

AS TIME GOES BY

W. Royce Adams

“We’re here for a little window. And to use that time to catch and share shards of light and laughter and grace seems to me a great story.”

--Brian Doyle

“The question any novel is really trying to answer is,

Is life worth living?”

--Nicholson Baker

“We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.”

--T.S. Eliot

Acknowledgements

The following stories reappear in different forms throughout this book:

“Uncle Carl” is an excerpt from “Terror Lynchings,” appearing in BLACK FOX LITERARY MAGAZINE, Issue No. 12, 2015

“The Summer Before Lucky Strike Green Went to War” first appeared in FROM THE DEPTHS, NO. 14, Haunted Waters Press, 2016

“Hands” appeared in CATAMARAN LITERARY READER, Vol. 4, Issue 2, Summer 2016

“Too Late, Naytan” first appeared in CHARITAN REVIEW, Vol. 40, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2017

“The Five-Hundred Word Essay” first appeared in CHAFFEY REVIEW, Vol. XV, 2017

“Down Here on the Ground” first appeared in CATAMARAN LITERARY READER, Vol. 7, Issue 4, Winter 2020

“Blue Pool” first appeared in EVENING STREET REVIEW, Vol. 34, Summer, 2020

CONTENTS

Early Years	6
Middle Years	166
Later Years	238
Listening List	291

EARLY YEARS

“Let’s Face the Music”

Call me Old.

Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having nothing to particularly interest me after retirement, I thought I would (Yes, I’m paraphrasing someone you should know.) set about taking a journey through the sea of words to help drive off the damp, drizzly December time of my life. Perhaps at my stage of being the big expedition question for me to ponder should be, “How much longer do I have to sail the seas of life?” But there is no answer to that until the end comes. No one knows when, only that a journey’s end does come. More importantly, and more answerable, sits a larger question that has been bothering me of late. I’ve lived these many years and one would think, since I’m almost finished, that I should know the answer.

I ask, besides just another relic of time, who am I really? I mean-- *Really*.

According to narrative psychologists, our life stories are not just an encyclopedic biography of facts and events of a life, but instead narratives that take those life events apart and integrate them together to make meaning and form an identity that reflects who we are, what our life means, who we’ve become and what could happen next. What can my own stories tell me about me? Does my life have any significance, or has it all been happenstance?

Silly question, you say. Not for me. Kafka made it seem simple when he said the meaning of life is that it stops. Joseph Campbell said the meaning of life is whatever you ascribe it to be. Toni Morrison said, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.”

Henning Mankell, in his book *Quicksand*, is one of the lucky questioners. He writes:

I am suddenly possessed by unexpected insight. It is as if somebody has given me a good shaking. The words come into my head of their own

accord. “I am myself and no one else. I am me.” At that moment I find my identity.

I want that insight into my identity. I want that “good shaking.”

Yet, Roland Barthes says “Who am I?” is a madman’s question. The bewildered man’s question is “Am I?”

Confusing, isn’t it?

I tend more to see it the way Darlene Cohen states it in *Turning Suffering Inside Out*:

The purpose of our lives may not be to produce something wonderful or to become rich or famous or renowned for wisdom; the purpose may just be to express our own sincerity doing completely whatever it is we do, immersing ourselves in the situation in which we find ourselves.

It’s possible you know the meaning of your life, or maybe you don’t even care. But isn’t it Socrates who proposes that the unexamined life is not worth living? Yes, you could argue, “But look where it got him!” Still, Nietzsche, on the other hand, suggests that in order to know ourselves we must examine the events, passions and thoughts that create our personal theories and moral judgments. But his background is not all that acceptable these days.

Isn’t this quest of mine a bit narcissistic, you may ask, since I am a nobody. Yes, but I offer a qualifier. Karl Ove Knausgaard, in his novel/memoir, *My Struggles*, offers his views on narcissism:

Narcissism is a weakness, something unwanted; if it were not, then we would not attempt to hide it, so the fact that narcissism is being exhibited here is an admission of weakness, at the same time as that admission also lifts up the I and distinguishes it, because it is candid, and candid narcissism stands in opposition to

hidden narcissism in that the former aspires to truth, whereas the latter seeks to conceal the truth.

I, too, hereby admit I am exhibiting weakness. But a candid narcissistic weakness.

Even though I'm just an ordinary male, with no claim to fame, who has lived through the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, the following Gulf Wars, the Afghan Wars, the Syrian mess and all those never-ending wars still going on, I'm just now beginning to examine selected windows of my life before it's finished. I'm going to take Nietzsche up on his advice, not clear where what I find will lead me. And as Morrison suggests, I'll "do language." This is my whale story without the whale.

Little by little as I age, both physically and mentally, I feel bits of myself falling away, evaporating, a derailment of sorts, a sense of detachment to things; so it's important to me that I find answers before all the leaves of my life have fallen off and scattered to the winds, gone for always.

I'm in conversation with someone, and I reach for a word that's right there, a word I know so well, but slip-slides away leaving me struggling, feeling a part of my memory has been plucked, as if an acute piece of my brain wanted to play hide-and-seek in a brain fog. Often, but not when I need it, the word comes back to me, but I've already lost the game. In other moments, when reading, I encounter an unknown word only to realize when I look it up I once knew the word, even used it before.

At times an essential thought or concept I need at the moment escapes unaccounted for, as if my brain wants to taunt me, or doesn't want me to deal with it, leaving me stunned, wondering what's happening to me. I receive an image of a slow phlegm-like mass attempting to smother my thoughts.

It's not just my brain that's not cooperating. Sometimes, when I'm still, I feel images of myself stepping out of my body desperately wanting to flee the cancer I carry, or slip from the constant, painful arthritic joints; the knotted neck and shoulder muscles; the foot, back and hip pain when I walk too far. My old floater-filled eyes play tricks on me. The body parts that used to take my command seem to find pleasure in betraying me, leaving me unaided. Even my waning hearing limits my ability to carry on a conversation without a "Sorry, what?"

In their song, "Why was I born?" Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II ask:

Why was I born?
 Why am I living?
 What do I get?
 What am I giving?

To elaborate, does my life ultimately have any importance in any universal scheme? Am I just taking up space? Have I wasted the time given me? What effect have I had on others? Have I unknowingly, worse, knowingly, hurt others in some fashion? What's my worth? Am I supposed to use the time I have left for some purpose? Is someone/something in charge of what's happening? Does anything ultimately matter? These are playful existential questions with no pertinent answers for me. I'll just have to trust Virginia Woolf, who tried to show in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* that no life is insignificant.

So, I'm putting down my cane and picking up my pen. I'm going to sift through the sands of my time to see what I can discover through remembrance. Don't expect any fancy writing. No playing with altered punctuation, or trying to be aesthetically clever, or poetic, or intellectual. Not here a Sedaris, or Saunders, or Atwood, or Didion, or Eggers, or such. Just me, squinting into some memorable windows in my life before they all fog up.

“Stardust”

Let's zoom in on a 1933 black and white photograph showing me, age three I'd guess, sitting on a cheap-looking rocking horse, smiling. My steed may be a Pinto, or maybe an Appaloosa; it's difficult to tell in the grainy picture. The horse looks no wider than an inch thick and perhaps no longer than five feet. It couldn't be very tall, because my feet touch the floor as I hold on with my left hand to one of the small handles where horse ears should be, the other hand resting on my right knee, a pose no doubt suggested by the photographer. My hair is parted on the left side and neatly slicked down. I look happy. I wear what looks to be a crisp, white one-piece outfit-- short pants attached to a shirt with a tight, dark collar, and white ankle-length socks with light colored shoes that could have been taken from a large doll. Do I see buttons fastening the shoe straps? Maybe this attire was fashionable in its day, but seems rather sissy looking today. The sight makes me wonder if I could possibly still be in diapers. I do hope I was past that.

Why am I dressed so? Surely it must have been an occasion; those are no play clothes I wear. Why am I smiling? Was it for the camera, or am I truly happy? Is the rocking horse a new gift? It looks too small for me. At that age, would I have asked for one? Is it even mine, or am I riding an appropriated horse?

I remember nothing of what I see in the photo. What I do remember, whether it was the day of the picture taking or after, and in the most vivid of blue and black, are scores of five-pointed stars in various sizes exactly like the ones cartoonists draw when they want to show someone in pain or being struck on the head.

If we look at that photograph again, we can see in the background an iron grate of some kind, a covering over what looks like a fireplace. I'm guessing I wanted to show off my equestrian ability and forced that rocking horse high enough backwards on its hind legs that I slid off and banged my head on that metal grill.

And when it hit, those five-pointed stars of various sizes exploded in my head, the memory of which still remains. Why did I see blue and black five-pointed stars of different sizes? I wasn't reading comics at that age, so from where did the images come? Did I apply stars to the memory after I heard that people sometimes see stars when they get hurt? No, I insist to this day I saw stars the moment of head impact.

That's my first life memory: five-pointed blue-black stars. And it's all because of the rocking horse, which I don't remember; because of my tilting too far back, which I don't remember; my sliding off the flat, wooden saddle; which I don't remember; and my skull meeting metal, which I don't remember. Too bad there's not a picture of me after I've fallen. That might reveal a more informative after event.

But I do remember the stars. Trauma, no doubt.

I don't remember the pain, though I'm sure I must have cried in hurt. What a noisy fuss I must have made. Or, perhaps my parents made the biggest to-do. Did they discover blood in my hair? Was I held in someone's arms and coddled? Was an ice pack placed on my head? Did a big bump swell where I hit metal? How long did the pain last? Did I lose consciousness, and that's where I met the stars? Did that whack on the head have some effect on me later in life? Those migraines, for instance, I experienced from junior high on into adulthood. Or, did it damage my intellect turning me into a slow learner; or did the blow knock some sense into me, like an introduction to gravity and the knowledge of cause and effect? Or is it going to evolve into a

slow brain cancer of some type that could announce itself any day out of the blue-black stars?

Why do I imagine the worst? And why, of all that, do I only remember the stars?

And what of the poor rocking horse? Did I whip it or kick it in anger, or slink away in fear? Did I ever mount it again and ride, Sonny, ride? Did they put the horse down, or just turn it out to pasture? I don't remember seeing it again. But how could I? I don't remember seeing it in the first place.

As time marched on, I felt pride when my five-pointed, blue-black stars were borrowed and made physical for others to see in comic books. When older, I saw them as I read and knew full-well what the drawn stars represented. Then Superman and Buck Rogers showed me there are other stars with different shapes from mine with different outcomes as they sent me to those other galaxies far, far away from what was going on in my tiny world.