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## **FOX ON THE SHORE**

by Lowry Pei

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A couple of days ago I became completely fed up with the novel I've been trying to write and decided to cut trees instead. This I have been doing, with much greater satisfaction. Landscaping on the large scale. I do like and need physical labor, more than I get at home by far. When I am crawling into a thicket on Prince Edward Island with loppers and saw in hand, and twigs are scratching my face and spruce needles are going down my neck and mosquitoes are whining in my ears, I remind myself that this is fun, this is the kind of situation I get my characters into, and then it *is* fun. It reminds me of childhood, the sorts of games I would play with myself, about exploration, secret places, and so on. Have done a good deal of clearing (creating view of the Northumberland Strait in a direction NOT facing the damn nine-mile-long bridge to New Brunswick) and have thrown a very respectable quantity of brush over the bank into a giant pile on the shore where we will burn it when the wind is right. Spruce trees, green or not, make a hell of a bonfire.

As for my book, I continue to say Screw it. If even I am not motivated to write it, who would read it? I know certain scenes are worth reading, and there are certain good lines, but maybe this thing was not destined to be a novel and I am just trying to make it into one out of habit. And even if it is one, you can't make a novel out of good lines.

So I put away all the visible pieces of paper connected to the book, took down all the passages from Helene Cixous push-pinned to the shed walls, even took away the smartest phrase up there, which was a line that I think was about Proust: "the time between habits." When seeing "the time between habits" has become a habit, it's time to take it down.

There must be a certain kind of erotic attraction to writing a book, or it won't be any good. In my experience.

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Forestry continues. Cutting spruces small enough to be cut off with a pair of loppers, so that I won't have to cut them in the future with a chain saw. It makes a lot of sense. Throwing them, once cut, into high stands of bayberry or into woods or clumps of trees to get them out of the way. After I did this long enough to get hot and tired, you couldn't tell I had done anything – unless you knew – but it will make a difference one day. Then hauled off more brush from previous days' efforts, also put in some shelves in Vaughn's shed, soon to be her studio. Hot and still today, unusual for P.E.I., a very sweaty day to haul brush. As my big pile on the shore sits and dries in the sun, the bonfire promises to be spectacular. I would say I have about enough cut brush and trees to fill a small swimming pool.

August 3

On Friday I got a phone call telling me that my brother, Landis, died. He was my mother's first child by her first marriage, so he was my half-brother to be exact. He was partly the model for Aaron, the retarded brother, in my aborted book, but there were a lot of unappetizing aspects of Aaron that weren't based on Landis. Landis was simultaneously like a boy – from the back he looked like a boy of about ten – and a little old man, and he acted like both depending on the context. He was retarded but he wasn't stupid, which sounds strange but is the most accurate way to describe him. He had a virtually perfect memory for directions, could find almost any place he'd been to before (not that you'd want him to drive the car), and possessed a good deal of social intelligence of a certain sort. He was intensely sociable and charming, and as people would put it in our family, everybody was partial to Landis. So if he found himself in any situation where he could meet new people, he generally was quite happy to chat them up in his own peculiar way, and they would end up liking him and getting interested in him, and he seldom forgot anyone he met, even if only once and for a few minutes. He often remembered things that had happened when the family was together which everyone else in the family had forgotten until he reminded them.

He's most associated in my mind with Columbus, Kansas, because he lived there with my grandparents and we always saw him when we went there to visit (at least twice a year). He was a fixture in town, known to everyone, could wander in and out of the stores around the courthouse square, "downtown," at will, and if he got to be annoying

or seemed to be having some trouble or got lost, people knew to call Mrs. Lowry at home, or Dick Lowry at the store, and somebody would come get him. He played pinball at the corner soda fountain called the Dari-Ette. There was nothing threatening about Landis, and he certainly wasn't big. He was a scrawny little guy who never grew. He just got older, but otherwise he never changed. The continuity of Landis was unique. A regular person would have evolved, grown up, acted differently, wouldn't have spent his life talking exactly the same, caring about the exact same things, playing the same games of store and train conductor. Landis wasn't like a brother, but he was a powerful link with the past, with my childhood, with the Lowry family (there's only one other member of it left that I feel close to, my aunt Elsa, who's a Lowry by marriage), with the history of my own tormented parents.

He rolled off a hotel bed while on vacation with a bunch of people from the place where he lived, did something to himself – they think maybe he broke his neck – got up, sat in a chair, became sleepy and lethargic, and died. To me this is a clear case of the soul says it's time so I'm leaving. We all should find such a neat and easy way to leave the world. He was almost fifty-nine years old.

I don't feel bad for Landis that he died this way, but I am sad that he's gone. The last time I saw him was two or three years ago, when he came to visit us. He called fairly often to talk about coming to visit again; I talked to him right before we left for P.E.I. Four days before he died he called our place in Cambridge and talked to Vaughn's son Matthew about coming to see us.

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This has put me in a whole new space whose geography I am not yet sure of. Having lost this link to my past – a stronger one than I realized until he went away – I sense that it may fall to me to keep that same past alive in other ways. When my mother died I had just the opposite feeling: I was relieved that our impossible relationship was over and had ended on an appearance of reconciliation. But I had no problems with Landis other than the fact that he could be very annoying, even maddening, to be around full time, for which reason I was a lot less eager to have him visit than he was to do so. And Landis's death feels different than I think any regular adult's death could, because of the peculiar truth about him that he simply hadn't changed, except to look older – that he was the same Landis I was with as a child. It's as if an aspect of childhood continued on, not in my imagination, not in the form of some house or landscape that would trigger memory, but in the form

of a living person – he was a child when I was one, and he was still almost that same child when I was fifty. I never thought much about just how odd this was, or what part it has played in my psychic economy, until now, and I'm not sure yet what it has meant, or means at this moment.

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I have a feeling of waiting for something but I don't know what. Waiting for some other shoe to drop, or for the consequences of this to become clear. A feeling that some shift will happen or is happening but not knowing what it is yet.

Robins are nesting in a tree about thirty feet from my shed and in plain view from the window at my right hand as I sit in front of my computer. Just now a crow flew up and lit in that tree with the very likely intention of raiding their nest. I have quite an affinity for crows but I went out intending to yell at him if he tried to do that. One of the robins chased him away, which takes guts considering the difference in size.

There aren't as many crows on this shore in the last couple of years as there have been in the past – I don't know why – but you see them from time to time in the tall spruces, flying around from tree to tree cawing and carrying on their noisy social life. Socializing, and what looks like play, seems to constitute most of their way of life that I can observe. They're smart, and I think they spend a lot of their time playing games. One activity I'm sure is a game is that they try to land on the topmost little sprout at the very tip of a tall spruce, preferably in a strong wind, when the tip is waving back and forth, and even if it were holding still, would barely be strong enough to support their weight. Accomplishing the feat of touching down on the tip-top of the tree seems to have two purposes: to do something difficult (though useless) because it's fun to, and to show off for other crows. Generally, after a crow lands on one of these wildly unstable treetops, he almost immediately leaves, either because he's blown off his perch despite mad flapping of wings, or because (in the eye of this observer) he's done it so the game is over. Often when he leaves another crow tries to take his place. This is accompanied by much cawing which would translate to "See! I did it!" and "Oh yeah? Watch this!"

I have a personal connection with crows that I haven't yet made enough of. They have some kind of guidance to offer, particularly in the area of having perspective on events around me, asserting myself, maintaining a sense of humor, and not letting life become one long workday.

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Vaughn and I have made a medicine wheel on our land here. It's on a high part of the bank above the shore, about eight or ten feet back from the edge, on an uneven, undulating turf of spruce needles, moss, lichen, and plants I mostly can't name except bunchberry, dandelions, yarrow and, of course, spruce seedlings. The medicine wheel consists of twelve quartz crystals in an outer circle about seven or eight feet in diameter, and twelve more in an inner circle (more like oval) that's only a foot and a half at most. When you go away for almost a year and come back, it's a challenge to find these crystals, which are buried point up in the earth and spruce needles, but of course they've been through a winter of ferocious P.E.I. weather and who knows what gale force winds have howled through this particular spot. They tend to get covered up, or all but covered, and in any case being transparent they aren't easy to see except when they reflect the light – but so far we've found them except for one, this year, which has either vanished, or we haven't looked in the right place yet. It's possible that a crow saw the sunlight glitter on it and took it away. They like things that are bright and shiny.

Last year we came and found that in a clump of foot-high spruce seedlings growing half-in and half-out of the circle, a group of hornets without much foresight had made a nest. I was clipping off some of the seedlings anyway, to clear the circle, and trying to sweet talk the hornets into letting me do it (everybody but me thinks talking to them is really stupid and pointless), and I got too close and one flew out and stung me on the wrist. I jumped up and yelled "Ow! You little fucker!" which kind of gave away the insincerity of my earlier remarks to them about how we could share the space and that sort of sensitive thing. When we came back this year there was no trace of the nest. Much too exposed a spot. Even the nests sheltered under the eaves of my shed come up empty the second year; every year hornets build a new one somewhere on the building. I don't know why this is. Maybe they're only good for one winter even if they last through it. But it seems to me that building these nests must be an enormous amount of work – chewing up all that vegetable matter to make flaky gray paper. I think this incessant chewing for the sake of construction is why hornets are always thirsty. And wasps. Once when I was a kid I got out of a swimming pool and lay down, and watched while a wasp lit on my big toe, drank up the drop of water on my toe – I saw it disappear – and flew away. I'm not sure why I didn't assume it was going to sting me and freak out, but I didn't and it didn't. Ever since then I've been pretty convinced that wasps would mind their

own business if I let them, and the only time one has stung me was when it somehow got in bed with me and I rolled over on it. I couldn't blame it for getting upset.

Hornets, on the other hand, are less trustworthy if you ask me. Or just more territorial.

The most trustworthy of all stinging insects are bumblebees. They are constantly around when I'm gardening, going about their work sometimes a foot or two away, and in years of this coexistence not one has ever acted threatening. I know they can sting, but I know they won't; this makes me say that bumblebees are my friends – sentimental as that is.

The purpose of the medicine wheel is meditation, ritual, and prayer. We went there yesterday to meditate and think about Landis, and I personally wanted to be open to whatever he might want to tell me. I've read in various places that people's spirits are at their most influential in the three days after the person dies, so I keep thinking that Landis, who couldn't communicate his thoughts very well in life, might now be able to get across exactly what he wanted the people close to him to understand. It would be consistent with his personality to do so; he always tried to tell people what to do, or to cajole or manipulate them to go along with his wishes. Probably he has some idea of what I should do with my life, and this would be his chance to slip it to me – I would guess not in words, below the threshold of consciousness. If I got anything consciously, it was "enjoy life."

I would love to know if the soul that was Landis considers the lifetime just now ended to have been a success, if it accomplished what the soul planned before entering that body. I would love to know what souls consider success. I would love to know what makes one choose to be a Landis.

I, personally, think Landis's lifetime was a successful one in that he connected to so many people and brought them something – peculiar and indescribable as it was – that made people almost universally fond of him. He was both funny and difficult, not necessarily on purpose, but those were not his defining characteristics. In his bizarre and amusing style he was a lot more transparent than less retarded people. Most of the time, you saw exactly what he was up to. But that doesn't explain it either. What was that thing we were all "partial to"?

Maybe this question can't be answered about anyone, if you know them well enough.

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When I try to think of my attempted novel today, it doesn't hold my attention. Today it's obvious that there's a lot more to life than the dim view down that particular mineshaft. Death does wonders for tunnel vision.

August 4

Today the weather forecast says light winds from the north. If it comes true, I'll go down to the shore and light my bonfire of cut trees and brush. I have to wait for an offshore wind or the smoke will blow over to the neighbors and somebody will not have a good day – or worse, the fire department will find out that I'm burning without a permit. It generates more smoke than anybody wants to breathe for the hours it takes to burn a brush pile. But if the wind blows from the north, then the smoke heads for New Brunswick and all is well.

I like pursuits that require respect for the facts of the physical and natural world. I like to deal with realities that have their own authority, that exist a certain way and do certain things whether we say so or not. It's a respite from the wordy post-modern world, especially the academic world, in which everything is an interpretation, everything is always shifting, knowledge is only a construct, and so forth. That view of reality it seems to me is based in great part on living in cities and on not having to make anything with your hands. In such a situation, one can (if one is rich enough and of a certain temperament) just about sustain the illusion that most of the important things in life have little to do with fact. This means a colossal amount of taking for granted, which is something we pay a lot for and which may not always be a privilege.

There are facts, no matter what anyone says. The world goes its own way. If you're a farmer and it doesn't rain all of June, that fact could change your life. If you're sailing and the tide creates a current that pushes you backward as fast as you're sailing forward, you're stuck and that's a fact. If you fall overboard off Vinalhaven, Maine, the water temperature is such that, life jacket or no life jacket, you will die pretty soon if someone doesn't come along and pull you out. You can improve your chances by wearing a survival suit, but the fact that you can die from hypothermia is not open to interpretation. The physical world deals with us in some ways unbendingly, and that's good: it is straightforward, even honorable. It teaches me how to be, how I have to be in relation to it: aware, steady, prepared. Responsible. Paying somebody else to do this for me, to learn what it teaches, is not always a good deal. We can't all have all skills, but for my part, if I don't deal directly with the hard physical reality of this world at some point, a part of me is missing.

The weather forecast (an interpretation) seems to be dead wrong so far about northerly winds.

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Fox on the shore.

Early morning; the Strait is so calm – a rare state for it to be in – that you can hear a single wavelet lap against a rock. You could canoe on it this morning and never worry about tipping over.

The fox comes of its own accord, on its own errand along the damp rocks at low tide; it turns and trots silently away as soon as it sees me. It has its own life, elusive, other. I hope to see this fox on the shore somewhere again; but if I don't, I know it's there.

I harbor no sentimental domestic notions about this fox. It is not my friend. It cares little about me, except for wanting me to stay out of its life. Its being out there somewhere, however, going its own way, is of lasting significance to me; it is a reminder that I need to spend some of my time on earth being, in a human way, a fox on the shore. Not easily done, when I have a wife, an aged father living with me at home, a teenage son, two stepsons, and a family I have married into. All of these I love in various ways. They love me, which is good, and in principle I'm sure they'd agree that everyone needs some time alone. But please, not today, when there are so many things to be done.

What's more subversive, unspoken, less acceptable is that a fox on the shore is not only alone but reports to no one. Its time is unaccounted for. No one knows what it is doing there except the fox itself. Such freedom is magnetic in a fox, a mystery that attracts the mind. If foxes could speak English, we'd surely call out, "What are you doing?" but we still might not expect an answer. People seldom get such an exemption from the human thirst to know.

Sometimes any answer undoes the doing.

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Late afternoon, the sky clouds up, the weather is definitely changing, and the long-promised offshore wind finally begins to materialize. Too late for a bonfire today, when friends have just arrived to visit for several days and no one, me included, wants to go out after dinner and spend hours tugging cut limbs and trees out of the heap and throwing them on the fire.

Some kind of warbler just flew up to my window and stopped in midair for an instant and looked this way and that before deciding which



way to go. Black and white with yellow streaks. I think I may have seen this bird just once at the bird feeder at home, passing through.

Mrs. Robin is still sitting on her nest, evidence that the crows didn't do anything fatal, but her motherhood must be a nervous one. I try not to contribute to her racked nerves; I avoid taking the path that goes closest to her tree, and there's at least one spruce I haven't cut down because it's too near her nest. Vaughn says it's okay to take that path because she gets used to us and realizes we aren't a threat, which may be so, but I sometimes wonder what she makes of hammering and the shriek of a power saw coming from my shed when I'm doing carpentry projects. Birds, mice, insects have lived here relatively undisturbed for months and then one day people show up and act like they own the place. Some birds are not terribly impressed; the other day I stopped my car in the road to let some blue jays decide if they wanted to get out of the way.

August 5

I spent half the day on a trip to town (all trips to town that include the grocery store take a minimum of three hours). While I was at Sobeys it started raining, which islanders have been waiting for. It was definitely overdue. Feels good to watch rain drip from the dense spruce branches outside the small window over my computer, but my bonfire is cancelled again. This too is okay. As Vaughn says, we can leave the brush there, piled against the bank, if we have to, and say we're trying to control erosion. Islanders do it all the time, even though it never works. The rule of thumb here is that you lose a foot of land a year. Big trees go over the bank every winter; their massive roots can't save them or the bank itself, and if they can't, a pile of cut branches is no protection at all.

It's less than twenty years since the land on this point was a farm, and already a few lots, the ones no one has touched, are practically forest now. Spruce trees are wildly successful here, regardless of high wind, long winters, relentless storms. Spruce seedlings grow by the hundreds in clear areas. Not all of them make it, but those that do survive mature into dense clumps which, rather than the individual tree, seem to be the natural unit of spruce. Different trees in a different climate would be too crowded to thrive if they grew the way spruce do here; but rather than crowding each other out, spruce form a wall that withstands the wind better than any one tree could. Then the next clump downwind from that is aided by the presence of the first. With every few steps away from the shore, each new layer of trees blocking the wind,

one enters a different micro-environment, and all the differences are about protection.

Family will be here shortly to have drinks and eat bean dip, and I will definitely not be able to conduct myself as a fox.

August 7

Landis was buried yesterday. We went to the medicine wheel to say goodbye to him at the time he was being buried in Holstein, Missouri, next to my mother. Like every other time I've really stopped to react to Landis's death, it had more impact than I expected it to. I kept thinking of him at my mother's funeral, in that same tiny town, visualizing him following my mother's casket out of the church. There are many things about this picture that stay with me. One of them is that three of the significant people in it – my uncle Mac, my uncle Bob, and now Landis – are dead. They were all fixtures of my childhood, and Mac was the adult man I most wanted to be like. Another is that I don't know if Landis was actually there, although I find it hard to believe that we would have had my mother's funeral without arranging for him to come. A third is that even if Landis was there, I couldn't have seen him, or seen this scene at all from the perspective I imagine it – from the side, watching the procession of family down the aisle – because I was at the front of that procession myself.

I wonder how Landis would have been reacting at that moment. There was a lot of crying going on. But I don't picture Landis actually crying, rather making a long face with a big lower lip pushing out, and a scowl of his bushy eyebrows, and squinting his eyes in a way that seemed on purpose, as if he had learned at some point how to mime an expression that would say "My feelings are hurt." This is not to say that his sadness would not have been sincere.

I remember that when I would go visit Landis, after he no longer lived with my grandmother, he would never say goodbye when I got ready to leave. He would just turn around and hurry off to something else, as if preoccupied, and if I called after him he wouldn't respond.

Even more than how Landis would have reacted, I wonder what he would have been thinking. He knew that my mother was his mother, but my grandmother brought him up and he always called our mother "Margie Nelle," the way my grandmother and my uncles did. I don't think I ever heard him call her "Mom" or any variation of it; my grandmother he called "Mamaw." But what would he have been thinking about the

death of his mother, who didn't bring him up? I never asked; not that I would necessarily have gotten an answer if I had.

Anyway I kept visualizing Landis at the church in Holstein, at his – my – mother's funeral, whether he was there or not, and it made me very sad that he didn't have one. But then, as I said, most of the people in our family who would have gone to Landis's funeral, who would have mattered to him, are dead now; and most impossible of all, I realized I wanted Landis to have had a funeral so he could have gone to it himself. He liked religion a lot. From as early as I can remember him he would sing "Jesus Loves Me" in an utterly tuneless nasal buzz whenever the impulse struck. He would have enjoyed going to a big bang-up church service for himself.

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Yesterday, after we had our own kind of observance for Landis, the wind was still right and I finally got the bonfire going and burned the entire brush pile without anyone on the point smelling a whiff of smoke. I started off with a heap as big as this shed I'm writing in; it's amazing that you can throw so much brush on a fire and send it all up and out to sea and finish with nothing left on the shore but a couple of bucketfuls of ash.

August 12

A couple of days ago I noticed not only that the robin's nest was empty (which is not so unusual – they don't sit on the eggs all the time) but that it somehow looked different. Vaughn noticed it too: it looked as though no one was home. Today I went over and peered into the nest for the first time – no eggs, no signs of habitation. Something happened. No way to tell what. Vaughn's father says that this must be the second brood of the summer for this pair because it's so late, so I could say that I hope the first one worked out. Or, from a different point of view altogether, I could assume that whatever happened was in some way appropriate to the scheme of things. This view I could then critique as fatalistic, that critique I could critique as arrogantly assuming that people can control the world, and so on, ad (for all I know) infinitum, but accomplishing nothing. The gabfest of critique and counter-critique has stopped seeming sophisticated to me and now feels juvenile instead. One must choose a place to stand, contrary to the implicit academic assumption that one can stand outside the world. I prefer the local point of view, this land, these trees and rocks, this pair of robins that I've been

watching, and the point of view of a human being rather than a demigod. I hope their first brood made it.

August 21

Tomorrow Landis's memorial service will be held, down in New Jersey. We arrived back in Cambridge yesterday with something of a thud that might be translated as "This again." Of course, this response seems like total ingratitude, considering our fortunate situation here, considering we have this house, jobs, savings, and so forth. It would be good to learn never to take things for granted, but it might also be superhuman. Better and worse, we get used to things. In the last few weeks I've been recalling that in our wedding ceremony, I wrote a wish that we might live life "without adjectives." Without evaluation, without comparison, in the moment. This neither we nor I have attained.

At any rate, accepting for the moment my inability to ignore the thud, "this again" really refers to going back to institutional life at the college, to rush and stress and tiredness, to living in the city that some say ranks first in the country in hurried, frantic pace of life. I hope for the sake of others, living in other cities, that this dubious statistic is accurate; but regardless of whether it's #1, Boston is sufficiently rushed for me, thank you. When I first return I notice with special clarity the social pressure to do things at top speed, the righteous indignation that people feel entitled to when anything slows them down.

Have spent the day dealing with stacks of mail, almost none of it personal, all about money, bills, solicitations, pension plans, bank statements, all of it to be read, filed, paid, added and subtracted, requiring phone calls and self-reminding notes. Pay Estimated Tax (colossal sum). Quite a remove from the natural world, but maybe all this bookkeeping gets me back there in the end, in whatever year the numbers say I can quit being a professor. I can feel myself becoming a short-timer, feel myself beginning to think that these are my last years in this kind of job, that it doesn't extend indefinitely into the future. I think this without regret. As a job title, part-time instructor sounds great right now. Or handyman.

August 24

Landis's memorial service was held the day before yesterday in Haddonfield, New Jersey, at Bancroft, the institution where he lived much of his life. We got there just in time, at 3:30 in the afternoon, after leaving home at 6:30 in the morning. The place – part of a gym,

curtained off – was full and people were standing along the walls. Maybe a hundred people were there, many of them residents of the same institution, but also staff and even a few people from the town. The retarded people at the event were able to focus, to pay attention, to be a part of the occasion. The only exception to this was a man wearing a helmet who had a sort of seizure, or attack, while I was speaking about Landis, but he couldn't help that. Staff members dealt with this in an amazingly smooth, quiet, undistruptive way. I went on speaking after only a short pause. After I sat down I noticed that he had peed on the floor and someone was quietly spreading paper towels under and around him; then a well-dressed woman, who also had spoken as part of the ceremony, put on a pair of rubber gloves and picked up the paper towels and put them in a plastic bag, all quietly, matter-of-factly, without a trace of disgust and without disturbing the flow of the moment. Toward the end of the ceremony a gray-haired retarded man got up and spoke incomprehensibly to the group, gesturing with great clarity and emphasis, having a strong stage presence and command of the moment, projecting solemnity and purpose. He spoke loudly, forcefully, and with brief spaces between the words, or phrases, but I didn't recognize one word I knew. It was like watching a ritual from an unfamiliar culture, performed in an unknown language; clearly what was going on had its own integrity and meaning – my not understanding it was my problem. The audience listened attentively and without any undercurrent of impatience. After a few minutes someone came over and thanked him, escorted him to his seat, and everyone clapped.

The most moving part of the ceremony, for me, came when the man leading it sat down with his guitar and sang "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," a song Landis loved and often sang (as often as he sang "Jesus Loves Me"). Most of the people joined in, including the retarded people and me. For years now I have found that singing in chorus with others at public occasions makes me cry; sometimes I can't even get through a Christmas carol. There was no hope of getting through "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star."

Afterwards we talked with a family who often took Landis with them to church, had him over to dinner, even had him to their house for Christmas Eve. I was struck by what deeply good people these were, so utterly unlike myself, and thought organized religion must be good for something after all. Toward me they projected no blame at all, no sense of "You should have done more"; I think it was interesting to them that I was Landis's brother, and they were glad I came, but from their point of view, Landis was theirs. Again, one last time, the old adage was proved true: everyone really was partial to Landis.

On the train home, Vaughn and I spent a while looking at a book of snapshots that belonged to Landis. It was made by his father, Louis Hartman, for my mother's twenty-fifth birthday, when Landis was a little over a year old, and it was about the two of them, Louis and my mother, getting married and having Landis. Of course this led to yet another review of my mother's tragic life: of her four children three were retarded, and one died at an early age; her first husband left, overwhelmed by the situation; she was unhappily married to my father . . . I always wanted to escape from the unbeauty of the retarded and from the screwed-upness of my family to some world where people were attractive, beautiful, happy, untragic, unburdened. Now I have only one retarded brother instead of two, and of the older generation of the Lowry family, only Elsa remains, who was always one of the sane; in short, with the passage of time I am escaping, and it leaves me with entirely mixed feelings. Landis, too, if not beautiful or "normal," was sane and brought a lot of good into the world; he was not someone I wanted to see leave it. To lose such a link with my past is unquestionably a loss; and yet that past itself was not something I wanted to live through when it was going on. There's no summing this up. Lives do end but where do their reverberations stop?

August 26

After one visit to Simmons College it is already difficult to keep contact with the earth. I feel my mind's sky cut off by the ceiling of that indoors, my mind separated from the earth by the floors of those hallways, from the red rocks and the sea and the trees by the walls of those offices. Distracted from remembering the presence of the day and the season by the incessant pressure of those human beings, by their relentless talk. Forgetting the guidance offered by crows.

Vaughn read the beginning of this journal and commented that a fox does not have freedom. This may be true but if true is not what I would call encouraging.

August 27

I keep reminding myself to notice the presence of the day.

This is a thought that came to me in P.E.I. – that days have a unique presence, and if I remember this, I can go through the day in some relation to that presence. Days then are not interchangeable blocks of time, or just some weather that happens to suit our convenience or

not, but are somehow themselves, alive, having their own intentions. To me it seems easy, even inevitable, to imagine seasons in this way – to think of summer and fall as having moods, to think of winter bearing down or spring reasserting itself. There's a story about the season going on in the background all the time, told in the form of weather statistics but having more to do with our imaginations and our internal climate.

Maybe it's harder to remember that days have their own presence too because today is always so readily consumed by busyness – while the season is large enough that there's room for the mind to leave the world of lists and chores. And I do want to leave it. Not that I mind work; as someone said, enlightenment for people like me is knowing what to do and how to do it -- a very mundane, practical form of enlightenment that I am comfortable with. Though I once claimed to be a Buddhist in order to get myself classified a conscientious objector, I would make a lousy Buddhist; I am far too enamored of the physical world to believe that it is an illusion I should be rid of. And if tomorrow I started suffering physically, and kept on suffering day after day, year after year, I suppose that would change.

But I'm not supposed to be thinking about tomorrow right now. The struggle to be in the moment never ends. Go back to today. Today has a breeze, and the sound of (I believe) cicadas in the trees, and a blue-gray sky that is bright and sunny but not completely clear, but those things aren't exactly its presence, an elusive something I will fall short of naming. Its presence is more like an energy or a thought or a state of being – not mine but the day's. I feel it is calm, clear, holding itself in readiness. This day is at the top of its form; it is like an athlete in excellent shape, sharp and responsive – but today is not the day of the race, it's the day off that is also part of the best training.

August 28

In the middle of last night a peculiar sound erupted somewhere outside, a loud animal cry that in words would be something like "weep, weep, weep" constantly repeated, strange and unnerving. It was clearly not a dog or cat sound, not the chatter or gabble of squirrels, not a bird sound, and that doesn't leave many possibilities. It sounded as though it could have been made by some animal being killed, or by one doing the killing. It went on for a while, long enough to get us out of bed and peering out of windows, then trailed off (I thought) into the distance. Out the open window I thought I heard the sound of water splashing. This morning I went out and found a strand of water plant (*Elodea*) pulled out of the pond and sitting on a rock at its edge, the pond water all cloudy

and other broken-off pieces of plant floating on its surface. Clear signs of a raccoon fishing. It hadn't managed to catch any of the seven goldfish, however, and that is no foregone conclusion; raccoons have taken quite a few of them from ponds I've had in the past. The sound may have been the excitement of trying to catch prey.

I've already learned that if any plants are sticking up above the surface, raccoons will rip them out. They don't usually pull up stuff that's growing underwater, but this one did, thereby stirring up the muck on the bottom. It's good that the pond is deep enough to make the fish uncatchable, and that the goldfish were smart enough to take advantage of that fact.

I minded a lot when raccoons caught my goldfish and ripped my water plants to shreds, but now that I've learned something about how to adapt to them I've stopped objecting to their visits. Anyway, raccoons will do exactly what they please and my objecting won't stop them. Vaughn and I saw two big raccoons crossing Cambridge St., half a block from a major intersection, about 9:00 one night, in no hurry at all, and I have seen one up a tree in our yard – which is nothing to the group of five I saw in my back yard when I lived near the Arboretum. They don't live on our territory; we live on theirs.

August 29

This morning the air is ambiguous, humid, neither cool nor warm, feeling different with the slightest change in location or dress. The spirit of the day seems to hover indecisively, or to withhold itself, to stay beyond the threshold or with one foot on it but refusing to cross. It feels like a day to spend in solitude, not to be with oneself, but the better to be out of oneself and a part of the hovering world. Not to be constantly jarred by people and personalities, including one's own. But to be alone and hence able to put up on the shelf for some period of time the ceaseless, the lifelong performance of being oneself. To enjoy for a day the privilege of being empty.

Yet I know that people are out there rushing around as hard as ever. The other day I was in the Wine Cask and noticed that the clerk was putting my bottle of wine in a bag and counting out my change at top speed, as if there were ten impatient people in line behind me – but no one was behind me. In fact there were hardly any customers in the whole store. I wonder if the sky, on a day like today, looks at us hurrying and wonders why we can't break the habit.



August 30

The other night, while not sleeping, I thought about an idea that I heard first from Fred Pfeil, perhaps twenty years ago. It was this: what if Death gave last call? What if there were an announcement on the order of "Okay, this is it. You have one month to die, or not at all"?

I don't know how old I was exactly when Fred posed me this conundrum, but I was somewhere around thirty. Then it struck me as a true dilemma; now it doesn't. If I had to make this unlikely choice today, it's obvious to me that I'd die in the next month. Immortality in my present state of being – much less immortality in a constantly declining body – seems out of the question. It's not that I want to die in the next month, but I do, in fact, want to die – a statement that I hesitate to make at all in this society. It sounds like a confession of mental unhealth, and yet I think of it as just the opposite. This lifetime has had a beginning and is having a middle, and I'd like to bring it to an end as well. The alternative – eternity as the person I am now – strikes me as unthinkable.

August 31

On the other hand, I certainly don't want to die today, which is a pleasant day of mild weather, on which I have just discovered that one of the tadpoles we put in the pond has turned into a frog who now lives there. I usually don't want to die today. But right downstairs is my 97-year-old father, who describes himself as lame, blind, and toothless (all relatively accurate), and whose fondest wish is to, as he puts it, "go to bed and forget to wake up." Any day that he could die, at least in that way, would be fine with him. But somehow death eludes him, or makes him wait – for what, I don't know, and worse, neither does he.

I remember reading somewhere that after a lifetime ends, the soul feels like someone who comes home from a long day at work and takes off a tight pair of shoes. But meanwhile, those who are left to grieve and relive the past in memory are in a completely different boat.

September 4

Classes begin. Between yesterday morning and last night it went from humid, almost hot, to chilly and almost like fall. Today also feels transitional, on the border between seasons. The light has a particular brightness or clarity which I associate with the colder seasons, objects stand out with a new sharpness.

We are on the verge of buying more land in P.E.I., which will mean that each summer, there will always be more opportunities for tree-cutting and brush-hauling than I can even begin to deal with. Of course there is no such thing as finishing that work. I like the notion of constantly working on the natural space, being one (but only one) of the forces sculpting it. Keeping the trees from growing in completely, creating clear areas, creating views (the Strait, the sunset), sites where a person might one day build. But it isn't really about building; if we never put anything on that land, it will be fine with me. I'm happy to maintain it for blue jays, crows, foxes and squirrels, warblers of unknown variety, robins and goldfinches, and those few people who walk through. To keep an open space for the grasses and lichens, the bayberry and (I think) alder that grow up naturally in cleared areas, the Indian paintbrush, brown-eyed Susans, dandelion, and vetch. Already it is becoming something of an effort to re-create all that in my mind that is becoming indoor mind, office mind, hallway mind, colleague mind, the mind of words about words. I have to think about the land for a while, until it returns my favor: it keeps a space open in me when I'm here.

Next summer I will continue to cut trees and brush, to maintain the difference between open land and encroaching woods. To hold off sameness, to make sure there are two presences out there, so that out of the two that are visible there can come into being an invisible third. That is the real action, for me. It goes on at the edge, where unlike things meet, where a person on foot passes from this to that. Beauty lurks on the boundary line.