

Three Ings

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*from The Book of Ing
Memoirs of a Manhood*

Foreword

Polonius....and there put on him
 What forgeries you please; marry, none so rank
 As may dishonour him—take heed of that;
 But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
 As are companions noted and most known
 To youth and liberty.
Reynaldo. As gaming, my lord.
Polonius. Ay, or drinking, fencing, swearing, quarrelling,
 Drabbing. You may go so far.

If I had remained a fireman on the railroad, as I was for a couple of summers during my early college years, or a laborer in the Brick Department of Wheeling Steel, as I was some other summer months then, or if I had committed to a life as a meat cutter, as I might have done when, at age 17, I told my boss I was leaving to go to college and he offered me a raise and full-time hours to stay, these memoirs might have turned out quite differently. (If ever, indeed, they had gotten written.) They may have smelled more of sweat and a little less than they do of the lamp, though I hope they aren't too much of the latter. They might have had more brawn and bluster, connected more to the worlds of muscle and gasoline and testosterone than they have turned out to be. More Harry Crews. More Roy Blount Jr. More Hemingway. So be it. Still, I maintain that however domesticated and schooled and *tamed* I have become, there lurks in me, in that low, reptilian part of my brain, and in the savage mindlessness of my DNA, a less than genial, incompletely socialized, sometimes brutish sort of fellow, given to language, appetites, and indulgences that might not pass polite muster. I have been arrested because of my knee-jerk smartmouthing of a highway patrolman in my neighborhood when I was a unlicensed kid aboard my 1956 Harley Davidson. I have been thrown out of my own father's scout troop for general witlessness and insubordination. I have been punched out in a barfight in a small Appalachian crossroads saloon after winning too many games of

eight-ball and then renegeing on a bet made while drunk. After talking to a former student in my mud-fouled, chicken-shit-stained gardening clothes, I overheard her little girl ask as they walked away, “Is that a homeless man, mommy?” My so-called study looks more like the remains of a trailer struck by a tornado. The corner of my bedroom that the laundry basket occupies smells of mud and stale sweat.

Good. I have always said that I like seeing that which is holy set against that which is plain, (not that they are contradictory). Or that which is pleasant against that which is ugly. “No day without night,” a Muslim proverb says, and so it is. So often, in the western world, the male of the species, no matter what correction has been applied to him from birth, remains, as is clear in the state of the world right now, unevolved in many ways: selfishly complicated, Learishly self-ignorant, blustering, possessive, headstrong, environmentally abusive, hyper-competitive, self-destructive, ferally promiscuous. And yet a man is also capable of glory, heroism, patience, even a kind of godliness. “What a piece of work is a man,” cries Hamlet: “how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in thought and movement how express and admirable.” That these contradictory states exist in any given male, and that their expression is to bewilderingly varied degrees repressed or tamed, distorted or exaggerated, is the reality I have to deal with.

In a pocket notebook several years ago, I recorded this little scrap of thinking:

Must a man’s stories of his life, more than a woman’s, be accounts and analyses of power? Rather than the sensitivity of women who, generally speaking, listen, and weigh and consider, and who work and cooperate and sympathize with their hearts, isn’t it so that men most often enforce, rule, direct, oppress, suppress with their privilege, their intellects and wills? And if so, doesn’t a male memoirist, if he be honest, have to be more an analyst of, and witness to, power suffered, power wielded, power abused, power transferred or withheld, power resisted, power deflected, power concentrated, and power submitted to, than of the heart’s more delicate secrets?

Though at this particular moment in American history with the Bill Cosbys and Harvey Weinsteins being outed by women fed up with masculine abuses of power, I see that my notebook query is still relevant. In my accounts of the various ings men crash into, stumble over, clamber up upon, overcome, or sometimes plunge fatally headfirst from, the problem of male power (and male failure) remains a brooding undercurrent.

At one point in our marriage, my wife shared our household with a male cat, a male dog, two sons, and, of course, one husband. She blurted, with minimal irony, after a typical day of shouting, dirt, scraped flesh, stanced blood, and sweating rambunctiosness, that “testosterone is a poison.” Though without any medical or chemical credentials, as the oldest of ten children she had nevertheless gathered plenty of first-hand evidence from all six of her younger brothers. Her father, a former Navy man and dealer of hardwares, ran a tight ship; nevertheless, various forms of stern discipline were visited upon his sons as they stumbled and careened through the usual male adolescent snafus. Many of those situations involved ings of various kinds: unsupervised partying, dinner-table-fooling, reckless driving, and, when disciplined, various attempts at paying back, which, in a nod to the tragic story of Oedipus, I call “killing the king,”—the normal male adolescent urge to displace or resist entirely the power of the father and to grow into some sort of autonomy. It went with Pam’s brothers about as well—that is, as poorly—as it was to go with their future nephews, our boys. It’s an old story, the Trial by Fire, and the scars of experience’s flashovers mark most males.

The context for the epigraph that heads this foreword, again from *Hamlet*, is that the young Laertes, brother of Prince Hamlet’s girl friend Ophelia, has been off to Paris for some weeks. His father Polonius, the new King’s chief advisor, sends Reynaldo to spy on him there, to see how he’s getting along, to determine if he’s getting into any trouble. He has assumed the power of surveillance. And there we see it—Polonius and Reynaldo speak one of the first litanies of “ings” male flesh is heir to—and it’s in a context of potential trouble—legal, ethical, physical.

“Gaming” of course refers to what we would call today “gambling,” indulging in such pleasures as poker, roulette, lotteries of every ilk, one-armed banditry, craps, fantasy football. The others in Polonius’s litany—drinking, swearing, fencing, quarreling,

drabbing (that is, *whoring*) will be addressed in this book (or discreetly avoided, or purposely transformed) in due time.

So in these brief essay/memoirs about what is mostly the underbelly or soft, less defensible flanks, of male experience, I am attempting to explore some of these ings as they have become manifest in my own works and days; I am indulging in usually brief but sometimes extended self-surveilling, ruminating, divagating, digressing, plumbing, discovering, apologizing, explicating, and avoiding. Overall, I am essaying, in the sense that Montaigne meant it: attempting some sort of explantatory, reflective, revelation of self to a reasonably indulgent audience. Many of the ings herein developed do not name exclusively masculine actions, I readily admit; but there may often be something man-boyish about these autobiographical and confessional incidents, these sometimes struggling testimonies. Chalk it up to an unfinished male, not yet fully *being*, still *becoming*.

Cursing

I intend in no way to suggest that this ing is a solely male domain, or that males are genetically favored to excel in it over females. Maybe in the supposedly discreet public worlds of business, medicine, law, and education men watch their mouths more than they do in private; I cannot say for sure, though some of the scrapings from the bottom of the 2016 election campaign muckrakings barrel are surely counter-evidence. Things devolved occasionally into cussing matches, noted with fake horror or mild amusement by the press. Nor do the the hallways of an American inner-city high school, where I spent most of my working life, offer a fair sampling of the amount of public cursing in the country; if such a place were to be representative, then even your own grandmother is likely to drop the f-bomb dozens of times a day. And I will say that I have been cussed out (we'll investigate the differences between cursing and cussing in good time) by high school girls whose vocabulary and delivery would have made even my afore-mentioned father-in-law Jack Korte blench. He was a Navy man, Jack, a survivor of the sinking of *The Wasp*, so he had heard and seen some horrible things. But had he been standing in

my classroom on one or another day when the shit hit the fan, and some hands-on-hip, head-wagging missy let loose, I think he would have taken cover.

Once, during a discussion of language, a demure young sophomore, as innocent as a madonna, and before I knew what was coming, spewed the words “you can’t say on TV,” the very ones made famous by George Carlin. Though no stranger at all to them myself, I stood stunned before the class for a moment, as the smirk lingered on her blushing face. Another time, a young woman who had found fault in my assessment of her achievement and effort as well as in my correction of her behavior, delivered a tirade including all the Carlin words plus a few more compounds involving mothers and illicit intercourse, claiming I was clearly one who engaged in such actions. It had even her classmates gasping for air. Still, I must maintain that, however perversely notable the female cussings-out were, none of them had the full force nor testosterone vigor of the masculine variety. For example, none of the girls deconstructed any of their cuss words in order to insert some other word or words, as the finest cussers can do. (Rhetoricians will recognize this verbal technique as an example of tmesis. Non-rhetoricians will simply laugh.) I will forego all modesty and report that in college, I perfected the art of what I will, with a nod to Peter Lobban, a graduate biomedical student at Stanford who much later suggested the term in a biochemical context, the *recombinant* curse. Here’s an example.

My housemates were a clever bunch of louts who kept the seriously poor hours that college boys do. I, on the other hand, at least attempted to maintain a schedule commensurate with my obligations to 8:30 classes in the morning. Therefore, at 11 o’clock of weeknights, I would climb up into my bunk (for some reason I always took the top bunk in college—perhaps a persistent wariness of high water, bred into me by five generations of river town dwellers, or perhaps a metaphor for my aspirations, clearly far above those of these wastrels and buffoons I shared the house or dorm with). Prone and tucked in, I would pull the blanket exactly up to my chin. I am told that since my goatee stuck out at a certain angle, I looked like Trotsky when upright, and when recumbent, like Lenin in his tomb. At about four past 11 on most nights of the week, two or three of my housemates would wander into the room, flip the lights on, and engage in aggressively inane dialogues specifically designed to enrage me, not only because they were stalling

my sleep, but even more so, and even more to their delight, because they would contain some theological or etymological error of the most egregious kind which they knew would send me (and my peace of mind) reeling.

“So then masturbation is not only a mortal sin, according to Father Tracey, but it will cause hair to grow on the palm of your hand. What horse crap. The man ought to be stewed in his own soutane.”

“If you did that,” I growled between clenched jaws, bolting stiffly upright in my bunk and glaring at the assembled miscreants, “if you did that, they would exco-fucking-municate you!” An amused silence falls. Then, two beats later, the varlets emit a chorus of satisfied chuckles, lightly applaud, and leave—deliberately failing, of course, to switch off the lights. On top of my agitation, I would have to clamber down from the top bunk and flip the lights off and then, blinded by the residual dazzle, navigate my way back to bed through piles of philosophy books, cast-off unlaundered underwear, and greasy Norwood Dairy Queen cheeseburger wrappers.

In the all-male environment of Xavier University in those increasingly rebellious mid-60s, cussing came so readily and so uncensoredly that it became dangerous to return home at, say, Thanksgiving. Once, probably during my sophomore year, I was seated at the family table, the turkey and dressing and all the trimmings elaborately laid out and steaming. Across from me sat my Aunt Nonie, a septuagenarian maiden who had kept house for more than half a century for her two unmarried sisters, Dorothy and Miriam, who were perched on either side of her. To their far left sat *their* Aunt Aggie, deaf for decades, but whose flushed, rosy face and bright, blank eyes suggested that she was enjoying some sort of witty interior monologue at all times. Whenever Aunt Nonie was upset, she would cry out, a stricken look on her face, ‘O Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!’ (I hasten to point out that though the names of Holy Persons are here spoken, they are not spoken in vain. They are offered as a prayer. This is what is known as an ejaculation—not a curse.) Or whenever the name of a deceased person came up—and Nonie and her everlasting sisters knew a lot of deceased persons—she would nod slightly and pray, “God rest his [or her] soul.”

So when, utterly forgetting myself, I looked straight at Aunt Nonie that fated Sixties Thanksgiving and asked her to pass the fucking potatoes, there came instantly an actual

violent rend, I believe, in the fabric of the universe. My grandfather Ironhead, seated at the foot of the table, though long deafened by his decades on the railroad, looked up quizzically, as if he'd felt some definite cosmic shift, cause unknown. My father sat stricken in an attitude of right-side paralysis, a bowl of steaming carrots half-extended in the direction of Aunt Miriam. She held her napkin to her mouth, and her steely blue eyes were fixed on me; I had the weirdest sensation that she might actually be stifling a laugh. Her sister Dorothy, a nurse in the Tin Mill across the river in Weirton, had been present to dozens of self-maulings by witless males like myself; now she sat upright, silent, with great dignity, as if patiently reconciled to the vast, fallen world of masculinity.

The "F" word had never been spoken in my house, nor had it ever, I am sure, been spoken in my grandparents' house, and most certainly not in the house of the Aged Aunties. Was there some sort of permanent loss of innocence that moment, some verbal and ethical catastrophe that affected the rest of everyone's years? Some stain that smirched the family for generations? I don't know. That I was not punished for it, nor even spoken to about it after dinner—that was the most sinister consequence. I had gone beyond the Pale, far beyond it, and it was as if I had been speaking another language, or had been possessed by some sort of linguistic incubus; no one looked me in the face.

Many years later, my own older son Patrick, then about four, had failed to close the front door behind him. My wife said, "Now you go fix that. Pull it closed all the way, please." He toddled across the hallway, reared back a leg, and kicked the door. "Goddammit," he added.

"Patrick Hague!" my wife cried, "What was that?"

"You told me to fix it," he said, looking up. "That's how Dad fixes stuff."

So much for cussing: the plebeian, pedestrian, Joe Six-Pack, Cable Guy version of the thing. Cursing, on the other hand, is a finer sort of thing, bringing to bear not only vocabulary and the spontaneous, obscene overflow of powerful emotion, as a pissed-off Wordsworth might have put it, but a variety of wit, intelligence, sometimes even genius.

English kings spoke French for 300 years (from the time of the Battle of Hastings, won, of course, by the French-speaking Norman conquerer, William, in 1066), to 1368, when The Statute of Pleadings became law, doing away with Norman or “Law” French and replacing it with English in the courts all over the land. Some of those old Francophone kings nevertheless learned to curse in English. Of course they did: which is more explosively expressive—the French word *merde*, which sounds as if it could be some sort of pastry, or *shit*, the satisfyingly onomatopoeic and clearly sensuously superior Anglo Saxon word? (Think about squatting and doing it in the woods or over the steep edge of a lake, or in a particularly resonant outhouse).

In the city of Bath, in southern England, named after the hot-spring-fed marvels constructed by the Romans, archaeologists have retrieved small lead and copper rings engraved with curses which were cast into the water for the goddess Sulis Minerva to read and respond to. A few translations reported in a *Daily Mail* article make clear the complexity and vitriol of these ancient maledictions. “May he who carried off Vibia from me become liquid as the water. May he who so obscenely devoured her become dumb.” In others, gory details prevail: “So long as someone, whether slave or free, keeps silent or knows anything about [my stolen ring] may he be accursed in his blood and eyes and every limb and even have all his intestines quite eaten away.” Ben Stevens, the Bath Council’s cabinet member for sustainable development at the time, waxes proudly about these artifacts: “...the decision by UNESCO to inscribe the Roman curse tablets...on the Memory of the World register ...is another reason for local people to take pride in the exceptional quality of our local heritage here in Bath.” Damn right, Councilor. Hell yes.

But even as I was thrilled to discover these sub-aquatic execrations, originally viewing them as I did *in situ* in the humid cellars of the old town, I worried that they were limited by the brevity required to get them onto the rings. Surely, with more elbow room, cursing could be brought to an even higher level of vigor, metaphor, and spleen.

So I invited my creative writing students to write curse poems. Adolescents confined to tight, airless classrooms all day, by sometimes boring or even aggressively antagonistic or ignorant disciplinarians, store up a lot of anger (remember the afore-mentioned cussing young lady) which translates, with a little prodding, into some high-octane verbal flare-ups. One of the more memorable was this effort, by Mike Heck, a light-skinned

African American champion baseballer. The poem establishes its situation effectively and directs the curse quite squarely.

**To The Administrator Who Stole My Earring
And Told Me To Shave**

Your whining pierces my ears like
5-0's loudest spinning lights during my
deepest REM.
Your gripes shape my forehead like a mulatto raisin,
dried and rigid.

May your children love heavy metal
and gauge their lobes to an inch.
May Daddy's baby girl put holes in her lips and
wear hair blue,
spiked and rigid.

May your first-born male sprout shadows at seven
and speak like a tuba
before he turns ten.

As background, it is important to know that the object of this curse had, at the time, three tiny blond daughters who, when they showed up with his blond wife at school, caused quite the stir, them being so cute and their father so stern and all. I hasten to admit that I primed my writers by showing them a poem I ran across in *Harper's*. I admire it for its tightly-contained contumely, like a stream of hot plasma in an accelerator, held in place by a powerful magnetic field of contempt. Here it is in whole:

**For the Jim Crow Mexican Restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts
Where My Cousin Esteban Was Forbidden to Wait Tables Because He
Wears Dreadlocks**

By Martín Espada

I have noticed that the hostess in peasant dress,
the wait staff and the boss
share the complexion of a flour tortilla.
I have spooked the servers at my table
by trilling the word burrito.
I am aware of your T-shirt solidarity
with the refugees of the Americas,

since they steam in your kitchen.
 I know my cousin Esteban the sculptor
 rolled tortillas in your kitchen with the fingertips
 of ancestral Puerto Rican cigarmakers.
 I understand he wanted to be a waiter,
 but you proclaimed his black dreadlocks unclean,
 so he hissed in Spanish
 and his apron collapsed on the floor.
 May La Migra handcuff the wait staff
 as suspected illegal aliens from Canada;
 may a hundred mice dive from the oven
 like diminutive leaping dolphins
 during your Board of Health inspection;
 may the kitchen workers strike, sitting
 with folded hands as enchiladas blacken
 and twisters of smoke panic the customers;
 may a Zapatista squadron commandeer the refrigerator,
 liberating a pillar of tortillas at gunpoint;
 may you hallucinate dreadlocks
 braided in thick vines around your ankles;
 and may the Aztec gods pinned like butterflies
 to the menu wait for you in the parking lot
 at midnight, demanding that you spell their names.

Muy bien! Let us picture the object of this poetic curse trying to escape after Senor Espada has delivered it, standing over his table with large placards on which the names of a dozen Aztec gods are printed in large bold letters, names like *Chalchiuhtlicue*, *chal chee weet lee kway* (goddess of water, lakes, rivers, seas, streams, horizontal waters, storms, and baptism), or Itzpapalotlcihuatl (god of sacrifice) or Tlahuizcalpantecihutli (god of dawn.) At the door, as a fellow worker of Esteban's bum-rushes the guilty man towards it, another accomplice waits, a person of awesome height, high cheekbones, burnished bronze skin, dark black hair. He flashes a placard with the name of the god of sacrifice on it, whips it quickly behind him, and demands "Spell it!" And before his victim can begin to try, he leans in on him, heavily, and shouts, "Now, you mongrel, pronounce it!"

Holy shit.

The quality of a curse, or a cuss for that matter, is improved in exactly the same way the punishment in hell for sinners was calculated by Dante: by the extent to which the punishment fits the crime. This one certainly qualifies in its pointed specificity and

cultural richness.

In a concluding aside, I am pleased to report that when I queried Sr. Espada about using his whole poem, he agreed very quickly, assuring me I did not need to pay him anything for its use save for sending him a copy of *The Book of Ing* when it's finished. Thank you, maestro, and may your enemies stumble head-first into vats of scalding oil at a church fish fry. And may your poetry win a Pulitzer.

Making Music

Roscoe Morgan was a raspy-voiced, hard-drinking, blues-living man with whom I once spent earnest evenings playing bluegrass music. I was really his student, not a peer; my friend Mike Henson, who lived near Roscoe in Cincinnati's Over-The Rhine, then a vibrant if troubled Appalachian outpost in the inner city, would get us together at his house or at Roscoe's and we'd sit in the kitchen, our guitar cases and picks and extra strings spread all over the floor and table. I'd sing along, practicing harmonies, or I'd try to keep up with Roscoe's picking. I learned a lot. Bluegrass music is a multi-stranded cable still clinched firmly to my heart. Its tight harmonies, its oftentimes world-weary lyrics, its sense of tradition and place and the importance of belonging somewhere and the pain of displacement are all a part of what ties me to it. I think too my Celtic heritage, though muted by five American generations, responds to the driving, old-country rhythms of bluegrass. Finally, the incredible speed in which it often must be played is thrilling, creating in me a kind of rush William James might have marked in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

I was a bachelor by default at the time of all this with Roscoe, teaching school, with long summers off, and I'd go down to the woods of Monroe County to live in my trailer for two or three months at a time, trying to recover from divorce, depression, and a bad case of fear-of-life. I guess in those summers when I came back to the city and visited Roscoe there might have been more consistently spirit-lifting stuff to sing than high lonesome ballads of failed love and bloody murder, but I had what I had and did what I did.

I helped Roscoe finance a new guitar—a top-of-the-line Guild, costing three hundred dollars in the early Seventies. My living in the woods and the lag between the monthly loan bill and the check from Roscoe while I was trying to be the go-between on the payments made it pretty difficult; Roscoe wound up thinking I was trying to bilk him, and his feelings toward me soured from friendship into resentment and suspicion. I didn't know how to straighten this thing out, and school started, and my schedule filled up, and the next thing I knew, Roscoe had died. I didn't go to his funeral nor even send a card. That was how embarrassed and guilty I felt about the guitar and his dying and my not being able to face any of it squarely. The story of his music and his marriage and his death is told in the novella "A Small Room With Trouble On My Mind." Mike Henson wrote it, years after, and it, like Roscoe, is a hard and sorrowfully beautiful piece of work.

Excepting the ephemeral folk trio called "One Two Few" I'd played in as a senior in high school, my time with Roscoe Morgan plus the time when I was a tiny boy soprano in my church choir—constituted the entire musical curriculum of the first half of my life.

So when, at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in the summer of 1997, my new friend Peter Pagano from Philadelphia urged me to join him in the Bread Loaf Singers, I agreed. The group formed each year to learn a few madrigals with which to lighten the hearts of exhausted fellow poets, short storyers, novelists, essayists—all the laureled and unlaureled convened in the Green Mountains not far from where Robert Frost rusticated during his last thirty years.

I hadn't been in a choir since I last sang the litanies and kyries, launching them from the stratospheric loft of St. Peter's Church back in my hometown. There in Steubenville the good nuns aimed a dozen or so boy soprano voices straight at heaven in the magical year or two before the rigors of puberty, then football, then adult lives of night shifts in the mill dulled their angelic edges. Though all that was long ago and far away, I readily agreed to Peter's invitation. For decades I'd been bringing madrigals, sweet ditties "full of kindly lust," to my British Lit. classes on the Renaissance. The fact that many Elizabethans could sing a part in a madrigal on sight was one with which I regularly tried to wow my students. Here was an opportunity actually to participate in a madrigal performance. I plunged right in.

Immediately, I realized how deep in over my head I was. Not only was it impossible for me to pull the notes off the page, but it was also equally impossible for me to pick them up from my fellow tenors, though their voices rose all around me. With no warning, my own voice would tumble awkwardly down an octave, like a burglar falling through a roof. The girl next to me would clap her hand over her ear closest to me, as if suddenly seized by migraine.

She was a tall, startlingly fresh-looking person, just recently created, blonde with a mushroom haircut, a finely ridged nose, skin so fair it was almost transparent. She had a generally effervescent, though sometimes tending-to-melancholy-manner, and large, bright, orderly teeth. Her breath smelled of orange juice and berries.

She was from Southern California, and, when someone asked by what route she had gotten to Bread Loaf, she launched into an astonishing itinerary of cross-continental air flights, from LA to Boston, Boston to Burlington, Burlington to a side-trip to North Carolina, then on to Chicago and LA and back to Boston and Vermont again. But she looked, despite all her barnstorming, as fresh as a peach. She was, I'd guess, nineteen.

And though I knew it must have offended her, she never said anything to me about my beer-ruined, ex-smoker's, half century-old voice. She even tried to help me find my way among all the notes, explaining that her voice registered unusually low for a woman's and that I should therefore try not to listen to her. But I couldn't help it; hers with its plain clear accuracy was the only map I had in that strange aural country, and she my only guide. At one point, attempting to help me with a passage, she likened its syncopation to the chants of a high school cheerleader and punctuated the movement of the notes with sudden arm-thrusts and leg-kicks.

The first few rehearsals were agony for me. I listened as our director, Al Hudgins, a burly bearded fellow in shorts and astounding print shirts, laid out each part. "Now here's the tenor line," he'd say, plunking it out on the piano and asking us to repeat. Later, rising up on his tiptoes, not quite levitated, he would work falsetto with the sopranos.

But to tell the truth, for all the director's sweat and urging, my notes seemed to me as frustratingly out of reach as Tantalus's fruit. I'd open my mouth after Al played the passage, and strange notes would bay forth like the howls of a hungry bluetick treeing the planet's last coon.

A few days of this, unchanged, would have killed me. But even by the end of the first rehearsal, I felt something of that counterpoint communion, that seductive give-and-take-and-then-coming-together that so teased and then fulfilled the Elizabethans. The many were becoming one; noisy disorder was shaping into chords—for a moment, we heard the great made thing that could not be made alone.

The girl helping me smiled, said “Yes,” and saluted the air. I think that once she saw we were going to be all right, that we were going to realize the madrigal’s complex harmonies, that we were indeed going to come out on the other side of noise into beauty, she relaxed.

I realized again (this all within a week of my 50th birthday) that like the very phenomenon of life itself, music labors elegantly against the running down of things. It interrupts the shabby decay that dishevels and disjoints, that drops the mouse in its tracks on a bitter winter day, that dissolves the beautiful skin of girls.

Where there might be loose mess and horrid corruption, music’s knots and braids of invisible resonance for a dozen or two measures entwine, in the case of the madrigal, into a thing as brilliantly detailed and jeweled as a peacock’s tail, the aural equivalent of a Fabergé egg.

“We’ll work on the dynamics,” our director says, physicist of sound and breath, and as we tune our voices the whole universe halts, just for a moment, our harmonies holding off its mute slide into entropy. Our last chord sounds, and though it diminishes, fades, resolves itself into the residue of all that’s ever been sung, still it lingers, the voice of a deep temple-bell, resonant in our hearts.

“Yes,” the girl beside me says, softly, not to me, but to all Creation, I think, which has at last satisfied the need that order and beauty and completion arise from it. “Yes.”

And then, as if in a dream, suddenly I feel my head jerked around. I am staring neck-wrenchingly backward down a narrow hallway, and in the smoke-dimmed, beer-stinking distance, dragging his battered guitar toward me, lurches Roscoe Morgan. “No!” he shouts. “Stay away! It’s a goddamn lie.”

Misnaming

Confucius advised that if we hoped to repair what was wrong in the world, we had best start with the “rectification of the names.” The corruption of society begins with the failure to call things by their proper names. —Michael Pollan

For many years now, I have mulled the fact that most of the all-boys’ schools in the Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati, my employer for forty-five years until I abruptly ended our relationship in May of 2014, have taken as their team names singularly violent and martial monikers. The Jesuits are an ancient order of religious men, dedicated to the defense of the faith, and notably, are the order to which the new and radically justice-seeking, humble, and gentle Pope Francis belongs. The Jesuits are equally called to obedient and humble service of the Lord, and dedicated, one would think, to the Beatitudes, perhaps the most fundamental teachings of Jesus. And yet these holy men have erred in their naming. Three of the Beatitudes strike an especially pertinent note: “blessed are the meek”, “blessed are the merciful”, “blessed are the peacemakers.” Then why, (sorry—I can’t pass up the opportunity) why in the *name of God*, are the Jesuit-owned and administered St. Xavier high school teams called “The Bombers”? Is there any way to justify any kind of bomber—suicide bomber, saturation bomber, napalm bomber, revenge bomber, nuclear bomber, roadside bomber—with the ideas of meek, merciful, and peacemaking? (The latter word brings up the scalding irony of the missiles used in the Iraq war by the U.S: “Peacemakers.” Yes, indeed: peacemakers just as trigger-happy vigilantes armed with thigh-long Buntline Specials might be referred to as “peacemakers.”) Besides their devotion to Jesus, that peacemaker, Jesuits are known for their rigorous intellectual discipline. The Bombers? Really?

It’s no better with the Archbishop McNicholas High School teams. The problem here is that their namesake, John McNicholas himself, wrote in 1938: “Governments that have no fixed standards of morality, and consequently no moral sense, can scarcely settle the question of war on moral grounds for Christians ... who see and know the injustice of practically all wars in our modern pagan world. There is the very practical question for informed Christians who acknowledge the supreme dominion of God ... Will such Christians in our country form a mighty league of conscientious non-combatants?”

I guess not; even the school named after him calls their teams “the Rockets.” Lest you want to believe that the rockets referred to are simply 4th of July amusements, go to one of their football pep rallies.

Then there are the Archbishop Moeller Crusaders. A brief history lesson will remind us that their namesakes were involved in a series of holy wars against the Muslims, and their goal was to liberate, by any means necessary, the Holy Lands from what were generally written off as hordes of savage infidels. There was even a so-called Children’s Crusade in which thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of French and German youths rose up and marched toward Jerusalem. The number of these lads who returned home unscathed, physically or emotionally, may very well be roughly equivalent to the number of Moeller boys who have gone on to play college and pro football. Will they too eventually perish of their concussing Crusades?

Equally problematic are the LaSalle High School Lancers, another group of young Catholic men who profess love and peace, but officially, on the field or pitch or diamond or court, hark back to the violent times when rivalries were solved with long pointed horse-powered weapons designed to pierce armor and poke huge and fatal holes in the bodies of foes. What would Jesus (or Mary, or Joseph) say?

Likewise, though named for a man of such renowned erudition that he was given the title *Doctor Mirabilis*, Roger Bacon High School really fumbled the ball when they took the name The Spartans. Do mothers from that whole side of Cincinnati really want their male children to come home from the tennis court or soccer pitch or football field on their shields? Really: they could have been, every team, the Roger Bacon Wonders, or the RB Miracles, and they could have cast a deep spiritual soul-spell over their opponents with such a holy name. But the martial, violent allusion won over faith and reason. And what to do with the fact that after it went co-ed, Roger Bacon then had future Trojan mothers as part of their family?

Little better than these, my own former school’s teams are the Cavaliers, or, in a rather awkward historical adjustment since they became coed, sometimes the Lady Cavaliers. Cavaliers are mounted horsemen, etymologically related to the French *cavalier*, (cavayeh) the Spanish *caballero*, and ultimately to the Latin *caballerrius*, meaning a horseman, the gender unequivocally registered in the very grammar of Latin.

There hangs in the hall of Honor at Purcell Marian High school a large painting of a Cavalier, and he (this will always pose a problem, as long as the school says coed) he looks very much like what a Wikipedia article describes as a *man* with “long flowing hair in ringlets.” Years ago, at a graduation ceremony on the stage at Music Hall, a kid with hair exactly like that in the image, after receiving his diploma, and while ascending the risers to the topmost row of graduates, tossed his mortarboard aside, ripped off his wig, and let flood down over his shoulders and back his long curly cavalierly red hair. He had been suspended and received countless demerits for his tresses (thus the obscuring wig which the administration grudgingly allowed) during his years there, but now the final triumph was his. Here was a boy who took naming seriously, and also the school’s alumni association’s motto: “Once a cavalier, always a cavalier.” The trouble with names is that too often even those who assign them, in the desire to conform to contemporary standards of competitiveness and macho intimidation, have lost sight of the names’ origins.

Perhaps the worst example of all is this alternate, self-invented handle for the Purcell Marian Cavalier football teams: The Hackberry Assassins. Hackberry is the street in East Walnut Hills the school has stood on since 1928: mostly working-class, residential, generally quiet, though at times during the crack 80s the site of multiple gang murders. But kids and coaches walk around every fall with crimson t-shirts with “Hackberry Assassins” printed in gold across the front and back, thus advertising some utterly despicable behavior to the community at large. The slightest bit of etymological research (completely possible at the school, because I once wangled the purchase of the full 18-volume set of the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the school library, to which I referred generations of scholars for some fundamental foot- and wordwork) informs us that the word “assassin” is from the Arabic *hashisihin*, in English “hashish,” the psychotropic substance with which a gang called the Thugee (from which we get the modern English word “thug”) whipped themselves into frenzies before engaging their enemies. So these boys, and more recently, these girls, walk around advertising themselves as ferocious drug-addled murderers. Great. Would you consider purchasing for ten dollars a “Hackberry Assassins” t-shirt as, say, a Christmas gift for your baby sister, just to counteract the miracle of the Nativity, and so keep the world in balance? This self-

proclaiming as thugs the students in a school dedicated to the Virgin Mary, supported by The Sisters of Charity and the Marianist Brothers, whose founder was Joseph Chaminade, a French priest who dedicated his work to the welfare of the orphans of the Revolution—cognitive dissonance at its most extreme.

Is it too much to hope that all of these Catholic institutions reconsider not only the denotations but the connotations of their team names, bringing them into more rational alignment with their spiritual and social missions?

But then it comes back to my mind that each of these latter schools began as an all-male institution. Roger Bacon and Purcell Marian are now coed (only Purcell Marian retains the name of the girls' school it merged with. Roger Bacon completely overboarded Our Lady of Angels as part of its name). The naming of schools originally *for* boys, *full* of boys, *administered* and *staffed* by many former or (still unrecovered) boys.

Ah. Now I get it.