted and confused him. What if this familiar partner was, after all, "the one?" Paralyzed by conflicting responses—desire, hesitation, inadequacy, withdrawal—Jim ended the summer by rejecting his family-friend along with her new, party-loving crowd, as "selfish and mentally lazy." Their excessive smoking and drinking repelled him. Yet—always self-doubting—he wondered if he was turning into an aging, moralistic "Calvinist," incapable of passion. Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, "The Prelude" saved the day, renewing his commitment to noble, spiritual values. In late September Jim headed for New York and, he wrote, "a new life."

The city's cultural resources, especially theatre and opera, provided a release from academic anxiety. The PhD was a daunting challenge. Jim started with a lucky break. A friendly professor, testing his command of Latin, presented him with a passage he happened to have just studied. His stumbling translation was good enough to pass. What followed was harder. In a course on Anglo Saxon and the history of the English language, the transplanted engineer felt completely clueless and his performance was a disaster. In the Eighteenth-Century seminars, where he had begun to develop a knowledge-base, he could feel a sense of progress. But by early

April, the relentless study, compounded by New York Winter, had seriously undermined his health.

In January 1934, Jim began to experience painful outbreaks on the skin of his legs and arms. During the next five months, four doctors prescribed different, sometimes contradictory, remedies. Nothing helped. In early May, a grim summation:

When one's body begins to disintegrate everything seems to go at once. I am only a shell to be sure—my skin breaking out continuously, my hair quickly disappearing, eyes weakening, one ear deaf the other threatened, my stomach always rebelling, sinus ready to flare at any moment, and worst of all my colon and intestines in an unknown and possibly dangerous condition. Not an alluring prospect for a young man—not yet even begun to live.

Never one to give in to self-pity for too long, he added: "Yet I still retain a buoyant zest for knowledge and pleasant optimism that somehow, someday, things will all turn out well in the end. The illusions of a born romantic—yet always welcome."

Hope sprang eternal in his relations with women. A few were sufficiently attractive in his eyes and offered stimulating conversation. He enjoyed arguing with them about theatre, psychology, and favorite books. All were critically evaluated as potential life-partners and all failed to measure up. He lacked the confidence to press his desires beyond a certain point, taking refuge in high moral and intellectual standards. The pattern was all-too-familiar, and he recorded it without illusion, finding a certain comfort in the journals of Boswell, "a pathetic figure in the end." Jim could view himself with irony: "...we spent the evening telling personal experiences, etc. I, for my part, had a good time. I always do when the principal subject is myself."

His mother spent the winter of 1934 in Tucson, looking after her grandson, George Jr., who suffered from respiratory illness. In loco parentis and struggling, she urged her son interrupt his time at Columbia and come to her aid. Her “dismal” letters, with their “complete acceptance of defeat” troubled him. “She feels her age and inability to carry on for the first time. It is tragic for us to see her lose confidence in this way, she who has been such a tower of strength and moral courage.” Jim was committed to his studies and managed to hold on in New York—no doubt, with considerable guilt. His skin outbreaks began about this time.

As always, the response to adversity was activity. Visiting friends around the city, he enjoyed spirited argument and conversation, singing for hours, when he found a receptive context. In the spring he played for an intramural baseball team.

Even during this first year of PhD work, Jim was deep in the research that would result in his dissertation and first book on Mrs. Thrale (later Piozzi). He spent five days in the Boston area for meetings with scholars at Harvard and Wellesley, including a theatre date with his rejected Evansville girlfriend (“very lovely to look at, still a trifle silly”). A trip to New Haven introduced him to the “Boswell Factory,” where recently-discovered manuscripts were being catalogued, edited, and prepared for publication. Frederick Pottle, the project’s director, would become a good friend. To his delight, Jim discovered that the young Yale professor had left a career in science for literary scholarship.

During the winter, he tried his hand at writing for *The Brooklyn Eagle*, a cultural journal. Several reviews found their way into print. But all attempts at fiction or satire were rejected. Intense anxiety surrounded each submission, and eventually it became clear that journalism and creative writing were a dead end. The psychic cost was too high, and he lacked the requisite creative flair. Yet Jim

continued to experiment. Passages in his journal were clearly those of a writer in search of a style.

New York exposed the mid-westerner to a wide political spectrum. In Southern Indiana, the crucial issues had been votes for Women (which his parents supported), repeal of Prohibition (which they opposed), and Roosevelt’s social and economic reforms (which Jim hesitantly approved and his friend McGinness violently rejected). In New York, one of his women friends urged him to observe Diego Rivera painting a mural, downtown at The Workers School (American Communist Party headquarters). Skeptical of left-wing politics, Jim compared the didactic paintings he saw to Catholic religious imagery. But he sensed that something important was in process and recorded a precise description of the painter at work. George Mitchell, his brother’s brother-in-law, was living in New York, and Jim visited him and his wife Alice regularly. Mitchell, the youngest of a remarkable family of southern progressives—New Deal radicals and anti-segregation activists—took Jim to a mass “Meeting for World Peace.” His journal records only amusement at the “squabbling between socialists and communists.”

John Wexley’s Broadway play, “They Shall Not Die,” dramatized southern racism and the Scottsboro case. Jim found it dramatically heavy-handed, but was moved by “the tragedy of the negro.” “What good is law,” he commented, “if it can be so easily manipulated to sectional and race prejudice?”

Theatre, Opera and orchestral concerts were affordable in 1930s New York. More than twice a week on average, the displaced Hoosier escaped his room in student housing for a performance downtown. He took female dates, met friends, or went solo. His journal recorded mini-reviews.

He transcribed quotes from Oliver Goldsmith and Samuel Johnson on the theatre as an escape from solitude.

To all the above I heartily agree. It is the greatest pleasure and solace to one who is without the financial wherewithal to cut a figure in society. For a whole evening he can mingle with delightful people, thrill at dramatic situations in which he can imagine himself as a participator, can fall head over heels in love with a beautiful, fascinating lady—see life vibrant with potentiality passing before his eyes—all for the price of one dollar. He will return to his drab room a different person—throbbing with the joy of existence.

The experience could also be depressing. He found a performance of “The Band Wagon,” a musical revue with an all-star cast, “superb and sparkling,” but added:

As for myself in self debased mood. Watching the beautiful girls, downstairs in lovely evening gowns—their well-dressed escorts—and I sitting in a suit seven years old, world-war trench coat under the seat, and a discarded hat one of the boys found too poor to take away from Flagstaff. Wonder if I'll ever have money enough to dress decently and take good-looking girls to the theatre downstairs. [If so] I'll be old, and won't enjoy the show as much as I do now—shabby but enthusiastic, poor but romantic.

In May 1934, Jim tallied his “record of theatrical performances:” Plays - 34, Operas - 19, Musical Comedies - 7, Operettas - 6, Symphonies - 11, Misc. concerts - 3, Ballet - 2. Total, 82. Average 2.8 per week, since October. Much later, speaking to the young student recording his oral history, he would justify escapism as a kind of method. If you have a problem, “Don't fret...Let your

unconscious work on it. Set up your problem and do something else: go to a show.”

Despite frequent periods of despair about health, love-life, and academic inadequacy, Jim made it through his first year of doctoral work. “You just have to be determined,” he often said with the assurance of hindsight, “and things will work out.”

MASCULINITY

Jim's long quest for romance and marriage, two decades of false starts and inconclusive flirtations, had been deeply frustrating. But in Spring 1938, the bachelor instructor at Lehigh thinks he has finally found a life-partner. His journal, which had lapsed in the years following his 1935 research trip in England, resumes intensively for three months. In obsessive detail, Jim records his thoughts, doubts and passion. Marguerite is different from his previous dates: she is about his age, a serious scholar of Thomas Hardy, and a Dean at McMaster College in Ontario, Canada. Raised in Rockport, a small Indiana town, she has an AB from Evansville College and a PhD from Radcliffe (Phi Beta Kappa). He notes her "character and ambition," a love of literature, theatre, and music. She uses alcohol moderately and doesn't smoke. "On the other side of the balance sheet," however, is "the problem of her age:" isn't she likely to be set in her ways? "I'm afraid after being a scholar for some time she would not want to keep house." Would she be willing to give up a Dean's position to live as an Instructor's wife in Bethlehem?

Jim corresponds flirtatiously with Marguerite, whom he has met only briefly. She responds in kind, and they agree that he will drive up for "what may be the most eventful trip of my life." A week later he announces, with multiple exclamation points: "I have fallen in love!" The full record of his time in Canada tells a more complicated story: attraction, repulsion, attraction. There are awkward hesitations—an attempted kiss produces broken glasses. He overcomes disappointment with her appearance—dislike of her face viewed from a certain angle—when he observes her across the room at a dinner party, looking poised and elegant. This is someone he could marry. They read aloud chapters from their scholarly books-in-progress. Jim is drawn to Marguerite's intelligence, and he likes the way she holds his elbow when they talk.

Once back in Bethlehem, the correspondence, blows hot and cold. Both parties seem to be having second thoughts. A repeat visit to Canada is cancelled at the last moment, and they agree to get together in Indiana during the summer for visits to each other's hometowns. From the start, Jim has been concerned about Marguerite's family, confessing: "I must admit to being something of a snob, and would like to know about a girl's relations. I don't know what Rockport has to offer." The journal stops abruptly in June. But a one-paragraph addendum, written five years later, in 1943, finishes the story.

We learn that in Rockport the romance fell apart.

Not that I'm really a snob, but the first sight of her in her natural habitat turned me away from her, perhaps even more than my realization that I had no real physical desire for her at all. She was so angular, dried-up, and lacking in femininity. A typical old-maid, really! And I could see that basically she was a social climber, selfish and introspective. Not the type for me certainly! What I needed was an unselfish, natural, home-loving, sweet girl. And I found one just right—but not right away—not, in fact, until the summer of 1940.

So the journal concludes more than a decade of searching for "the right girl." A happy ending. Yet it's uncomfortable to read this passage today—the attitudes to class and gender it expresses. Jim was certainly not, in most areas of life, a snob. But here, the prospect of marriage, with its internalized parental standard, provokes elitism. Rockport lacks the mansions and cultural institutions of Evansville, and Marguerite's family, though no details are given, is apparently not up to snuff. Her achievements as a scholar and college administrator now seem merely signs of self-centered social ambition. Physical attraction turns to loathing, expressed in dismissive terms. Equally sexist, in an opposite register, is Jim's

cloying evocation of the “natural, home-loving, sweet girl” he marries two years later.

Reading my father’s journals now, it’s impossible to miss their masculinism. Many passages make one cringe. The “girls” he meets are always sized-up—their physical appearance noted, their intellect and social skills graded. What I learned, in the 1970s, to call “the male gaze” is pervasive. Yet the journals aren’t written in a spirit of chauvinism. My father’s masculinity is associated with vulnerability and the fear of failure. Women, simultaneously desirable and threatening, need to be kept at a safe distance.

At one point, Jim makes a long list of his requirements for the “girl of my dreams,” concluding that she doesn’t exist. “Yet I hope...” No woman measures up. Nor does he himself. He notices that he talks too much, lacks physical assurance and “sex appeal.” When desire surges, he wants to act but quickly feels he is “flying close to the flame.” High standards of intellectuality, morality, and appearance cool his ardor and keep him safe. At times Jim wishes he could just let himself go, yielding to romantic passion. Reading Byron, he yearns for sexual freedom, but his “Calvinism” (the ghost of a noble father) intervenes. A biography of Rousseau elicits the comment: “One doubts whether he ever had any satisfactory sex relations throughout his long life. He was always so afraid of women, and their entanglements, that he never allowed himself [...] real love. Always he played at imaginary love. So I do constantly [...] I mentally desire and physically remain coldly aloof. It is a miserable condition...” In this romantic *agon*, complex, real women are nowhere to be found.

It would be unfair to label my father misogynistic. In his journals he genuinely enjoys female company, with enjoyable conversation and mildly erotic flirtations. He values “wit” (in an Eighteenth-Century sense, lively intelligence) wherever he finds it. He argues

happily about books, theatre and ideas with his girlfriends, at a safe emotional distance. When things threaten to get serious, the high stakes of marriage intensify his neurotic and medical symptoms. In schematic Freudian terms, an ideal superego (“Father, the finest man...” etc.) and an impossible desire for the perfect wife (his ever-loyal mother), create a knot he cannot untie. No wonder his body keeps failing, breaking out...

Dad’s late marriage seems to have resolved his conflicted feelings about sex and women. While I can’t be sure, I do have the testimony of two prominent feminist scholars who knew my father as an established professor. One, Helene Moglen, met him at a conference on Lawrence Stern, the subject of her dissertation and first book. She reports his unhesitating encouragement for a young woman entering the field, something she had not enjoyed in her doctoral work at Yale. To anyone interested in the Eighteenth Century, his attitude was welcoming. My second witness, Carolyn Heilbrun, a colleague at Columbia, struggled for respect as a scholar and a feminist during the 1950s and 60s. She reported that, in a dismissive environment, my father was an ally. She added caustically: “At Columbia there were faculty who always slept with their students, and those who never slept with their students. Your father was in the latter category.” Though his appointment was in the Columbia graduate school, Dad kept his Eighteenth-Century course at Barnard throughout his long career. I’m sure he enjoyed lecturing to a room full of “Barnard girls.” One of the students, the novelist Erica Jong, recalls his inspirational teaching (in her autobiographical *Fear of Fifty* and the epilogue to her Eighteenth-Century novel, *Fanny*). He assigned female writers and was, she concludes, “an intuitive feminist.”

We were all amused when a colleague reported comments by students, overheard on the street-corner at 116th Street and Broadway: “Oh that Professor Clifford. He’s a doll!”

Having known my father as a success, his life on an even keel, it has been uncomfortable to encounter him, in the journals, as a flawed human being. He holds little back, and the less admirable aspects of his character and social background are on open display. Anachronism is, of course, a risk. I may be imposing political standards and definitions that were absent in the 1920s and '30s, at least in my father's social milieu. (It's hard, for example, to recognize as "feminism" his mother's nineteenth-century amalgam of women's rights, Christian evangelism, and moral reform.) Perhaps inevitably, I always read his journals from the perspective of my own post-sixties sexual "liberation."

Sex in Dad's early life remains a mystery. Were there unhappy experiences? The intimate journal is silent on this and on topics like impotence or masturbation. Perhaps they were repressed. I can't help thinking so. But I'm probably projecting my own experiences, the values and preoccupations of my time. Dad was born in 1901 and raised by morally conservative, if culturally progressive, Presbyterians. He may well have been a virgin at marriage.

Masculinity and "manliness:" this is a recurring theme. Jimmy Clifford was thin, his spindly legs a source of shame when he had to wear tights in a Shakespearian drama, to the amusement of his friends. He was physically active and good at sports, but lived with the awareness that his health might fail at any moment. Thinning hair and mysterious ailments undermined his self-confidence. In the journal he often notices the robust physique and good looks of male acquaintances. Dad's rather common male insecurities were compounded, before 1940, by his uncertain career and the very real prospect of failure. Reading the journals now, I recognize his shaky masculinity through my own experiences of thinness, hair loss, and non-guaranteed erotic performance. But as a boy, I always saw my father as physically strong, ebullient, and

competent in practical tasks. Only in the very last years of his life did he suddenly appear weak, in need of assistance—help I didn't know how to give.

In one of the files my mother kept I discover a handwritten poem, apparently from 1976. I reproduce it here, with minor changes—and with no recollection of having written it.

Dad at 75

Something, at the dinner table, sticks in his esophagus, something his mind won't accept, stiffening all those senseless muscles without asking permission.

Is it a bit of fibrous beef? Or the brussels sprouts he's never liked—though an Anglophile—we cheerily inquire, watching the worry invade him, rendering him a child.

"I can feel it there...I only need to burp." He concentrates on insides now unfamiliar. Roots pulled up quick from their familiar soil, the final transplanting.

He quivers, slumps, small in his clothing—and behind him the familiar wall of books, heavy volumes which once in a dream I hurled at his face (they turned into sponges).

Gagging on something. "Perhaps there's a growth in there," he says, as if calmly, between dry retches. His roaming eyes, his little skull, little, if only I could take it in my arms!

If I could allow this person—finally visible—to need me. But he is still an untouchable... pathetic skin, undesirable. I cannot spare any change.



PART THREE

HOOSIERS



Indiana Humor

Thanksgiving Dinner in our New York apartment always included "Aunt Lady," Frances Hanson, a widow and long-time family friend who lived in a nice apartment on the East Side. She and her husband, Richard Hanson — Evansvillians with a high-brow demeanor — had been dubbed by their friends "Squire" and "Lady." Frances was admired for her impeccable good taste, witty repartee and willingness to participate in the practical jokes and satires favored by my father and his friends.

Dad and his brother George conducted "research" into the life and works of "The Bard of Alamo," James B. Elmore. They visited the poet on his farm not far from Wabash College, and collected his publications, including Love Among the Mistletoe and Poems (1908). Elmore's commemoration of a railway disaster, "The Monon Wreck," contained memorable lines: "And yonder in the wreck I see/ A man that's pinioned down by the knee/ And hear him moaning and to say:/Cut oh cut, my leg away!/ But a jackscrew from the mail caboose/Is now applied and lets him loose."

At Thanksgiving, passages such as this were read aloud with mock seriousness. Aunt Lady and my father provided commentary. There were also readings from Abe Martin's Almanack, by the syndicated humorist Kin Hubbard. A favorite section of The Almanack was Miss Fawn Lippincut's advice column.

"I am often forced to walk downtown with a neighbor who insists on discussing books. As I have beautified my home premises at an enormous expense I do not wish to sell out if I can help it. Will you please suggest something?" SAM

Answer: I would sell. Peace is worth any price.

"I am a worthy young man of splendid habits and good prospects. I have ushered at seventeen church weddings and put up thirty-two hammocks so far this season, and yet the girls do not seem to care for me." ERSIE

Answer: Intersperse your exemplary habits with an occasional rash act.

"I have been asked to go to a picnic with a young man who wears a belt in addition to suspenders. Would he excite comment?" FLORINEL

Answer: I would forego the pleasure in this instance. The season is young and you will doubtless have other opportunities.

"What is considered a fair yield of turnips?" ROBERT

Answer: Any kind of a turnip crop is a failure.

Not, perhaps, for everyone. Our Thanksgiving dinners usually included one or more "strays," foreign students with nowhere to celebrate the holiday. What they made of these recitations I cannot imagine.



I'VE ALWAYS FELT MORE THAN A LITTLE AMBIVALENT about my family's Indiana background. Growing up as a New York cosmopolitan with four years living in Europe—first London, then Paris—I turned into a post-structuralist sophisticate, a Marxist, a cultural theorist—what my father called, always with reserve, “a critic.” Everything distanced me from my parents' roots. Dad loved Southern Indiana. With all his East Coast attachments and Anglophilia, he never disavowed this background. (A paperweight on his desk proclaimed him a “Who's Who Hoosier.”) I did receive from him an appreciation for bad puns and cornball humor (The Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields), a gift I associated with Indiana. But the rest of the heritage, especially its religious and political conservatism, repelled me.

A more ambiguous gift came to me through music. I learned to sing from my father, something I'll always be grateful for: Gilbert and Sullivan, Christmas carols, Broadway musicals. For me this love, and the confidence to perform in public, found an outlet in folk-country music. I was part of the folk revival in New York during the late 1950s and early '60s. Inspired by Pete Seeger, I took up the banjo and spent many Sundays at Washington Square Park belting out union songs, blues, and all the rest. In college, I turned to “Old Time” country music and bluegrass, whose high harmonies suited my voice. I don't think I knew, then, that Bill Monroe's famous bluegrass festival center, Bean Blossom, was in Indiana. And I certainly didn't appreciate the irony of my enthusiasm: in New York City, a child of parents from respectable Evansville, discovers the “hillbilly” music from Kentucky across the river that they tuned-out on their radios.

No doubt, ashamed of my privileged class background, I was seeking to identify with another America through popular culture. Even very recently, when speaking about my family history, I called my parents' Evansville milieu “middle class.” My wife, Judith, whose parents were from Jewish immigrant families in the Bronx, corrected me: “You mean upper middle class, don't you?”

The Cliffords and the Igleharts were prominent citizens, civic leaders, pillars of their churches, supporters of moral reform and higher education. The Orrs, my Grandmother Emily's family, were early industrialists, founders of the Orr Iron Company and owners of downtown Evansville real estate. “Bob” Orr, who cycled through Wales with my father in 1935, would later become Republican Governor of Indiana. My grandmother kept genealogical records for both the Orrs and the Cliffords. She wrote that her grandchildren could be proud of their ancestors. Prominent among them, on her husband's side: Robert Letcher, Governor of Kentucky (1840–44) pictured in Old Crow Whiskey ads, and the famous frontiersman, Daniel Boone.

As a boy in the 1950s, I felt proud of the Daniel Boone connection, though I probably confused him with Davey Crockett whose image in the Walt Disney TV series of 1954–55 left an impression. (How I saw this, since we had no TV then, I can't recall.) Boone and Crockett, long surrounded by myths, now seem less heroic. My ancestor's contribution to American history was “opening up” Kentucky and Ohio for Westward expansion from the original colonies—and dispossession of the Indian tribes. Boone no doubt believed some version of what would later be called “manifest destiny.” He was not, however, an “Indian fighter” in the Andrew Jackson mold. He participated in wars pitting English settlers against the French, and later he sided with revolutionary colonists against Loyalists and the English army. Indians allied themselves with both sides in these conflicts, so Boone

fought alongside, and against, several different tribes. According to legend, he was a loner who loved nothing better than hunting and exploring for long periods in “the wilderness.” This is true. But he also established permanent settlements, and when more people arrived in Kentucky, before he moved further West, Boone engaged in land speculation. To the end of his life, apparently, he enjoyed the company of Indian hunting companions.

Native Americans and the settlement of Southern Indiana don’t appear in the family lore that has come down to me. (The word “Indiana,” I now see, both names and hides this violent history.) However, an intriguing anecdote featuring an Indian appears in the genealogies recorded by George S. Clifford. Daniel Boone’s sister, Elizabeth, was the mother of ten children by her Scottish husband, William Grant. One of these, Squire, survived the disastrous Battle of Blue Licks in 1782—disastrous, that is, for the American revolutionary soldiers. Against Daniel Boone’s advice, they rashly pursued a force of Loyalists and Indians across the Ohio River and were lured into an ambush. Before he swam back to safety, the story goes, Squire Grant gave water from his hat to a wounded brave—a noble act. I can’t help wondering about this vignette, preserved by my grandfather from the Boone years of land-clearing and white settlement. What lingering bad conscience and desire for innocence does it express?

Emily Orr Clifford was intensely loyal to her home-town, which she had watched grow into a small city. She resented the portrayal of small-minded midwestern life in Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* and composed rejoinders that defended the progressive aspirations and human decency she and her husband had found in their many civic projects. Of these, the founding of Evansville College was the most significant. As a widow she served for twenty years as a Trustee and encouraged the institution’s growth. What began

as a small religious college evolved into a modern university. Mrs. Clifford didn’t oppose the secularization that came with change, but there were lines she wouldn’t cross.

A story recorded in the University’s official history tells of an especially sweltering day on which the Trustees gathered in a downtown hotel where the normal meeting rooms were intolerable. The only air-conditioned space was a combination restaurant and bar. As the Trustees entered the area reserved for them, their sole female member announced: “I have lived seventy years without setting foot in a saloon, and I don’t intend to do so now. Go ahead without me.” In a gesture of “gallantry,” the Board sweated through its meeting in a hallway.

There were other lines defining my grandmother’s world that have not been enshrined in amusing anecdotes. Looking into Evansville history, I came across newspaper accounts of a 1915 controversy over the planned screening of D. W. Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation” in a local movie house. A “committee of colored citizens,” chaired by the president of the recently-founded local NAACP, protested the movie’s racist celebration of the Ku Klux Klan. They argued it could encourage racial tension in the city, especially in light of a recent lynching, nearby in Kentucky. Evansville’s Mayor responded by appointing a “Board of Censorship” to review the film’s moral acceptability. This permanent body was chaired by the High School Principal and was composed of six respected citizens. They viewed “Birth of a Nation,” heard from the objectors, and decided it could be shown. As I looked through the Board’s membership listed in a 1915 newspaper article, one name was familiar: “Mrs. George S. Clifford.”

I don’t know what was discussed and who stood for what in the committee. Nor do I know whether Mrs. Clifford participated in the Board’s future deliberations on moral acceptability. But it was

troubling to see her name on the censorship committee, rather than among the protesters. The latter group was certainly right to worry about the movie's encouragement of racism. According to the newspaper account, after a scene in which the film's hero refuses to shake the hand of a black man, members of the audience applauded.

As recent scholarship on the revived KKK during the inter-war years reveals, Indiana's southernmost city was a point of entry for the organization's rapid spread northward. The screening of Griffith's racist epic in Evansville was part of that process. A newly "respectable" Klan quickly took hold in Indiana, harassing and boycotting Blacks, Catholics, and Jews, and exerting important political influence until it was discredited by scandal at the end of the 1920s. I've found no evidence of involvement by any of my parents' high-minded relations, but it would be wrong to assume the Klan appealed only to the unenlightened lower classes.

My Evansville grandparents lived comfortably in a racially divided world that had its roots in post-Civil War systems of supremacy and segregation. Their white privilege seemed normal and acceptable. My grandmother's participation in this arrangement emerged unexpectedly during a meeting of the Evansville College Board of Trustees.

I found among the papers kept by my mother an informal lecture/appreciation of Emily Orr Clifford by Ralph Olmstead, a central figure in the history of Evansville College/University. A WW1 veteran, Olmstead graduated from the College in its second class and, in 1923, took up a position as Executive Secretary to the President. He served in that position, renamed "Vice President," for thirty-nine years. A scholar as well as an administrator, he wrote a detailed history of the institution he had seen through many changes.

The transcribed lecture begins by praising George and Emily Clifford for their visionary work bringing an institution of higher learning to Southern Indiana. It evokes Mrs. Clifford's subsequent long service to the College. Then Olmstead turns to "another matter...quite different."

Evansville was really in fact a southern city. We're north of the Mason-Dixon Line but several miles farther south of Louisville and the south has always had quite an influence on the city—much of the trade on the riverboats and all was to the south—manufacturers and so forth. Well, it's interesting that, well I should say that Evansville was in effect a segregated city. The Negroes had their own school—no integration. They would stand in the balcony if they went to a theater, and they were looked upon as the people who would do the hard work, do the daily labors and who would be the servants in the home as they were in the South. Well, with that background, in the early 1930's about 1931 [the College's] President Harper had come to the point where he was very unhappy about the fact that there were no Negroes in Evansville College. Interesting thing here is that there was nothing in our charter or in the action of the Board about saying they couldn't attend. They just didn't expect to—nobody black. They fully expected therefore to go somewhere else. But President Harper didn't agree with that at all. He was born in the Midwest and educated in New England. He couldn't see us denying admission to Negroes when there was an opportunity for them to get an education in Evansville high school, and I think we were probably about one of the few or maybe the only college north of the Ohio River that didn't admit "colored" people. But then I have to say that "colored" people were not agitating it very much. I think there was a group or two but they just didn't expect to be welcome and so they didn't apply.

Well, now to Mrs. Clifford. First off Dr. Harper decided to take this problem to the Board [of Trustees]. He knew it was a possible cause of some pretty strong feelings and he went to the Board and asked for approval for the college to make it clear that Negroes were welcome, and they approved it; but what surprised me and puzzled me a good deal knowing Mrs. Clifford—a wonderful, fine-spirited woman, kind as she could be to everything and everybody—voted against it and I thought what does that indicate? Why is she against it? It finally occurred to me with what I have said earlier here that having grown up through whatever her years were then in what was in fact a segregated city, she had the same sort of feeling about the Negroes that some of the people in the South did. In other words, as you know in the South in many places, the Negroes were treated kindly, they were the household servants and of course they did the work in the fields... This is something I finally explained to myself. I think in later years, she changed that attitude a good deal particularly after Negroes came [into the College] with absolutely no protest on the part of any white group nor of the college students.

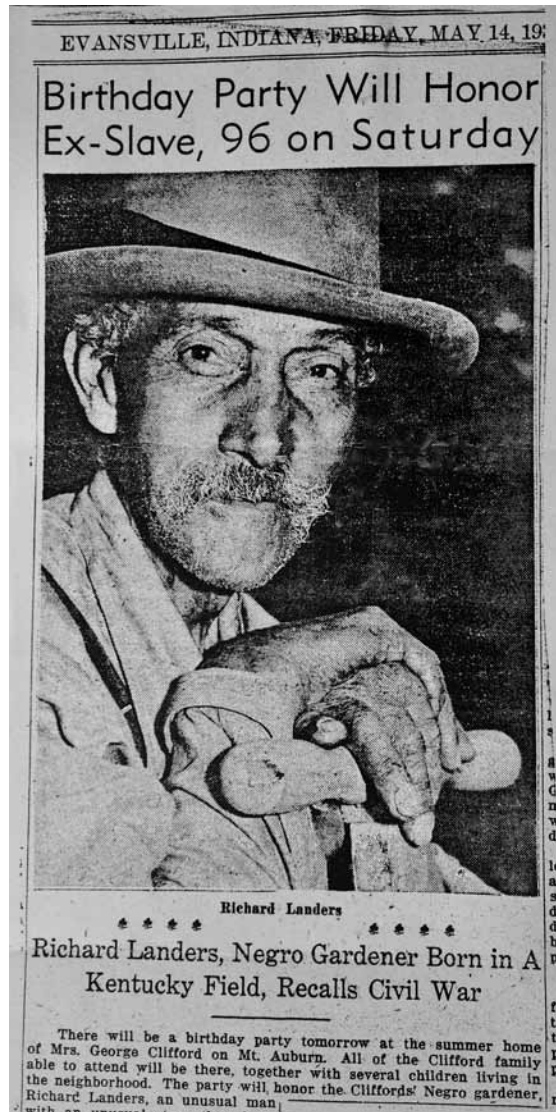
Emily Orr Clifford, a White woman born in 1868, while in many ways a liberal, could not conceive of Evansville College as a proper place for Black students. They belonged where she was accustomed to meeting, employing, and sometimes befriending, them. Much later, living in our New York Apartment, she developed a cordial relationship with Blanche, an older woman from Barbados who helped my mother with housework. “Grandmother Clifford” had a long experience of making friends with servants.

This relationship of hierarchical affection was most dramatically enacted in the person of “Old Richard,” an important presence in my father’s youth. Richard Landers was born a slave in 1841 and

bore his master’s name. After his liberation in 1860 he continued to work for a farmer who had “rented” him from his owner, then found employment on steamboats, a river dredge, and for the railroad. Seriously injured at work, he credited a divine vision with renewing his health. At the age of sixty-six he talked his way into a job at the Clifford’s country house. In her memoir of Ballyrea, my grandmother described Richard’s arrival in 1901. A shortage of gardeners with the necessary skills had left her desperate for help with her ambitious landscaping projects.

When despair was deepest, there sauntered up the walk, a thin little old colored man, with a twinkle in his eye. Seating himself on the step, he began to ask questions and praise himself, smoking all the while a vile cob pipe. The despondent Enthusiast [as she called herself] was inclined to dismiss him without trial, but like a drowning man she clutched at any straw. Appearances are often deceitful, for Richard is the ideal gardener. Most refreshing is his personal interest in every improvement, his pride in the “barbered” lawns, his delight at the visitors’ compliments, and his never-failing good humor, which makes him the friend of the whole family, and the comrade and helper of the boys.

Richard worked more than 36 years for the Cliffords. My father’s school-friend Rick recalled that ten friends from their class visited Ballyrea each year at Spring Break. For a week they played baseball, talked, ate and hung out. The only adult present was Richard who cooked and looked after the boys. The Cliffords’ gardener, who also worked around the house in town, became something of an Evansville personality, and at his 96th birthday party, the local press showed up. There was ice cream and an enormous cake, covered with lighted candles. Richard, still spry and proud of it, told his stories from slavery times, a practiced performance.



The newspaper accounts evoke a return to “Plantation Days” and “a walk along memory lane.” Richard was born in a field where his mother was forced to work when pregnant. As a boy, he narrowly escaped being sold down the river in punishment for a prank devised by his playmate, the master’s son. Richard told



Richard Landers tells a Kindergarten class about his life.

the reporters about whippings by a traveling specialist, “Double Headed Bill Ladd,” who was equally adept with either hand, and who prolonged his victims’ suffering by always taking a cigar break. “I remember when my mammy got the lash 200 times. She sassed ol’ missus and the travelling whipper came around to our house one day in a buggy. They put my mother’s head in a yoke like this (bending over and holding two fingers in a V-shape at his throat) and they gave her 200 licks. I clenched my hands but I didn’t say nothing because I knew I’d get a whipping too.” After the Civil War, it took a while for his mistress to tell Richard he was free, but when she did “I ran as fast as I could.”

Did “Old Richard’s,” stories help the people of Evansville in 1937 feel better about an ugly history they could not consign to the past? The city had its own racist legacies: the capture of fugitive slaves in the mid 19th century, entrenched segregation, and the KKK’s success during the 1920s. Evansville was also a station on the Abolitionist Underground Railroad. My grandmother’s genuine

affection for Richard, a black man who occupied his appropriate place in the family, was integral to this White history. So was her suffragist feminism (which could also be racist, as shown by the well-known case of Elizabeth Cady Stanton). Over her negative vote, Evansville College did admit African Americans after 1933 (today they remain underrepresented). No doubt, as Ralph Olmstead thought, her thinking on race and diversity evolved. She admired Eleanor Roosevelt who, when Grandmother lived with us in New York, was chairing an international commission to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



My parents, internationally minded, progressive liberals, were also formed by Whiteness. Two anecdotes from the mid-1930s make this clear.

Unlike her outgoing and loquacious husband, my mother was reserved. Only late in life could we talk about her past experiences and, in a limited way, her feelings. She didn't have much to say about the year she spent, after college, in New York studying psychology at Columbia. But she did tell me about venturing beyond Morningside Heights with a group of fellow students for an evening at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. The students danced, mostly with each other, to music from two famous bands (I recall only Cab Calloway). Suddenly a good-looking African American approached her. My mother recalled feeling terrified. She had never been held by a black man before. Discovering what a good dancer he was, she relaxed somewhat, and the experience (I can't recall her exact words) was an intense combination of pleasure and anxiety.

A few years earlier, in 1935, my father was travelling on an ocean liner to England for his dissertation research. He kept a rather disjointed journal. Its very first pages record a troubling incident. The third-class cabin he shared with his cousin Bob Orr could accommodate three. The morning after their first night, Dad wrote: "3rd cabin mate finally showed up at 2AM—proved to be a negro—Woodson—highly educated. Argued with Purser—Slept poorly—worrying about what to do—Battle between conscience and inclination. Inclination won out. Changed stateroom to double for Bob and me in 1st class. No extra charge—so we're living on the fat of the land. Very little vibration."

It was unpleasant to stumble on this piece of evidence. No matter how much the cramped cabin and the ship's motion were factors in Dad's appeal to the Purser, his worry about "conscience" and the

mention of “negro” and “highly educated” make it clear that race and class were prominent in his mind. Like my mother’s reaction to her dance partner, whatever his abstract ideas about equality, sharing intimate space with a black person created anxiety and, in this case, segregation.

No other passage in my father’s journals refers to race so explicitly. But he inhabited a world structured by racial inequality, so this very silence is evidence of the way whiteness was simply assumed, never questioned. It’s not a world I can simply consign to the past, or export to a “southern” city, Evansville. Thinking about my own progressive upbringing in New York, I recall my parents raising money for “civil rights,” and in the late 1950s my mother telling me what the initials CORE (The Congress of Racial Equality) stood for. Like many good liberals, we had only a few black friends. (Mom later forged more relationships in her work at Union Seminary and in multi-racial urban churches.) Morningside Heights, where Columbia was perched, was a white enclave, surrounded by Harlem to the East and North, Puerto Rican neighborhoods to the South. We learned, early on, where we could safely walk, what subway trains we had to be on. All this was normal and taken for granted.

In the 1980s, under the influence of postcolonial and critical race theory, I came to reflect on the racial map that determined my movements in the city and the identity I was crafting through my taste for folk and country music. I wrote about this in a somewhat distanced way—a chapter called “White Ethnicity” in my book, *Routes*. The graduate program in which I worked made diversity of gender, race, and sexuality explicit priorities. I considered the teaching and writing I was doing anti-racist. I still do. But I’m much more aware now of the horizon within which I was thinking and acting. There was always something theoretical about my

commitment to “diversity,” a tendency to privilege culture over race as an analytic category. In my personal life, international friendships have been more common than ties to my African-American, Asian, or Latinx compatriots. I was, I still am, living in a white enclave—different from my grandmother’s world and that of my parents, but not fundamentally opposed to it.



Around 1952.

My father looks down at me, smiling. I'm about six years old, stretched out on a sled in snow-covered Riverside Park, New York City. We're at the top of a small hill, and one of my feet is hooked over a metal fence, holding the sled in place. Behind me, Dad crouches. He's wearing a winter topcoat, scarf, gloves, and a grey fedora hat. I'm in a snowsuit, boots, and a cap with ear flaps. Ready to steer the sled, I glance toward the camera, perhaps in response to a prompt. In the next moment, I'll release my foot from the fence and, followed by cries of paternal encouragement, glide downhill on my "flexible flyer."

PART FOUR

DAD AND ME



IN 1986, ADRIENNE RICH published *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, a collection that contained her lecture, “Notes toward a Politics of Location.” From that lecture (and from the work of PhD students I was advising) I learned the concept of “Whiteness.” The location Rich evoked was a complex intersection of influences: racial, sexual, and gendered. Ten years later, introducing a book that worked with this sense of situated intersections, I wrote: “I do not accept that anyone is permanently fixed by his or her ‘identity,’ but neither can one shed specific structures of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history. I understand these, and other cross-cutting determinations, not as homelands, chosen or forced, but as sites of worldly travel: difficult encounters and occasions for dialogue.” (*Routes*, p. 12)

I can still read this passage without embarrassment. But I wonder how well, over the intervening twenty-five years, I’ve responded to those “difficult encounters and occasions for dialogue” across various frontiers of difference. I don’t have a confident answer for this question. I do know that real dialogue requires an ability to listen, a willingness to give up the need to be right, sophisticated, politically virtuous. Letting go of these protections is a long process, never finished, simultaneously personal and political.

For me at least, this path to openness passes through an honest encounter with my father. Unblocking that relationship, even in partial ways, may help me be less guarded in the years to come. Perhaps I’ll accept, better late than never, who he was and how that has shaped, empowered and limited, me. The frozen images I’ve lived with for so long—simple, idealized, distanced—may yet give way to something more complex, an impossible realism. Impossible: because the emotional tangle of parent and child is endless. Realism: because awkward facts will no longer be hidden by complacent stories or contained by irony.



After his death, many of my father’s former students wrote appreciations of his mentorship and example. The tributes are overwhelming and heartfelt. Until now, I’ve hesitated to include a selection in this memoir, wanting to avoid a tone of “celebration.” I’ve needed to hold onto a critical perspective. Why?

It was part of Jim’s special charm that he seemed to erect the moments when you did see him into institutions or half-comic rituals, which would never cease to disappoint you, with their regular fun and repeated good sense.

He came closest to anyone I know to living the ideal of a scholar in a community of scholars—in which people help one another, are glad for each other’s successes, and despondent for their losses... As a woman, I was particularly grateful for his collegueship, for his friendship and immediate interest so freely given, with none of the silent reservation I find so often... He seemed to me to be above jealousy or professional pettiness of any kind.

He was almost unique among Columbia’s eminent senior faculty in his genuine interest and affection even for first-year graduate students.

He gave us enthusiasm for our subject and showed us the way to sustain it; he gave us generosity toward our students (for no one shared his knowledge and resources with his students as Jim did): and he gave us a sense of civility, which is awfully hard to transmit because so much of it was so exclusively Jim himself.

As a teenager, I was once cornered in our apartment house elevator by the wife of a Columbia colleague who lived two floors down. She had resolved to attend some lectures by the eminent

faculty she knew only socially, to see them in action. She came at me rather aggressively: “I just listened to your father lecture. And I want you to know that he’s really good, a master. You probably don’t know that, and you may not care. But I’m telling you.” The elevator door opened and she walked out, leaving me speechless.

Jim was always applauded at the end of his courses, but I recall a day during the half-year course on Swift when Jim had just lectured on Swift’s women — and the entire class, filled with seasoned PhD candidates and the worldly-wise one often found on the campus, spontaneously stood up and cheered and clapped. It had been one of those gems — the perfect lecture, the completely matured condensation, in one brief hour, of erudition and wit.

The neighbor in the elevator was right. I didn’t know... The only public talk I ever heard my father give was one summer at the Meeting House in Shrewsbury, Vermont. A lecture-demonstration about cowboy songs: I thought he did pretty well.



A glaring symptom of my own blocked relation with my father was the fact that I never got around to reading his best-known book, *Young Sam Johnson*. I must have dipped into it, but it was not until a few months ago that I finally read *Young Sam* (a household name in our family) from beginning to end. As it happened, I picked up the book right after working through Dad’s journals from the 1930s. There were obvious parallels. The biography follows Johnson up until he was forty, culminating in 1749 with *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, which established his reputation. Johnson, my father wrote, “had endured one trouble and disappointment after another — the physical ills of childhood, the insecurity of home, the business decline of his father, the break in his own

university education, the long series of failures as a school-master, the harrowing struggles as a translator and journalist, the disappointments of his marriage.” Of course, one can’t draw any simple equivalence between Johnson’s challenges and my father’s. But the two lives, up to the age of forty, were experiences of struggle and stubborn determination. Both young men overcame depression, professional defeats, and physical infirmities. Their fathers were admired figures: civic leaders in small communities who died when their sons were in their twenties, leaving behind complex feelings. For both young men, professional recognition and sexual fulfillment were hard-won.

Dad certainly identified with the literary icon to whom he devoted his professional life. Joseph Wood Krutch’s summation of Johnson, quoted prominently in *Young Sam*, resonates with the character of the man I found in the journals: “...a pessimist with an enormous zest for living.” A worrier, Dad always hoped (expected) to be proven wrong.

If my father’s personality contained something of Johnson, he was also part-Boswell. Dad didn’t share Johnson’s high seriousness: the religious faith and morality that could be punitive when directed inward. He wasn’t “deep” or conflicted, and in this he was closer to Boswell. The two shared an irrepressible enthusiasm and an outgoing personality. If Dad consorted with the intellectual and social elites of London and New York, he was no snob, and seemed to be the same person whether at the annual black-tie Johnson Dinner at the Algonquin Hotel or on the baseball field in a Vermont cow pasture. Humor and frivolity—from Gilbert and Sullivan to the Marx Brothers, to Abe Martin’s *Almanack*—were uncomplicated sources of delight.

More of an ironist, I often found my father’s enthusiasm promiscuous and his thinking naively literal minded. His research and

writing never strayed far from the empirical surface of reality; and this apparent lack of “depth” seemed, to me, a failing.

Dad was certainly an indefatigable amasser of biographical facts. Given his focus on Johnson’s world, the body of evidence he had to master, while large, was finite. During the two decades of work on *Dictionary Johnson*, he aimed to learn everything about his topic. He wanted to know the number of legs on the stools used by Johnson’s assistants working on the *Dictionary*. He was interested in what happened to waste products at Johnson’s Gough Square house. Over many years, Dad collected and weighed scraps of documentary evidence from his own sleuthing and from the research of many graduate students, amateur antiquarians, and professional historians in England. There were tantalizing gaps in Johnson’s life. The literary detective greeted with delight each “new fact,” and he never gave up hope. What if that autobiographical manuscript Johnson was said to have burned before he died turned up, like Boswell’s Journals, in a croquet box in some country house attic?

From the perspective of my own scholarship—focused on later centuries and often contending with too much evidence—Dad’s manageable home in the eighteenth century seemed enviable, but a bit too comfortable. My own academic cohort, in the 1970s and 1980s, radically questioned empiricism in history and the social sciences. Influenced by semiotics, we focused on the prefigurations and implicit narratives that determined what could count as a fact, the “literariness” of even the most material evidence. (Dr. Johnson would, no doubt, have refuted us as he did Bishop Berkeley, by kicking a stone.) Ironically, my father, whose PhD was in Literature, turned out to be essentially a historian, while I, with a doctorate in History, moved in a different direction. For me, reality was always interpreted—selective and interested. And this included any attempt to establish a factual “record,” a firm basis on

which future narratives could be built. One of the ways I held my father’s work at a distance was epistemological.

The line I drew between us was real, but certainly too sharp. After all, Dad edited a collection of essays called *Biography as an Art*. His Introduction to the volume argued that for facts to be meaningful they needed to be shaped aesthetically. It recognized that biographical forms had changed over time and were still evolving. Dad argued that composing a life always meant selecting and arranging the available information; so writing was a subjective, “artistic” process. Nonetheless, he believed that his own life-project—narrating the young and middle-aged Johnson, then delivering his mature subject to Boswell—had to stay close to verifiable, documented facts in order to provide the grounding for other biographies. There would always be strong interpretations of Johnson (in his own time: Joseph Wood Krutch, Walter Jackson Bate, and John Wain). But whatever new portraits emerged, they would all be based on his research.

I have more understanding and sympathy, now, for this project. My own epistemological critiques from the 1980s seem less urgent in a changed historical moment. Dad’s empiricism wasn’t naïve: he knew that facts don’t speak for themselves. But he clung to them, I believe, for dear life. He let others grapple with theory and psychology, because he had found a stable world of expertise to which he could make lasting contributions every day. In his journals from the 1930s he agonized over what, of enduring value, he might leave for posterity. His exhaustively researched biographies were the answer.

In Samuel Johnson, he discovered a profound combination of the conflicting impulses, “romantic” and “classical,” that he grappled with in his journals. Behind the eccentric and unforgettable personality that Boswell gave to the world Dad discovered writings

that confronted deep moral, political, and emotional problems, a wisdom that grappled with human complexity. He also found a man with a profound capacity for sociability and friendship. Like Johnson, my father would not give up on old friends, if their academic polemics were offensive or their politics objectionable. After his first pal McGinnis became a rabid right-winger, Dad limited their exchanges to old-times. Never too proud to mend a fence, he treasured conviviality, conversation, and wit. The Eighteenth-Century world of Johnson's circle was a perfect "settlement" for a man overcoming failure and despair.

In my own work, I stayed away from the eighteenth century—probably because I had grown up in it. Our summer place in Vermont was visited by scholars and graduate students who loved to talk shop. In New York, I kibitzed at the evening gatherings Dad hosted for his seminar. Evansville socializing had taught him a love of games, so he devised educational amusements for his students. Original manuscripts and photocopies of letters and records from the 1700s were set out on desks and card tables with the signatures covered over. Those who identified the most authors won prizes. I squinted with the graduate students at barely legible handwriting.

My father's pedagogical trump card was enthusiasm. He arrived at seminar meetings carrying armloads of old books and manuscripts. Students, he believed, should see and touch the real thing. He told pointed and amusing stories (some at his own expense), and his knowledge of his field required no embellishment. Generous with what he knew, there was little sense of superiority in his manner. Dad didn't need to be the smartest person in the room. I wish I could say the same.

I never knew an authoritarian father. All I received was sensible advice and encouragement, which I absorbed thoughtlessly. In

my late twenties, however, I began to worry that my happy childhood—lacking arguments, blowups and reconciliations—had created an emotionally superficial person, shy of confrontation, passive-aggressive in disagreement. My post-sixties cohort assumed that attacking parents and other authority-figures was normal and a necessary path to personal autonomy. Fearing I had missed that critical step, I tried to initiate frank discussions with my parents about our family's limited psychological depth. Wasn't their emotional restraint a kind of indifference? Shouldn't they have encouraged more honesty? More raw feelings? Mom listened to my complaints and suggested I should lighten up. Dad took to his bed with heart palpitations. I backed off.

Recalling these crude attempts at confrontation, I feel embarrassed. Dad's conflict-avoidance was a hard-won, equilibrium. What right did I have to rock the boat? In fact, he welcomed vigorous arguments, as long as they didn't become personal or cut too deep. After college, when I considered myself a Marxist, we often debated politics and social issues. He played Edmund Burke to my Thomas Paine: it was a performance we both enjoyed.

I've said that my own life imitated his. I married late. I became a college professor. I was professionally ambitious. I wrote books. Closeness led to rivalry. (Of course, I was the only one competing.) I needed to equal his achievements, or to surpass them, but not by too much. Sometimes I still catch myself mentally comparing his publication record to mine, wondering who's ahead.

Now in retirement, my "productivity" is flagging; I don't get around to finishing various writing projects. Unlike my father, who completed a major work before he died, I dabble in experiments that will probably go nowhere. I still wonder if I should publish another book, to keep up?

It seems I will never be free of this entangled competition. So be it.

The North Kaibab Trail

When I was sixteen, we took a family camping trip through the Western national parks (Rocky Mountain, Grand Tetons, Bryce, Zion, Grand Canyon, Mesa Verde). An enthusiastic hiker, I made it to the end of a trail high up in the Tetons. This ignited my teenage ambition. In Zion I insisted on tackling the hardest trail in the park (Angel's Landing). Only after I was on my way did Mom and Dad learn from a Ranger how dangerous it could be. After that, they were more cautious.

We camped for a night on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. The next morning, our plan was to drive on a wide loop past Lake Powell to Flagstaff (for General Delivery mail pickup) and then, the following day, back to the Canyon's South Rim. That evening Mom and I attended a campfire lecture where we heard about the interior of the canyon, its geologic history and changing climatic zones descending to the Colorado River. The Ranger mentioned a trail that linked the two rims. Fifteen miles to the bottom, then nine very steep miles up and out. I had to do it. My mother said, strategically, "Ask your father."

Exhausted from driving, Dad had gone to sleep early. I woke him and blurted out my desire to walk across the canyon and meet them on the other side. He said absolutely not, and went back to sleep. I gave up.

But Dad woke me early the next morning. "Jamie, I've been thinking about it, maybe there's a safe way to do the hike. It would be a great experience. Let's talk with a Ranger." We discovered that the North Kaibab trail to the bottom was not much

travelled; yes, there were rattle snakes (keep an eye out); and no water (carry a good supply). I could camp at the canyon floor, and the small lodge there, The Phantom Ranch, had a telephone. My parents would call from Flagstaff to check that I was OK.

I packed water, food, my sleeping bag, and charged down the trail, encountering no snakes or people, and arriving by mid-afternoon. An unforgettable experience, now mostly forgotten (if only I had taken my time, or carried a camera). The next morning, before the sun rose too high, I crossed the ground-shaking Colorado River and all but ran up the Bright Angel Trail to the South Rim. There I looked down my nose at tourists taking snapshots of the view and waited for my parents, feeling very pleased with myself.

Dad was right. It was a great experience that led, a couple of years later, to summer jobs in the Yosemite high country and a lifelong love for the Sierras. Much has faded from our summer trip, but I won't forget him waking me, early that morning on the North Rim.



An entry from Dad's journal, April 1933:

Mother includes in her letter a clipping from the newspaper with this caption. "Your father—isn't it?" And so it is!

[Passages from the clipping are copied without noting the author's name.]

"To my son I transmit the heritage of an honorable name," reads a sentence in the will of a man who died recently. Is there any legacy of which a boy could be more proud, or that in the long run will give a greater incentive to ambition or the good life?

Every father can train his son to acquire intellectual curiosity, a zest for living, and a sense of social responsibility... a love of good books, good pictures, and fine music.

Wealth is the last thing that men should desire to bequeath to their sons. What then, you may ask, must we leave our children? There each individual may have his preferences,

I should head my list with this — the memory of a happy childhood.

FATHER'S DAY

"A few kind words and a toothpick..."
That's what he always asked for.

So every year he got a plaid necktie
to hang with the others inside
his closet door.

Happy man.



"Ookamazook"—his way of ending
every phone call. No one knew
what it meant.

Remember
rotary dialing and long-distance?

"Ookamazook" puzzles Google.



Behind the wheel, singing.

In the troops of the sultan...
Chicks and ducks and geese...

Oh, what a beautiful morning...

The world rolling by was our home
on the range.



He could twirl a rope, throw
a spitball, recite doggerel by obscure Hoosier
poets, hunt and peck

on a manual Smith-Corona,
make his own lunch.



Scores of stamped letters and postcards
came and went every week.

In summertime

on a country road
with our dog

he chased the mailman's car.



After dinner, reading
aloud

the Oz books,
Charlotte's Web

choking up
for

Tiny Tim.



He'd have loved email,
maybe Twitter.

On blank postcards,
a few lines of family news...

"Not much else here."

Love Dad



"Clifford's Dome"

should always be photographed
from behind

facing St. Peter's, St. Paul's or
a duomo.

The distinguished professor
didn't mind.



Whoop, Whoop!

Then a hissed intake
of breath.

Whew...

He wasn't the one

to give us driving lessons.



Skilled at naps, falling
asleep

instant dreams of

Monon Wreck

Jussi Boerling

sand bar

The London Underground



New necktie.

Broken toothpick.

Happy man.



Samuel Johnson and (replacing Boswell), J.L.C. From an 18th century print by Thomas Rowlandson. A retirement gift from Dad's students.

AFTERWORD



Having finished this post mortem, I find there's more to do.

I'm looking at the dozen or so cardboard boxes filled with family memorabilia, mostly my father's, but also my mother's. There's also a small bookcase filled with volumes by and about Samuel Johnson and other eighteenth-century authors, plus some first editions of novels (especially Virginia Woolf), and obscure Indiana poets and humorists.

What to do with these? Now, in my mid-seventies, I've been trying to winnow and dispose of my own books and personal papers, not wanting to burden my successors.

Libraries, these days, aren't interested in acquisitions. I'll offer my father's books, along with my own, to graduate students at U.C. Santa Cruz and to a used books store in town. Past experience suggests that quite a few will remain. I'll search for a dealer who will take these away. Some, no doubt, are valuable. But I don't have the time, or the heart, to try and sell them.

Disintegrating editions from the 1920s (with Dad's familiar signature on the first page): Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, or Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. A fading picture book about the mosaics in Ravenna. I can't contribute these to the land-fill. Still, that's where they'll end up.

While I'll always be reckoning with my parents, I don't expect to keep researching their life-experiences. Nor do I feel the genealogical urge that sometimes infects people my age.

The boxes of memorabilia have nowhere to go. Old photos and obituaries. My mother's play, performed at Randolph Macon College. Letters to her parents in Evansville.

Reading those letters, I recall her formidable father, "granddaddy." He visited each summer, teased his grandchildren and happily destroyed us at canasta. (He also gave me the only spanking, a "patty-whacking" he called it, that I ever experienced.)

Memories like these will disappear with me. As they should...

But what about the box that contains my grandmother's journals from her round-the-world trip? Surely these should survive. Am I (with my siblings) the last to care about Emily Orr Clifford and her remarkable life? Probably yes. The same can be said about the genealogical records she kept so carefully, and all the stories about Evansville in the early twentieth century—the anecdotes about her young sons that "Mother Clifford" told my sister Emily and me when we visited the four-poster bed in her New York room.

The succession of generations: a process of oblivion, pitiless and necessary.

I've more than half a mind to close up all the boxes and toss them into a dumpster. That would be doing time's work.

Or should I curate a reduced archive of only the best things . . . but for whom?



Just before she died, our beloved family friend, Frances Hansen, sent me a tiny envelope. It contained three printed calling cards bearing the name "Mr. Richard R. McGinness. And in blue hand-writing across the top: "I feel sure this will interest you."

Such cards, used and reused, accompanied the pranks, satirical poems, and practical jokes enjoyed by my father and his circle of Evansville friends, in the 1920s and beyond.

On the little envelope Frances writes that its contents are very rare. She thinks I should have the cards. "This is like giving up my life's blood."

No question of consigning these to the dark... Not yet.

