

## Food & Memory

Richard Hague

### 1: Aperitif

Many years ago—actually, thirty-two or thirty-three years ago, for the sake of accuracy—I was invited, much to my surprise, to a dinner and reception in one of those vast mansions on Grandin Road. I confess that I cannot recall the name of my host or hostess; nor do I remember talking to anyone who seemed to be any kind of inhabitant or employee of the place—owner, butler, dishwasher. The guests were all writers of some sort or another, I suppose, but I don't know how I came to be among them. I was a lean and hungry chap in those days, slowly overcoming a post-divorce decade of loneliness and general fear-of-life, at the end of a series of several consecutive and somewhat desperate summer rustications to Appalachian Ohio. There, living alone in a trailer two miles out a country road from the nearest town, a depopulated village of ninety-seven souls, I had tried to put grief, loss, and humiliation all behind me and to get into the rhythms of dawn and day and dusk and night and to work my body to a pleasant weariness in the woods.

But then here I was, suddenly back in civilization, married anew, restoring a near-century-old house in Madisonville, and The Great Man of the Moment was being wined and dined. I felt a little like Steinbeck's dog, along for the ride. The guest of honor was William Least Heat

Moon, whose now-classic *Blue Highways* had been recently released; he was in town on a reading tour, I think, and, I hope, to reconnect with Camp Washington Chili. The place had impressed him during the blue highways trip; the number of calendars from traveling salesmen, the better the chance the food was good. Camp Washington Chili fit the bill, and I trust he returned for a three-way and a cheese coney before heading off to his next promotional duty.

I must have had a conversation with him, I tell myself, though I recall being at the far end of the table, and not really knowing much about him at the time, nor about my fellow diners. In fact, I don't remember exchanging a single word face-to-face with the guest of honor. My recollection of the whole event is generally hazy and uncertain; in my dislocatedness had I drunk so much that I lost touch with what might have been the most witty and substantive dinner conversation I'd ever heard? Or, had the author been drunk himself, and thus so incoherent that it's not possible to piece back together the gist of his talking? Or, had the host or hostess suddenly turned out the lights and locked all us writers in, gassed us into unconsciousness, then whisked Least Heat Moon away in some silken Rolls-Royce, as if to show him, upon his coming-to, what real travel and what red highways were all about?

I don't know.

But before I apologize for this damnable lack of knowing, let me remind you that I'm in good company. My ignorance puts me in the same place as the very inventor of the general form of writing I'm engaging in right now, a writer Shakespeare possibly read, a writer even to this day unparalleled in his execution of the genre he was in the

process of developing. Michel de Montaigne, the first practitioner of what we now call the personal essay, asked himself, “What do I know?” This was not an epistemological question for the Frenchman; it was a practical entrance into the kind of personal writing he was embarking upon, the kind of writing a later scholar has said deals with “the basic archaeology of the self.”

Montaigne took as his mission what Philip Lopate, in his introduction of him in *The Art of the Personal Essay*, describes this way: “to put before the public a full verbal portrait of himself.” At the same time, Montaigne knew that his own fickleness, ignorance, forgetfulness, and digressions were the very stuff of the human condition. Thus what might appear at first as a monstrously large, probably boring, not to mention garishly egotistic writer’s project is subsumed into the larger thing he wants to put forth to us in that age of flourishing humanism: in writing about himself and in following his whims about his subjects, he is manifesting, in prose, the nature not only of Montaigne, but of humanity.

These are among the main driving forces of any essayist: to answer the dizzyingly circular questions, What do I think, and *why* do I think what I think about what I think about? Very similar to this drive is the work of the memoirist, another kind of essayist, though some purists would place memoir in a subcategory of autobiography. As I see it, the essayist-memoirist focuses not on the large and miscellaneous and inexhaustible abundance of life in general, but on the shape and meaning of either part of his own life and mind and psyche (the essayist-memoirist), or something approaching the whole or some unitary substantial segment of his own remembered life (the

memoirist). The questions of the essayist-memoirist are only slightly different from Montaigne's: What did I do and think then, and why did I do what I did and why did I think what I thought then? Who was I then? And sometimes even a further question is explored: How is that previous self connected to the present one, or, conversely, how and why did the divorce from that previous self and this one occur?

So in this first paper of mine, I adopt the stance of the essayist-memoirist. I intend to engage in the kind of writing Tony Covatta, one of my sponsors, called for more of on February 24<sup>th</sup> of this year, commenting on the dominance of fact in so many Literary Club papers, and wishing for more depth, more of the underlying meaning of those facts, both to the writer, and indirectly, to the reader. Of a good memoir, Mr. Covatta wrote, "It has a coherent point of view, an idea or a series of ideas, that gives us insight into the subject, and into the mind, heart and soul of the writer, and thus into ourselves." Richard Hunt, my primary sponsor, heeded the call not long afterwards in his probing paper on fathers and sons.

In the same spirit of personal writing, I intend to essay a subject or two that are linked in my memory and my imagination, and that have lodged there persistently enough that I feel I have to express, and insofar as it is possible, explicate them. At the same time, I know I will be revealing things about myself that may not reflect the better angels of my spirit. For any writer of the personal essay, or the memoir, such candour is often the way it goes. There is a kind of recklessness in such intensely personal writing, and a kind of danger. Nevertheless, I do it. Why do I remember the people and the events and the situations this essay-memoir explores? What do they mean? What do they reveal about me?

To repeat the master's question: "What do I know?"

## 2: Starters

For the first two decades of my current, clearly permanent marriage, my wife Pam and I tried to reinvent my Grandmother Hague's ham loaf. I remembered it as a salty-sweet concoction with a most lusciously pink interior, its glazy top drizzled with pineapple juice, the whole thing set out steamingly fragrant on a long white dish in the dining room of my grandparents' house at 118 Logan Street in Steubenville. Just three doors down ran the Pennsylvania Railroad, and then, just a few yards below that, the Ohio River. But this ham loaf was something entirely different than the fish we ate from the river, those oily-tasting mud- and channel cats; this delicacy remained memorable as a kind of holiday meal, even when served in the middle of the most gray empty week of February.

Not so surprisingly, Pam and I were never able to recapture the taste and appearance of that meal. We tried different grinds of left-over ham; we tried mixing in pineapple juice before the baking, we tried basting the loaf with it during and after baking; we tried different kinds of bread crumbs and various combinations of cloves, nutmeg, allspice. Nothing produced the taste I remembered, and I suspect that nothing ever will. Our senses are at their height in our childhoods—every new sight, smell, texture, taste is just that—original, arresting, unique. We are experiencing the world for the first time. The remembered taste of that

ham loaf, then, lives in a part of my brain that is no longer readily accessible; the callouses and fissures and dead-ends of time and alcohol and coffee and football and the stray concussion or two here and there have obscured or disordered the nerves where that memory is stored, and the experience of just *that* taste, from just *that* time in my life, is, short of some liberatingly awful trauma, or the scary mental jiu-jitsu of hypnosis, perhaps irrecoverable.

Thus the difficulty of memoir, whose relation to “memory” is etymologically obvious. We know from neurobiology at one end of the continuum and from the fallibility of so-called eyewitness testimony near the other end of the continuum, how untrustworthy memory can be. We know that memories can be repressed, altered, distorted, exaggerated; we know that disease and injury can scramble our ability to recollect; we know that sometimes the most believed and believable “memories” are absolute fiction. What we must therefore know is that for the writer from memory, the memoirist, things are not necessarily as they seem to be. It is a treacherous, error-haunted way we walk.

For example, in her essay-memoir “Memory and Imagination,” Guggenheim and Houghton Mifflin Fellowship winner Patricia Hampl begins with an unforgettable description of her childhood music teacher, a nun named Sister Olive Marie. “Her oily face gleamed as if it had just been rolled out of a can and laid on the white plate of her broad, spotless wimple. She was a small, plump woman; her body and the small window of her face seemed to interpret the entire alphabet of olive: her face was a sallow green olive placed upon the jumbo ripe olive of her black habit. I trusted her instantly and smiled, glad to have my hand

placed in the hand of a woman who made sense, who provided the satisfaction of being what she was: an Olive who looked like an olive.”

What a delight we experience in reading such a passage: how it retains its metaphorical unity, how its details are listening to one another, as in a good poem, how it sustains its serio-comic tone. This is a writer we can trust. As confidently and as readily as Hampl the girl must certainly have placed her hand in Sister Olive’s hand, we place our trust in such an authoritative presence. “Go on!” we enthuse, warming to her story. “What next?”

I am sorry to report that no further than two more pages, Hampl stops dead in her tracks. “Sister Olive Marie...but was her name Olive? As for her skin tone—I would have sworn it was olive-like; I would have been willing to spend the better part of an afternoon trying to write the exact description of imported Italian or Greek olive oil her face suggested: I wanted to get it right. But now, were I to write that passage over, it is her intense black eyebrows I would see, for suddenly they seem the central fact of that face, some indicative mark of her serious and patient nature. But the truth is, I don’t remember the woman at all. She’s a sneeze in the sun and a finger touching middle C.”

“Ah hell,” I hear myself, the essayist-memoirist, saying. “I know that experience. The writing takes hold of you, and shapes the memory; writing is always a shaping force. Pretty soon, you’ve got a metaphor that’s heating up for you, and you glide along with what you think are power and style and excitement, and then you shift into second gear, and the writing’s coming as smoothly as it ever comes, you’re on the roll of rolls, and then you shift into third, and the pages, like the miles

accomplished aboard some heavenly Silver Ghost sedan, add up. But then you go back to revise—to re-look, literally, to re-think, re-process, get the critic in gear, and you realize you were writing, oh yes, but were you getting the truth of the experience? You fact-check yourself, as Hampl does, and you find yourself coming up short. At that point, she says, the second draft begins, and it is an attempt, as she and the bumper sticker say, to CHALLENGE AUTHORITY. The problem is, the authority you have to challenge, that apparent know-it-all, that actual horse's mouth, is, of course, you, the memoirist,—the *author*, for God's sake—functioning as witness to, and expert on, the past. But: Is this witness really expert and reliable? Is this witness even in his right mind? Is this witness driven by unconscious biases or repressions or delusions of grandeur or fantasy-fulfillment or unresolved grudges? Is there an incipient tumor of fabrication and lies already sending its first tendrils into regions of his brain and into the sentences of his every paragraph? These questions must be asked of the writing self, and they must be answered—it seems impossible does it not?—*selflessly*, impersonally, with all the gravity of the most incisive judge and critic. It's as if you are the builder of the bridge, and at the same time the finicky sapper who blows the whole thing apart because of a few cracked bolts.

Enough. To mix my metaphors yet again, with this plate of appetizing (or, perhaps, appetite-dismissing) questions and complications so abruptly set forth for you to nibble on, my dear listeners, even before you can chew and swallow I now present my main course: Grilled Cheese, Tomato Soup, And A Tall, Blue-Eyed Blonde.

### 3: The Meal

It was forty years ago, because I was living alone at the time, my former roommate having dropped his teaching job and bolted to Boston in yet another re-enactment of the grand American drama of chucking it all and starting over. Huck had done it; Ishmael had done it, and now Brian Conly was doing it. Known to his college chums as Buffalo Bill (for his goateed resemblance to the famous Indian killer), and as Colonel Excess (for his lifestyle of memorably extravagant drunkenness, his reckless accelerator-punching of his push-button transmission Plymouth Fury, and his wild and sometimes delicious cooking adventures)—Brian once served us a stuffed veal pocket—who knew? Just a few weeks before, seated at our tiny breakfast table one groggy Thursday morning, clutching a half-empty bottle of Cutty Sark between his former Elder High School tight end's thighs, he'd announced that he was going to quit his job as soon as possible (teaching English at UC Raymond Walters, a local institution until recently bearing the name of a past Literarian, I believe), go to Boston, and find a rich Irish girl, to whom he would, again as quickly as possible, get married. Astonishingly, he succeeded in all of these—though the marriage didn't last, and the bride, and the fortune, as they are sometimes wont to do, drifted away.

So, after he'd absconded to Bean Town with little more than his underwear, socks, and his buggy VW successor to the Plymouth Fury, there I was, seated at the canary yellow table in the dining room I'd

shared with him, sharing it now with the wife of one of our former mutual college writing buddies and, more to the point, with her friend, with whom the goodwife was “fixing me up.” My buddy’s missus, herself a pretty, young, open-faced, full-bodied and quite genial woman, was studying art at Edgecliff College, where she had met the tall, blue-eyed blonde in one of her printmaking classes. After getting to know her, she thought we’d make a good pair. For a fleeting, wicked moment, I thought the wife and I might make a good pair, too, but the few irritating shreds of conscience left in me after my Jesuit education as well as an inherited-from-my-strict-Catholic-family-decorum prevailed. Besides, her husband was the only short story writer I knew who packed a gun.

I had invited these ladies of the brayer and brush to lunch; I also intended to show off my apartment, one of the best and least expensive bachelor pads I’d ever known. There were two bedrooms, a huge living room, a dining room with one wall so large I was able to hang from it a 7x9 foot rug of faux Native American design, in garish rusts, reds, and yellows. My lodgings also featured a reasonably functional kitchen, a commodious bathroom with a shower, and, best of all, a little sun porch overlooking the street—the apartment occupied almost the entire second floor of a huge half-timbered Tudor-style house, once the Town Hall, on a busy corner in Kennedy Heights. I wrote on the sun porch, which overlooked the street like the fo’c’sle of a ship, and I felt like the captain of some vast galleon, surveying at my leisure the busy decks below.

My cooking repertoire was nowhere near as knowledgeable or as adventurous as Brian’s had been. I would like to say that I made the

grilled cheese sandwiches which I served the ladies that afternoon with an artisanal French loaf baked in a wood-fired oven, but this was decades before the craft-baking revolution displaced Wonder Bread from peoples' shopping carts. I wasn't using Wonder Bread, assuredly, but it would have been something similarly industrial and schmaltzily-named—Green Lantern Miracle Wheat, say, or Grandpa Emerson's Transcendental Rye—bought at a factory outlet-type chain store off crowded shelves hastily replenished by stooping, underpaid, un-unionized operatives who wore their names embroidered on their shirts and who were forced to drive their huge, brightly painted trucks for hours all over town, standing up. This was how things generally were in the America of bread in the early 1970s.

I would also like to claim that the cheese was especially choice: a rare, sharp, eminently meltable English cheddar, maybe, or a good Gruyere, or at least a solid and respectable local Amish Swiss, bought from a bearded man in suspenders who had left his farm in Adams County at 4 a.m to deliver his handmade wares to an open-air stall at Findlay Market. I would like to say we'd exchanged pleasantries (though the Amish are definitely not into small talk) and that I had determined the provenance of the milk that went into his cheese ("A cow I raised by hand, mister, sired by the famous bull Ahab on my cousin Elmer Yoder's farm.") Or it would have been equally impressive if I had selected it from the cooler cases of a master cheesemonger, in a place like Krause's, it too until recently located at Findlay Market, and staffed by *fraus und frauleins* for whom German, and cheese-lore, you got the impression, was their first language. Besides a hundred types of cheese, Krause's

dealt in dozens of varieties of wursts, sausages, Landjaegers, spaetzle noodles, sauerkraut, as well as huge loaves of plutonically dark and dense pumpernickel, chunks of which could be sawn off and sold by the pound. Once again, though, I can make no such culinary claims. The cheese I had prepared the sandwiches from for those two gorgeous art-ladies had probably come from a pack of sticky Kraft Singles, and thus were no more closely related to real cheese than Kool Aid is to Bordeaux.

And I would most certainly desire (as a now seasoned gardener who has practiced growing things for decades since that afternoon repast) to further claim that the soup was home-made, crafted from half a dozen select San Marzanos organically grown by myself to the moment of utter ripeness, and then, that very morning, plucked, seeded, chopped, and cooked lightly down, skins and all, with some garlic (hand-grown in my garden) flat -leafed Italian parsley (ditto), and freshly chopped sweet basil (likewise), then strained, in order to remove the little morsels of skin which give the soup a piquant thrill of slight bitterness but also a deep tomato-ness, then whirred into a velvety emulsion with my immersible blender. At the end, a little further simmer, adjusting the taste with a pinch of sea salt, would have finished it off nicely. And just before serving, did I gild the lily with a spot of extra heavy-whipping cream, or, more daringly and erotically, with a splash of an especially sweet, fruity sherry? Not. In actuality, I had poured a condensed glob of wiggly tomato-colored stuff—probably the ten-cans-for-a-dollar brand from the local discount factory-food dispensary—and rushed it to boiling while pouring in slugs of tap-water and stirring with a splintery

wooden spoon. I sloshed it quickly into some scruffy stoneware mugs I'd washed that morning just for the occasion and plunked them down, steaming, before the ladies.

At that crucial moment of serving did I tremblingly recall the sexy eating scenes in movies like the one in the 1963 version of *Tom Jones*, in which Albert Finney as the title character and the lusty Joyce Redman as Jenny Jones/Mrs. Waters demolish, by hand, a greasy roast chicken, and other similarly slick and lip-smacking vittles, which chicken's juices (and theirs, and the viewer's eventually) run down their chins, and most appetizingly, down and into the bosom of Ms. Jenny as she ogles her slavering partner across a table full of food which, you know will not, cannot, support the combined entwined and grappling weight of them when their eating and ogling turns really nasty?

Or was I thinking about the scene in *When Harry Met Sally* in which the powder-pure, innocent-faced Meg Ryan, literally in the middle of Katz's delicatessen, sitting across from the supremely chauvinistic and clueless Billy Crystal, fakes a 72-second orgasm (again, in the interests of accuracy, I timed it on YouTube) and then, the last phony throes of passion dropping from her face, sticks a forkful of cole slaw in her cute little mouth?

Fortunately, my imagination had not, those years ago, been befouled by more recent and decidedly less erotic eating sequences, such as the ones in *Hannibal*, or even the recent documentary and dyspeptic downers like *Supersize Me* or *Food, Inc.*

Thank goodness, then, that my guests were not only artists and beauties and incipient *bon vivants*; they were, after all, college students,

and I myself was not that far from the cash-strapped and half-starved ardors of graduate school. Thus we ate so quickly, and with such hungry, animal gladness, that I cannot remember even chewing. But I did indeed feast my eyes upon the delicate (though a good inch or two taller than me) maiden across the table: her rampant mane of buttery-silvery curls; the soft, boullion-like transparency of her fair skin, seasoned very lightly across the bridge of her nose and just under her eyes with a sprinkle of pale golden freckles, like the flecks in half-churned buttermilk.

I suppose we talked of art and college life and the married missus's husband, a brilliant alcoholic with a fascination for Hemingway, Lucky Strikes, and Smith and Wessons. Many had been the Monday nights after meetings of Mermaid Tavern, the literary fraternity at Xavier University, which, like this Club, maintained an exclusively male membership, and claimed its own meeting place (a dim, heavily tiled and paneled Elizabethan rathskeller in a Cincinnati stolid brick house just off-campus in North Avondale, at the corner of Dakota and Redway)—many, I say, had been the nights that her husband and I and a few other poets, boy soldiers (ROTC was required of all freshmen and sophomores in those early Vietnam days), physics majors and other assorted undergraduate and graduate crazies had repaired to Uncle Woody's tiny subterranean former speak-easy on Reading Road, or to some nameless smoky joint in Norwood, to continue our literary rants and our drinking.

I don't remember much of what the blonde said during that lunch, but this gap is not the result of inattention. Rather I think I was already, in between bites of that utterly forgettable cheese sandwich, intensely

imagining the unimaginable—that this great beauty would wind up in my embrace, that I soon could, and would, stretch myself at full length upon her undulant self, and that, because of her height, there would be still more of her left to explore.

I must immediately report that it was no such electrical and Shelleyan consummation I would encounter. We did indeed begin dating after that lunch, and the relationship became physical, and I am sorry to say, difficult, and, in the end, unsuccessful. Like that mundane, pedestrian lunch placed against the possible lunch, the Platonically ideal imagined lunch I have already confessed to not achieving, she turned out to be less than, and to me, in undecipherable ways, more than, a mild-mannered dreamboat. For example, she wore almost as a uniform, tight, back-pocketless buttock-lifting jeans (nice), topped with her trademark tattered cotton plaid shirt, sleeves half-rolled up (not so nice, though showing the freckled skin of her arms.) The shirt's top two buttons remained unfastened, so that an expanse of snowy chest and a hint of collar bone flashed whenever she moved (nice, again). She smelled of cigarettes, marijuana, wine, and patchouli, although now and then, downwind of her, or my lips close and urgent at her throat, I caught a tantalizing breath of raw dark honey mixed with lilies of the valley and Southern Comfort. Every Spring, there would come over her an unsettling transformation; from the lassitude and moody grayness of winter, she would plunge into what I can only describe as a psychologically orgiastic state during which, for two weeks, she would remain drunk on Mad Dog wine, eat nothing but single slices of bologna, and grow giddy over Elton John's "Benny and The Jets." She was the only

girl (except for the pony-tailed hoydens I was attracted to as a child) who ever hit me. I hasten to add, though physical violence in a relationship can never be justified, I deserved it, but I remained thereafter wary of her stylish, heavy, literally *handy* wooden clogs. Without warning, she would suddenly embark on long camping trips with one or another of her boxy and boyish girlfriends to Nova Scotia, or Newfoundland, of all places, where they would snuggle together (she'd tell me this) in a tiny pup tent and where they would go fishing, shoot pool with fishermen, truck drivers, and dropped-out college professors, and get high. Her unannounced absences and emotional and relational inconsistencies so disoriented and distressed me that I actually grew somewhat jealous of her dog Billy, to whom she paid singular, constant, and devoted attention and of whom she had more photographs than she had of me.

Clearly, she was damaged goods, and clearly, so was I. Both of us had suffered relatively recent abortive marriages, and so we hobbled along a wrack-strewn shoreline like two injured castaways, needing one another while at the same time resenting each other for reminding ourselves of our pain and of the shortcomings and disappointments and empty promises of life.

I have not used her name here, nor her married friend's; it would be ungentlemanly of me—though I admit that I have said some things already that could be taken as more than merely ungentlemanly—patronizing, just plain mean and sexist, and I have said them, after all, at her expense. For this, I apologize, and have no defense—none

whatsoever. Nor will I attempt any counter to a reader's deepening impression at this point of my own boorishness, chauvinism, perhaps even misogyny. How stupid and futile would it be to claim here that some of my best friends, now and in the past, are women? Perhaps even worse, I cannot deny that I have, perhaps, slanted some of this, including my descriptions and characterizations of the people involved, in such a way as to create a livelier read, to hell with the actual facts, (whatever "facts" may be to a memoirist, adrift in a sea of uncertainty).

But to return to the truth, if I've ever left it, I can say that the maiden's first name was the name of a month, an especially dewy, green, moist, warming month, a month of sprouting, budding, growing. She herself loved flowers and plants, and had, just before we met, worked part time in a greenhouse. Once, in an unsettling inversion, I discovered her leaning over a fungus known as "stinkhorn," rising from the rotten mulch in her widowed mother's backyard flowerbed. It is a fungus aptly named for its odor; more unsettlingly, in shape and color it mimics a florid, uncircumcised, erect penis. She was in the midst of the act of jerking it out of the ground, bare-handed. This juxtaposition of the violent with the erotic, of the innocence and promise and even randiness of spring with the reminder of death that all mulch and all uprooting is, seems emblematic of my life at the time. I had ideas, beautiful and elegant ideas, but grosser and messier realities prevailed. As for the ideas, I did not yet have the ability to execute them, either in lunch or in love. And she, another waif of the universe, needed feeding, healing, nursing, nourishment. And though I made her lunch, and dinner, and hungover breakfasts, and though I made her happy

sometimes, and angry often, I could not muster the feeding she needed, nor could she pull herself away from her beautiful sorrow and her dramatic drunkenness, joining me in the kitchen, so to speak, where love might have transformed despair and sorrow. And at the end, truth be told, it was I who left her; despite my bad behavior and arrogance, she didn't instigate our break-up; I did, out of a mixture of cowardice, exhaustion, concern over her drinking, and most of all, I think, an immature resentment of her cussedly independent ways.

#### 4: Dessert

Remember that it's not always sweet, this last stage of a meal. The old saying "From soup to nuts" suggests that a meal may end with something other than pie or cake or cannoli or baklava or, God help us, deep-fried Twinkies. I remember dinner in Manchester College's dining hall at Oxford, where I studied on a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for a summer. After the requisite fish, peas, and potatoes in more forms than even the Irish might have imagined, the scouts, as the waiters are called in Oxford colleges, would set out not slabs or dollops or saucers of sweets, but great plates of sharp Cotswold cheese and dry crackers ("biscuits" to them, of course) and, actually, now and then, bowls of nuts.

So this memoir via meal: it does not end sweetly. As a matter of fact, the spirit of Patricia Hampl, the spirit who Questions Authority, has me once more double-thinking some of the things I've said above. Was the blonde artist-maiden deserving of even one bit of the laughter my

writing has evoked about her? Probably not. (And I have to say that after our relationship began, she was, one sudden day, no longer blonde. There had been reasons to suspect as much—but it was quite unsettling. How much else of what I thought I knew about her was subject to such swift transformation?) So: Was I really that attracted to her friend, the gun-slinging short-storier’s wife? Maybe not so much. And the actual lunch, the grilled cheese sandwiches and the tomato soup, as opposed to the idealized one I have imagined,—was the real lunch so bad? Again, probably not. After all, “Hunger is the best spice.”

But I have to confront the pitfalls any essayist-memoirist is prone to, and call myself to account. I may yet have to revise this, I may yet have to discard this bouncier, more ebullient possible narrative for what may turn out to be a much more stolid and prosaic version of the truth. The fiction writer in me, the poet in me, let alone the hyperbolic fabulist in me, resists this truth-telling, this diminishment of the story’s possibilities. But the very fact—(?)— that I confess all this presents us with the dilemma—all nonfiction writing is *a* version, not necessarily *the* version. One writer looks at the Battle of Little Big Horn and sees it from the American Cavalry’s point of view. It sees George Armstrong Custer as the victim of a massacre. Another writer sees it from a Lakota grandmother’s point of view, and tells what looks like the last installment of an utterly different, brutal, anti-heroic, even genocidal story. One writer examines the life and career of Margaret Thatcher, concluding that she was a stiff-spined exceptional leader who broached no nonsense, and another dissects the Iron Lady’s meanness and conservatism and sketchy friendship with Ronald Reagan and discovers

an inflexible tyrant. Rarely, if ever, do we get an objective view of that strange, elastic, ungraspable thing we call “the truth.” Thus the ongoing argument and occasional lawsuits over so-called nonfiction writing. And thus the struggles, alone at the desk with words and memory, of anyone crazy enough (or desperate enough) to attempt to accurately capture events in the past, or even worse, to report accurately some fleeting emotional episode obscured by the turbulent passage of decades.

Perhaps all this accounts for the scarcity of such deeply personal writing and self-revelation and self-examination in Literary Club papers. And perhaps this is for the best. Personal writing can run the gamut from exciting and incisive and thought-provoking to deadly dull and self-absorbed, like the chatter of a half-drunk cocktail guest who has never been told he’s a boor. Such writing is difficult, risky, fraught with the occasions of failure and of various literary and intellectual transgressions. How much more uncomplicated it is to stick to “facts” that live on the surface of the narrative. The ponderous depth of personal memory, its sometimes bottomless obscurities and transformations and downright gaps, is daunting. Nevertheless, Tony Covatta’s call remains, his invitation to probe deeper and more soulfully and more personally into the subjects of the papers we write and share.

#### 5: Digestiv

I meant, after all this, to write of food, one small instance, one tiny chapter in the greater volume of my eating and drinking. And I shall attempt to do so again; it is, as all good subjects are, larger on the inside than it seems from the outside. But things are not so neatly filed away in memory and imagination; they bleed into one another, they leach,

dribble, sweat, seep, they cross each other's boundaries, like the ingredients of one recipe gradually entering an unexpected other over the long history of cuisine—nutmeg into pasta sauce, bacon into ice cream. So the story of this meal—which is really the story of this girl-woman, and of this earlier, erratic, unripened man-boy version of myself, which is really a story of love and loss and limits and misdirections, of the ideal set against the real—has not really digressed. It has followed the scent of human beings meandering through the world, bumping into one another, entwining sometimes in a seethe of heat and passion, and then separating again, like strands of boiling pasta. Where we end up, we pasta strands, is where we'll all end up, after all. We are the eating and then we are the eaten. And unless we are the unfortunate husband of a series of deceased wives, we usually get but one try at the banquet. Well, maybe two, at the most perhaps three. How will we behave? And how can we ever know, given all the obscure ingredients, all the unexpected combinations of them, all the catastrophes and derangements of what we plan and cannot plan for, how can we ever know all the ever-re-written menus of life? How can we ever surely know for what courses and for what unpredictable, demanding presentations we must prepare?

What do I know? What can any of us know?