

Only Shorter

Albert Pyle

The Literary Club

February 12, 2007

I met the writer Ross Feld at a dinner in the suburbs. Some of you may have known him. He wrote what are called in the publishing world literary novels, four to be precise. Literary novels, the serious books that get top billing in the Times book reviews, sit apart from the genres like detective novels, where the city is fairly well represented, and other genres. While he was writing in Cincinnati he and Austin Wright were pretty much the city's entire population of literary novelists.

It's worth telling a little bit about that dinner where we met because the circumstances surrounding it were odd and because it turned out that Ross and I both thought it was funny in the same way, which is how we felt about a lot of things, which was one of the big reasons we were such good friends.

The invitation to dinner was from a woman named Theresa whom I hadn't seen or thought about in years. According to my mother, who was by no means totally reliable in such matters, Theresa carried a torch for me all the way through the suburban Chicago school system we attended. If she did in fact have a thing for me, I didn't have one for her, and we had never dated. But all those years together made us sort of cultural cousins, I guess. At any rate, our ways had parted after high school, and I had only seen her once since then, running into her on the train out from the city one snowy evening, where she told me that she was in medical school, just as she had planned in elementary school, and that she was now a total behaviourist. I had to ask her what that meant. She was a lifelong nervous laugher, in the way a lot of humorless people are, and it made her laugh extra nervously to have to explain to someone something that she obviously thought he should know at his age. It may also have made her nervous that I was in a sailor suit. At that stage wearing a sailor suit still made me sort of nervous. Fifteen or so years later in Cincinnati, Theresa was calling to say that she now lived not far from me, that she was a doctor, that she didn't go by Theresa any more but by Terry, and that I should come to dinner to meet some friends I would like. I didn't have a lot of confidence that I would

like anybody she would think I would like since we hadn't had any friends in common since elementary school, and how the hell would she know who I would like? But I didn't know how to say no without sounding like a jerk, so I said sure, my wife and I would be there.

We were the first ones to arrive. I think Theresa, as I had decided I was going to continue calling her, had invited us a little early so that she could show off her home which was - and this is one of the things I would laugh about with Ross - a concrete bunker in an otherwise unremarkable subdivision in unremarkable Blue Ash. Again in the way one can be only if one is devoid of a sense of humor, Theresa was a committed and practicing ecological activist. Making lots of money now as an abortionist, she had poured some of her and her pathologist husband's funds into the construction of an earth sheltered house on a street of suburban fake colonials, and she made us walk through the prairie grasses she had imported, the better to admire the organic apple orchard on the earthen swelling that was her roof. There was a total ban on bug spray on the property, of course, so our ankles were viciously and relentlessly attacked by teeming hordes of insects fleeing the surrounding Chem-lawns. It was pretty weird, and I feared the worst for a long and strange night. I could tell by the set of my wife's jaw that she shared my fears and that she would probably be open to bailing on the dinner if there were any conceivable way to do so without disgracing ourselves. There wasn't, of course.

After a tour of the inside, where we were to admire the grim but ecologically sound fluorescent lighting and the basins with their taps that could be turned on using one's elbows, we were at last allowed to meet the other guests. It was a gathering of highly accomplished women friends and their slightly iffy husbands. There were Theresa and her husband, who pretty much kept as quiet as his pathology customers, my own wife and me, a Chinese-American psychiatrist, the psychiatrist's househusband, and an obstetrician and her husband, who turned out to be Ross Feld.

When I shook hands with Ross the penny dropped, as the English used to say. I recognized him. He was from New York but was living here for some reason. I had read about him in the paper some months back when he was awarded some kind of grant to work on a novel he was writing. There was a bad moment for me as I had to review my recent public writings in my head to see if I had said anything unpleasant about him in

print or on the air. I was perfectly capable of doing something like that, and I quickly remembered reading the Enquirer piece and being jealous of this guy who wasn't even from here and here he was getting state government money and getting free publicity.

Perhaps I should explain that my self confidence, never particularly robust, had taken a thorough beating in recent years. I had flamed out of a career as a mid-level bureaucrat, I was, to all extents and purposes unemployable, my wife had had to go back to work to keep us afloat, and I was trying to reinvent myself as a writer in a city where openings for bad-tempered essayists were few and far between. It was, as it turned out, one of my small writing gigs that had brought me back into Theresa's orbit. She had heard me on the radio, and, as it happened, so had Ross. And he was still willing to meet me. So that was good.

Ross was smallish, or at least noticeably smaller than me, wore big glasses, kept an oversized moustache from the nineteen-seventies, and was losing his dark hair as quickly as I was. Most people that I had met who earned their living by writing seemed to dress like bums, but Ross was neatly turned out in what I would learn was his uniform, khakis, a button down shirt, and Bass Weejuns. He had an oversized smile that showed up a lot. It wasn't a social trick or a mannerism. Ross enjoyed the hell out of things, and the smile was the record of that enjoyment. Within a few minutes I had forgotten that I was nervous about meeting someone who might be on his way to becoming an important novelist about whom I might have said something intemperate (as it turned out, I hadn't) and within a few minutes more, I was his friend for life as he had declared, upon hearing that I had a book in print and another on the way, that I could safely call myself a writer. That was a bit of badly needed validation, for which I would have paid any amount of money, a gift handed to me with a smile and no obligation.

What would have been under any other circumstances an excruciatingly long and phenomenally awkward evening – Theresa didn't cook, there was endless discussion over an immense pizza order – her children were noticeably odd, and there was some sort of marital tension in the bunker – what kind of family could thrive under those conditions I ask you? - the evening actually flew. Ross's good humor was infectious. The three unemployed husbands enjoyed each others' predicament and the pathologist from the bunker was considerably easier to take than his wife the abortionist. The wives were

having less fun, but my wife liked Ross as much as I did, so it wasn't one of those evenings that leave you exhausted and/or heading for mediation.

Left to my social inadequacies, that might have been the last of it. I certainly wasn't going to search out more evenings in the bunker, and, much as I enjoyed matching wits with Ross, I couldn't imagine that someone who had worked for Time Magazine and had won some sort of award for his first novel, was going to want to spend more time with a midwestern local guy trying to crank out detective novels. But I was wrong. Ross had already decided that I was part of the fraternity, and he would be calling me to get together. We tried a couple of dinners with our wives, but that was a match that wasn't going to work, so we took to meeting for lunch from time to time, and we would talk often on the telephone. Ross loved to talk, and he was good at it. I learned over time that he was in close touch with a circle of friends back in New York. They kept him supplied with the freshest jokes available.

But one of the nicest things about him, I realized in those early days, was that he was not visibly pining for New York. He had none of the New York self absorption that drives those of us in the real world so crazy. Ross knew that there was considerable value in being able to live well and safely at a reasonable price in a well behaved city, and that there was nothing lost in not being able to see *Cats* or *Les Miserables* on a whim. He was sharp enough to have observed that there are considerably more people outside New York than inside, and that many of those people have interesting lives and do a lot of work. He did, however, miss the talk back in New York. Ross told me, after I proved that I could usually converse without drying up, that he found the local reticence baffling if not off-putting. It seemed to him that people in these parts would just let conversations drop as soon as possible. He thought it was, I don't know, sad, maybe that people didn't seem to want to go past a few social sentences.

I thought about that the first time he pointed it out to me, and I've thought about the change in the years since then. In my experience there are as many gasbags per square mile here as anywhere. But it's possible that people were a little intimidated by Ross. Despite his easy charm he was, after all, an outsider making his living in a most unusual way. I think that a lot of people in parts such as these where writers are relatively scarce fear them the way primitive people were said to fear photographers. I did

understand his missing the pleasures of wisecracking, though. I have lived in places where people don't feel as guilty about shooting the breeze and poking fun at life and the crap it throws at you as a lot of people do here. Maybe it's the nuns. At any rate, he was always ready to talk. Talking, being funny, was, as far as he was concerned, a very good use of one's time, not a waste at all.

As much pleasure as we found in each other's company in those early days of our friendship, there was an important bit of business we had to get through, a test of sorts that had to be taken and passed if we were to go on. That critical test was the reading of each other's stuff. Ross had a head start on me here. He had heard me on the radio and, if I have the timing right, was one of the six or eight people who had read my op-ed ravings in the Post. I needed to read his books. I don't think I was aware at that point that he had written a lot about art that I could have tackled, and it's probably best that I didn't, since he believed more strongly in the legitimacy of contemporary art than I thought was right for a rational human being. At that point I only knew that he wrote novels, so I needed to get busy. My wife had taken a crack at *Years Out*, his first book, written in Ross's early twenties. She effectively warned me that it was very much a first novel, so I went straight to *Only Shorter*, which had been published just a couple of years earlier and which was still in print. It's a book about people with illness, specifically cancer, something Ross knew far too much about.

When he was twenty-seven Ross developed Hodgkins disease. That would have been the mid nineteen seventies. If you know your cancers, you know that Hodgkins disease is considered one of the more treatable in the vast array of dreadful illnesses, but at that time the treatment was radiation, and lots of it, something he went through until he came out at the other end, sterile and burned, but more or less cured, able to resume doing what he wanted to do which was write..

That wasn't his first brush with disease. He had had polio as a child, an event that left him with a steel rod in his back and an uncomfortably early warning that life is not only not fair or beyond fairness, it is not guaranteed, even when you are smart as a whip, which he was, and fabulously observant, which he also was, and clearly destined for the intellectual big leagues. Does bad luck cluster? It does seem to. His only sister died from a childhood ailment when she was in elementary school, and his only brother was

hammered as a young adult with yet another family case of Hodgkins disease, out of which he made it alive, but barely.

The first time I read *Only Shorter*, his second novel, in which two of the main characters were in varying stages of cancer, I raced through it, mostly curious to know what kind of a writer he was, whether we were going to compete on any field, and whether I was still going to like him.

I was much relieved to find nothing to embarrass him or me and deeply pleased to see that we were both interested in life as it is lived in the suburbs and exurbs where, contrary to the bulk of literary evidence, most Americans now live. I had, and may still have, for all I know, a chip on my shoulder about New York and what I thought was the excessive attention paid to it by writers, many of whom had fled their many Gopher Prairies and Columbus with only the dimmest understanding of where they had spent their lives, much too keen to be recognized in what they thought was the only arena that mattered.

I must have given him one of my own books around that time. His tactful take on it – he was obviously not a reader of crime fiction – was that I wasn't a crime novelist, I was a social commentator. I took that as a compliment, ignoring the implicit explanation of why my books sold to a handful of English majors rather than to the hoped for zillions of crime readers.

Ross, who grew up in a Jewish section of Brooklyn that he explained to me was basically a *shtetl* that had been transferred intact from somewhere beyond the Pale, could have been excused for writing about that limited world if that was what he had chosen to do. Certainly there are countless Minnesota refugees who would have given anything to have grown up where he did so they could turn into Saul Bellow. I think it is greatly to his credit that he didn't do that. Much of *Only Shorter* takes place in places like Bethpage and Woodstock, and his renderings of those unglamorous places are sure and revealing, although they often appear to have been easily tossed off just to let the reader know where he is.

Being of sound body and relatively young, I didn't catch the equal accuracy or the import of my friend's direct look at fatal disease in the novel. Another thing I missed in that quick first reading was the equally informed look at an aspect of the art world. I

missed it because I had next to no interest at all in contemporary painting, but it's part of the balance of the book, the world of one of the two cancer victims.

And I must stop here first to speak to those of you who lump all disease novels in with the likes of Erich Segal's now largely forgotten but once mega-best-selling novel *Love Story* or possibly with Bette Davis in *Dark Victory*. I feel your pain. But I ask you not to drift off into your mental golf games, and I retract the phrase disease novel. You should too. *Only Shorter* does address disease, but there is no Max Steiner score, no sentimentality, just that sharply accurate observation which marks the difference between George Eliot and the rest of the pack.

Then I must tell you something about Ross's art world credentials, not just because they meant plenty to him, which they did, but because that connection informed so much of his writing and, I later learned, his thought. The art sub-plot in *Only Shorter* has to do with a painter turned framer who tries his hand at some forgeries of works by an artist friend now dead. He's a noble crook, trying to get money to take his dying girlfriend to Milan where he thinks he can get better medicine than he can get in the U.S. The character is able to paint a believable forgery because he had been close friends with another artist, now dead. Ross knew a lot about friendship with artists.

When I met him, he and his wife were living in the upstairs apartment of a cramped little St. Louis on Westside Avenue in Hyde Park. The first time I saw the place was at dinner to which he had invited me and my wife. I thought the apartment was shockingly graduate student for someone his age. He was in his late thirties, and neither he nor his wife had gotten the books and papers under control. Nor had they done much in the way of furniture shopping, their only new piece being a sofa bed she had insisted on buying because she thought it was possible that they weren't available in the Midwest. It looked like graduate student digs legitimately. His wife was doing a second medical residency, and there was neither money nor time to pull things into *House and Garden* shape. There were, however a couple of paintings on prominent display. God help me, I thought they were by some sort of goofball. I didn't know - until I helped him to move into a house they bought, without my advice, which they could have used - I didn't know that the pictures were by Philip Guston and were worth pots of money.

Not long after the wretched bout with Hodgkins disease, Ross came to know and become a close friend of Guston's. The friendship came about because of a piece Ross had written for a prominent art magazine about a Guston exhibit. Several years before that show, the artist had royally pissed off the New York contemporary art establishment by walking away from abstract expressionism when he was making good money both for himself and, more importantly, I gather, the art business as an abstract painter.

You can read about the friendship and about that review in Ross's last book, the posthumously published *Guston In Time*. It's a short work. I believe that he was in the middle of it when he got sick again, and that it had to be pulled together by his editor. If you're at all interested in art or criticism or artistry or writing, you will find it worth the short time it takes to read. I learned a number of things about Ross that he hadn't bothered to tell me or had decided not to tell me since I hadn't shown even polite interest in the subject of contemporary art in any of our time together. My prejudice. My loss. Ross and Philip Guston weren't just friends, they were close friends. Ross was one of three people that the artist named on his deathbed to read his kaddish. The other two were the composer Morton Feldman and the writer Philip Roth.

Knowing Ross as I did, I suspect that in writing that first review for The Arts he took more than a little pleasure in taking a stand contrary to the mainstream in the matter of Philip Guston. His writing teachers at CCNY were very big on cross fertilization. They thought that any writer worth his salt needed to know something about the visual arts and, more important, needed to know artists, a tenet Ross accepted and held. If you wanted to know artists in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, New York was a pretty good place to be. He knew and liked painters and he came to know a lot about painting. But he also came to know a lot about the people who buy sell and write about art, and he knew their worth. By the time Ross went to bat for Guston and his new, weirdly representational paintings, he knew exactly in whose eye he was sticking his thumb and knew that he would not be making himself any friends.

On that last point he was mistaken. Here is the letter Guston, who hadn't yet met Ross, wrote to him about the piece.

*Dear Ross Feld*

*Only my lassitude has kept me from writing you- I've been wanting, for months now, to tell you how much I liked the piece you wrote on my work in The Arts, last April or so. I don't remember writing a note such as this, but I wanted you to know how I felt when, to my great astonishment, (and pleasure) I read your singular article. Everything you wrote in it was so personally felt by you and expressed in such a close and fascinating way, rarely if ever found in the art magazines. I felt as if I were reading thoughts about my work with great excitement- and more- as if we knew each other and had had many discussions about painting and literature. In a word- I felt great recognition. Please accept my deepest appreciation and thanks.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Philip Guston*

Pretty cool.

But how cool it was remained lost to me. Even when Ross called me to be the special guy to move the two Guston paintings from the Westside apartment to their spot in the house the Felds had bought in Mt. Lookout, I still didn't know what a big deal the paintings were, which was probably a good thing as I would have been nervous and likely to drop them or otherwise screw up.

The move to Mt. Lookout was made possible by his wife's finally settling down to practice medicine, and made necessary by their adoption of a son, an event that overwhelmed Ross with happiness. A few years later they were able to adopt another boy, and for a while there, Ross was in a sort of heaven, presiding over a Classic American Household.

Ross actually ran that household. He had the time, he could cook, and they could afford help, a luxury that gave him time to write, which he never stopped doing. We continued to meet for lunch and talk on the phone, and then, one day, we decided to get rich. Neither of us had made much on our books. What cash flow there was came from articles and reviews, and Ross did editing for the prestigious publisher North Point Press, but we still knew we were authors and that we should be making better money at it. So we decided to write for the movies.

I know. What a couple of chumps. But we didn't know that. Because of the regard in which his novels were held, he had been taken on by an agent from one of the powerhouse firms – ICM – and we just knew, after a pleasant lunch – at Grammer's probably – that we could put something clever together, and that his high-powered agent could get it sold to those rich suckers in California who were throwing their money away on childish crap, and that we could finally have the cars we wanted. We even discussed which ones.

I have never had more fun in my life. I had a job writing comedy. Ross and I had decided on a script that we were dead certain would be irresistible to the actress Geena Davis, a plot we had worked out over a couple of days. And every weekday for months I would drive to Ross's office over a quilt shop in Madeira and we would have as much fun as the cast of the Dick Van Dyke show. And when that first script was done to our satisfaction and shipped off to be turned into fast and luxurious Japanese automobiles, we went to work on an even better script to be turned into really excellent houses with no foundation issues.

You never heard such silence as came from the high powered west coast agent to whom Ross's east coast agent, pleading ignorance of film ways, shipped our joint work. The expected cries of delight from studios pining for the next Billy Wilder and Ernst Lubitsch never came. Not a peep. I know. You all knew that. But let me tell you, writing comedy in harness with someone who doesn't just get your jokes but sets you up for them, someone who can return your serves with his own sharp volleys is about as much fun as you can have or probably ought to have, and I wouldn't trade those days - days and weeks and months that made not a dime - for anything.

Somehow during that time, Ross, sneaky bastard that he was, wrote a third novel, *Shapes Mistaken*, published in 1989. What was sneaky about him? He worked all the time. Except for an occasional trip to the race track or his stock broker, both of which seemed to make money for him, Ross worked. He wrote and edited and reviewed books and changed diapers and kept a kosher kitchen for a wife who couldn't cook and talked to his huge circle of friends and got to know people like Wendell Berry and still gave the impression that spending hours playing Mel Brooks to my Carl Reiner was the most important thing he could possibly do. Ross's picture on the back of *Shapes Mistaken* is a

good one. The photographer made him pose on the deck of the Mount Lookout house, not a place he ever spent time, but the light was good, and he looks just the way I remember him, and, I think, the way he thought he looked. Behind the oversized spectacles resting on the big schnozz there is a hint of the guy who never stopped assessing his chances with any attractive woman who came within ten feet of him.

We never discussed whether those assessments were followed up with action. I was a big believer in Don't Ask Don't Tell long before the Clinton administration made it a catchword. I didn't want to know. If I knew, I would have to tell my wife. But he was very, very interested in the ladies.

*Shapes Mistaken* is about Charles Shapes, last name spelled shapes. Charlie manages a store that is about to become history, a stereo component shop that he owns with his lifelong friend Sid. They set up the business in what used to be a Robert Hall store in a strip mall in a nowhere suburb of New York. It's a shaky venture, and they don't know, but Ross did, that their business, and all similar businesses are about to get wiped out by Circuit City and Best Buy. Charlie and Sid are good guys, a subject that interested Ross a lot. Charlie's a pianist, a guy who loves and understands music and doesn't much understand business. The two men are in their fifties. Sid's life is taking a strange turn, he's running for a minor elected office, but he's keeping his money in the stereo shop, feeling guilty for having sold the piano shop in Manhattan where Charlie was so happy. Charlie's life is about to change too. His morbidly obese, semi-estranged wife dies in Florida, leaving enough money for Charlie to buy out Sid, if Sid will sell, and give the business to his cranky daughter.

Fans of the television show *Seinfeld*, which was famously about nothing, will recognize the sort of nothing that *Shapes Mistaken* seems to be about. There are no adventures and there is no huge problem to be solved. There are, however, a number of metaphorical safes falling out of windows onto the heads of people who may or may not deserve safes falling on their heads. Ross knew as well as anybody, better than most, that the safes land on the just and the unjust and that's the way it is. Charlie Shapes, a guy without malice, a man for whom music is not just a pleasure but possibly the most intense pleasure there is, suffers from tinnitus, an uncontrolled ringing in his ears. The woman he's hired to help with his business turns out to be stealing from him on a grand scale.

The Russian immigrant he's taken on as a project seems to be a whack job. Charlie's mopey daughter is cuckolding her feckless husband. Random stuff. But it's the random stuff that happens in the world of non-celebrity where most of us live.

*Shapes Mistaken* got good reviews. All his books got good reviews. It didn't sink without a trace, but it didn't make serious money, and it didn't get sold to Hollywood which seems to be the validation that counts these days. If he had written more and had sold something later on to Hollywood, I think people would have gone back to the book and kept it alive. His agent probably wished he had thrown a little more plot in and made it something that could be reduced to the couple of sentences that register in the tiny minds of the decision makers in Los Angeles. But that wasn't what he was interested in writing. I think he thought plot was overrated. Certainly he had no use for the kind of plot that sweeps in and takes control. He knew far too well that life was essentially plotless.

Ross kept on writing. He was always in demand as a reviewer, getting work from the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* and various magazines. He kept up with his friends and he started another book. And he soldiered on as paterfamilias, driving his growing boys wherever they had to go, wherever they wanted to go. I was sort of horrified by what I saw as an inability to say no to his sons in the way that it seemed to me he couldn't say no to his wife. He was in love with them all, and he saw no overriding reason to say no in a world that says no often enough. They had waited so long to have children. Too long, maybe. Young parents seem better equipped to be ruthless when ruthlessness is called for. Ross didn't have a clue.

When his wife decided the boys needed a dog, Ross willingly participated in the purchase of not one but two gigantic Labrador retrievers who wallowed in the same loving indulgence as the two boys, with results that anyone who knows the least bit about dogs could have predicted. Dropping in on Ross became something of an ordeal. It was nothing that a little alpha male assertiveness couldn't fix, but that wasn't going to happen.

Sometime after the boys and the dogs, I became a working stiff. It was high time. College tuition loomed on our horizon, and my own income from books and reviews and free lance work was nowhere near what we were going to need. So, instead of having a safe falling on my head, I fell into the best job in the city, where I am today. The safe, when it did, fell a year or so after I went to work, when the tactless surgeon who had just

repaired my hernia told me that the other lump he took out while he was in there was cancerous.

Well, as you can see with your own eyes, I'm just fine. But the diagnosis just then scared the living daylights out of me, my family, and I regret to say, Ross, who, I realized, as the scare receded and life went on, was seriously affected. I understand now that for Ross, I was more than a writing partner or appreciative audience or soul mate. For Ross, up to that point, I had been living proof that it was possible to be not just a good friend, but a healthy good friend. He liked it that I was healthy and safe. So when I seemed to be sick, he took it hard. But he took it. And he, with the understanding earned from his own harrowing close shaves with death, became the one to whom I could speak frankly about what I was going through.

I suspect he didn't believe me when, after I had decided the cancer business was all a false alarm, I told him I was OK. He would come down to see me at work and we would go out to lunch and have a good time, all the while with him watching me like a hawk for signs of doom. There weren't any. I was, and am, as I keep telling you, just fine.

When he wasn't worrying about me or running his ramshackle domestic life or talking to his many other friends or thinking about art or listening to music that was way beyond my simple tastes, he was at work on his fourth novel, *Zwilling's Dream*, putting himself about three novels ahead of anybody else in town writing literary fiction.

The *Zwilling of Zwilling's Dream* is a writer, and much of the action has to do with making a movie of the book middle aged Cincinnati Joel Zwilling wrote when he was twenty-two about his life as the child of holocaust survivors. I don't ordinarily like books about writers and writing any more than I like movies about movies or moviemakers, but I make an exception for this short sweet novel which isn't really about writers as much as it is about the awful moviemakers who turn out to be not so awful as they seem, and the exhausting work people make for themselves in their dealings with people they love, and the strange business of rebuilding a life after one's first life is ended by tragedy. If you want to see what a first class novelist can do with the city you know and live in and care about, this is the one to read. You will get a sense of the

relationship Ross had formed with Cincinnati and you will, I trust, remember that that relationship was like a second marriage for someone who had grown up in Brooklyn.

You will also note his almost panicked feelings of affection for children and, possibly to your surprise, you will get a feeling for his deep sense of repulsion for abortion, which he saw as a dark scar on the century. There are funny bits, some sharp renderings of the kind of people who show up when moviemakers come to town. But it is, ultimately a serious novel.

And his last one. He went on with all the writing bits that paid and started work on the book that became *Guston In Time*, and soldiered on with his chaotic domestic life, which he loved and which became even more chaotic when his now married and robust younger brother the accountant moved to Cincinnati, followed by Ross's parents and then his aged mother and father-in-law, all of them with complications, all of them extra work, but work he took on without complaint, glad in various ways to have them.

I saw ever less of him as his work and my work absorbed us, but every now and then he would wander in to the Library where he was loved without reservation. He would come late in the morning and we would go out to lunch and have a fine time, better than the telephone, I thought, although he gave terrific telephone. He did come to one of our events at the Mercantile where he stood off to the side, watching me until he found it necessary to point out how similar my smoothings and schmoozings were to those of an undertaker, for which I wanted to pop him one. But he was right, of course.

At the end of the century some lumps rose around his neck and shoulders. The physicians among us know the end of this story, but I didn't. It was another round of cancer. He told me which particular cancer it was – I never learned its name – and I took him to his first round of chemo, having learned the ins and outs of treatment without really understanding what was going on. I thought it must be sort of like my own anti-climactic cancer. He was walking around, still himself despite hair loss and weight loss and other indignities. And he telephoned and told the latest jokes, which meant that he was still in touch with his friends from New York.

And we would, even then, go out to lunch. The last time we did that we went to that frozen-in-time restaurant in Newport where the politicians go for their iceberg lettuce fix. Ross's doctors had ordered him to eat a lot of rich fat stuff, so he wanted a plate of

chicken livers. He was, for all that he was slow moving and unsteady on his pins, still himself. I am sure that he knew that the weakness that I saw as a regrettable effect of the chemotherapy, something he could get over with a little exercise, was the cancer getting the upper hand. He was, after all, a veteran.

I was reminded, when I re-read *Only Shorter* for this paper, of what he had been through and what he was going through again, and in one case, because I had been through it, how accurate and amusing he could be about this horrible business. You medical types will agree. Here's a bit:

*Last and most awful, a hematologist sunk a bore above Jack's ass in order to extract a core of marrow – the doctor, a gaunt and elegant-looking man, putting all the grunting muscle into it of someone undoing the frozen lugs of a car wheel. When he was done he showed Jack the prize: an inch-long spongy cylinder, not white as Jack expected but red. The doctor's hairline was dropletted from the exertion; and the young nurse-assistant, who'd told Jack before it began that the procedure was all new to her too, looked greenish afterwards. Jack was still sore when he sat.*

I hope you remember that passage next time you order up tests.

Not long after the chicken liver lunch, Ross went into the hospital, where, to all extents and purposes, he lived the rest of his life. I would visit him in the suburban institution where he had been installed. He told me it was a good place, but we both knew it was a convenient place and the other end of the medical universe from, say, Sloan Kettering or the Cleveland Clinic. But that was how it was. He shrank, as one does. And it became harder to understand his speech as the disease and the treatments hammered the body that, you will remember, never really recovered from the much earlier polio and Hodgkins Disease. The last real thing he said to me was an expression of chagrin. He told me that it was all wrong, my being there and giving the little bit of help that an awkward hospital visitor is allowed to give. He said that he was supposed to have been my Virgil. I understood that to mean that he had expected to be my guide as I

went through the hell that he was trudging through again and which, I understood, he thought was, in my case, only delayed.

His wife, knowing how even the best hospitals could screw up, arranged for twenty four hour watches as he got weaker. I stood just one of those. He was, I fervently hope, insensible. He had been plugged with a respirator and a feeding tube, and, as I remember it, he was being moved about automatically. There was no sign of my friend, but I trusted that the brutally horrible and inhuman things being done to him were being done to make him better, and that I and everybody in his intelligent and amusing world would have him back, battered, but still Ross.

So, when the call came from his sister-in-law – I forget what well meaning evasion she used to soften the blow – I was genuinely surprised. I know. Dense.

Ross was not an observant Jew, but he was obedient and a good husband, so I believe he would not have argued with the immediate orthodox funeral in a suburb he would have found laughable or the burial in a place he never went. I think we would have had a private laugh about the windbag rabbi and I know he would have relished seeing the number of his old friends who flew frantically to Cincinnati from New York. What I learned at the funeral was that the number of people who clearly knew they were his closest friend, people whose lives had just taken a hammer blow, was so large that you had to get in line.

One of those friends was a woman who probably loved him more than she loved her husband. When I see her on the sidewalk we both have to make a concerted effort not to start crying in the street. It's still that sharp a loss. And every now and then someone will, out of the blue, mention that they knew him, and it's the same situation. He was that kind of a friend.

But that's not really what he would want you to be hearing about. He would want you to know that he was a writer, and he would hope you would read his books and understand what he was getting at in them. And, whatever he wanted, I want you to know that right here, under our noses, in a town not really known for its body of writers, we had one of the best.

About the title of this paper and the title of this book: some of you will recognize this passage from *Malone Dies* by Samuel Beckett, which Ross put in the front of his second novel:

“...to recognize the good in the bad, the bad in the worst, and so grow gently old all down the unchanging days and die one day like any other day, only shorter.”