A PLEA FOR EROS

essays

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Yonder

1

MY FATHER ONCE ASKED ME IF I KNEW WHERE YONDER WAS. I said I thought *yonder* was another word for *there.* He smiled and said, "No, yonder is between here and there." This little story has stayed with me for years as an example of linguistic magic: It identified a new space—a middle region that was neither here nor there—a place that simply didn't exist for me until it was given a name. During my father's brief explanation of the meaning of *yonder,* and every time I've thought of it since, a landscape appears in my mind: I am standing at the crest of a small hill looking down into an open valley where there is a single tree, and beyond it lies the horizon defined by a series of low mountains or hills. This dull but serviceable image returns when I think of *yonder,* one of those wonderful words I later discovered linguists call "shifters"—words distinct from others because they are animated by the speaker and move accordingly. In linguistic terms this means that you can never really find yourself *yonder.* Once you arrive at yonder tree, it becomes *here* and recedes forever into that imaginary horizon. Words that wobble attract me. The fact that *here* and *there* slide and slip depending on where I am is some-

how poignant, revealing both the tenuous relation between words and things and the miraculous flexibility of language.

The truth is that what fascinates me is not so much being in a place as *not* being there: how places live in the mind once you have left them, how they are imagined before you arrive, or how they are seemingly called out of nothing to illustrate a thought or story like my tree down yonder. These mental spaces map our inner lives more fully than any "real" map, delineating the borders of here and there that also shape what we see in the present. My private geography, like most people's, excludes huge portions of the world. I have my own version of the famous Saul Steinberg map of the United States that shows a towering Manhattan; a shrunken, nearly invisible Midwest, South, and West; and ends in a more prominent California featuring Los Angeles. There have been only three important places in my life: Northfield, Minnesota, where I was born and grew up with my parents and three younger sisters; Norway, birthplace of my mother and my father's grandparents; and New York City, where I have now lived for the past seventeen years.

When I was a child, the map consisted of two regions only: Minnesota and Norway, my here and my there. And although each remained distinct from the other—Norway was far away across the ocean and Minnesota was immediate, visible, and articulated into the thousands of subdivisions that make up everyday geography—the two places intermingled in language. I spoke Norwegian before I spoke English. Literally my mother's tongue, Norwegian remains for me a language of childhood, of affection, of food, and of songs. I often feel its rhythms beneath my English thoughts and prose, and sometimes its vocabulary invades both. I spoke Norwegian first because my maternal grandmother came to stay in Northfield

before I had my first birthday and lived with us for nine months; but after she returned home, I began learning English and forgot Norwegian. It came back to me when I traveled with my mother and sister to Norway in 1959. During those months in Norway, when I was four years old and my sister Liv was only two and a half, we forgot English. When we found ourselves back in Minnesota, we remembered English and promptly forgot Norwegian again. Although the language went dormant for us, it lived on in our house. My parents often spoke Norwegian to each other, and there were words Liv and I and Astrid and Ingrid used habitually and supposed were English words but were not. For example, the Norwegian words for *bib, sausage, peeing,* and *butt* all submerged their English equivalents. Liv and I remember using these words with friends and how surprised we were to see their befuddled faces. The paraphernalia of infancy, of food, and inevitably the language of the toilet were so connected to our mother that they existed only in Norwegian. When I was twelve, my father, a professor of Norwegian language and literature, took a sabbatical year in Bergen, and Norwegian came back to me in a kind of flash. After that, it stuck. The speed with which we four sisters transferred our lives into Norwegian is nothing short of remarkable. During that year we played, thought, and dreamed in Norwegian.

I returned to Norway in 1972 and attended gymnasium in Bergen for a year. That time my family was not with me. I lived with my aunt and uncle outside the city and took the bus to school. Sometime during the initial weeks of my stay, I had a dream. I cannot remember its content, but the dream took place in Norwegian with English subtitles. I will always think of that dream as limbo. Its cinematic code expressed precisely my place between two cultures and two languages. But soon

the metaphorical subtitles of my life disappeared, and I immersed myself in the dream's "original" language. It has now been twenty-three years since I really *lived* in Norwegian. It surprises even me that less than three of my forty years were actually spent in Norway and that nearly every minute of that time was lived in Bergen. I speak Norwegian with such a broad Bergen dialect that my parents find it comical. That dialect is the real legacy of my years in Bergen, the imprint of an experience that will not leave me. Chances are even senility won't rob me of it, since the old and feebleminded often return to the language of early childhood. And yet Norwegian survives in me not only as a sign of Bergen but as a sign of my parents' house in Minnesota. It is not for nothing, after all, that when my stepson, Daniel, was a very little boy and he looked forward to going home to Minnesota with me and his father for Christmas, he would ask, "When are we going to Norway?"

If language is the most profound feature of any place, and I think it is, then perhaps my childhood history of forgetting and remembering enacts in miniature the dialectic of all immigrant experience: *here* and *there* are in a relation of constant strain that is chiefly determined by memory. My father, who is a third-generation Norwegian, speaks English with a Norwegian accent, testament to an American childhood that was lived largely in Norwegian. Although separated by an ocean, my mother and father grew up speaking the same language.

My mother was thirty years old when she came to the United States to live for good. She is now an American citizen and claims she is glad of this every time she votes. My mother's threat to take the first plane back to Norway if Goldwater was elected remains strong in my memory, however. Norway was always there, and it was always calling. A Ful-

bright scholarship brought my father to the University of Oslo, where he met my mother. The details of how the two met are unknown to me. What is mythologized in some families was private in ours. My mother's sister once used the English expression "love at first sight" to describe that encounter, but I have never felt any reason to poke my nose into what is clearly their business. Oslo may not be Paris, but it's a lot bigger than Northfield and a lot less provincial, and when my mother traveled from one place to the other to marry my father, whose family she had never laid eyes on, she must have imagined the place that lay ahead. She must have seen in her mind a world my father had described at least in part to her, but whether that world tallied with what she actually found is another question altogether. What is certain is that she left a world behind her. As a child she lived in Mandal, the most southern city in Norway, and those years were by every account (not only my mother's) idyllic. Her memories from the first ten years of her life, with her parents, two brothers, and a sister in a beautiful house above the city where her father was postmaster, are ones of such aching happiness that she says she sometimes kept her memories from me and my three sisters in fear that we might feel deprived in comparison. When she was ten years old, her father lost his money and his land. He had undersigned a business deal for a relative that went sour. Although he might have saved himself from ruin, my grandfather kept his word of honor and paid on that debt, which wasn't really his, for the rest of his life. I think this event forms the greatest divide in my mother's life. Suddenly and irrevocably, it cut her off from the home she loved and threw her into another as surely as if the earth had opened up and formed an impassable chasm between the two. The family moved to Askim, outside of Oslo, and this is why my

mother's voice carries traces of both a southern accent and an eastern one: the mingled sounds from either side of the chasm. I have never doubted the happiness of my mother's first ten years, in Mandal. She had parents who loved her, rocks and mountains and ocean just beyond her doorstep. There were maids to lighten housework, siblings and family close by, and Christmases celebrated hard and long at home and in the house of tante Andora and onkel Andreas, people I have imagined repeatedly but seen only in photographs taken when they were too young to have been the aunt and uncle my mother knew. But it seems to me that losing paradise makes it all the more radiant, not only for my mother but, strangely enough, for me. It is an odd but emotionally resonant coincidence that every time I have been in Mandal, it doesn't rain. Rain is the torment of all Norwegians, who seek the sun with a fervor that might look a little desperate to, say, a person from California. It rains a lot in Norway. But when my mother took us there in 1959, it was a summer of legendary sunshine, and when I was last in Mandal, for a family reunion in 1991 with my mother and sisters and my own daughter, the sun shone for days on end, and the city gleamed in the clear, perfect light of heaven.

I never knew my grandfather. He died when my mother was nineteen. There are photographs of him, one in which he stands facing a white horse with three young children on its back. He is wearing a straw hat that shades his eyes, and between his lips is a cigarette. What is most striking in the picture is his posture, proud and erect, but with another quality that is almost but not quite jaunty. It is somehow obvious that he didn't strike a pose. He had intelligent features—his eyes especially give the impression of thought. My grandmother said he read (almost to the exclusion of anything else) church

history and Kierkegaard. She adored him and never married again. I'm sure it never entered her mind to do so. When I think of my mother's mother, I think of her voice, her gestures, and her touch. They were all soft, all refined; and, at the same time, she was freely and passionately affectionate. For some reason, I remember with tremendous clarity walking through her door, when I was twelve, with my sisters and my mother and father. It was winter and my mother had knit me a new white hat and scarf to go with my brown coat. When my grandmother greeted me, she put her hands on either side of my face and said, "You're so beautiful in white, my darling."

The last time I lived in Norway, I visited my grandmother every day after school. She lived in a tiny apartment that rose above a small, old graveyard in the city. She was always happy to see me. I'm afraid I was a morbidly serious adolescent that year, a girl who read Faulkner and Baldwin, Keats and Marx with equal reverence, and I must have been somewhat humorless company. But there was no one I liked being with more than her, and this may have made me livelier. We drank coffee. We talked. She loved Charles Dickens, whom she read in Norwegian. Years after she was dead, I wrote a dissertation on Dickens, and though my study of the great man would no doubt have alarmed her, I had a funny feeling that by taking on the English novelist I was returning to my Norwegian roots.

My *mormor* (in Norwegian maternal and paternal lines are distinguished: *mormor* literally means "mother-mother") is at the center of my real experiences of Norway, Norway as particular and daily, as one home. She was a *lady* in the old sense of the word, the word that corresponds to *gentleman*—a person who never shed her nineteenth-century heritage of gentility. I was deep in my self-righteous socialist phase, and I'll

never forget her saying to me in her soft voice, "You must be the first person in the family to march in a May Day parade." She wore a hat and gloves every time she went out, dusted her impeccable apartment daily, including each and every picture frame that hung on the wall, and was shocked when her cleaning lady used the familiar form *du* when she spoke to her. I can recall her small apartment well: the elegant blue sofa, the pictures on the wall, the shining table, the birdcage that held her parakeet, Bitte Liten, a name I would translate as "the tiny one." And I remember every object with fierce affection. Had I not loved my grandmother, and had she not loved my mother very well and loved me, those things would just be things. After Mormor died, I walked with my own mother outside our house in Minnesota, and she said to me that the strangest part of her mother's death was that a person who had only wanted the best for her wasn't there anymore. I recall exactly where the two of us were standing in the yard when she said it. I remember the summer weather, the slight browning of the grass from the heat, the woods at our left. It's as if I inscribed her words into that particular landscape, and the funny thing is that they are still written there for me. Not long after that conversation, I dreamed that my grandmother was alive and spoke to me. I don't remember what she said in the dream, but it was one of those dreams in which you are conscious that the person is dead but is suddenly alive and with you again. Although all other architectural detail is lost, I know I was sitting in a room and my grandmother walked through a door toward me. It was a threshold dream, a spatial reversal of my memory of walking through her door and her telling me I was beautiful in white. I remember how intensely happy I was to see her.

My daughter, Sophie, has always called my mother "Mor-

mor," and no name could be more evocative of the maternal line. *Mother-mother* is for me an incantation of pregnancy and birth itself, of one person coming from another, and then its repetition in time. When I was pregnant with Sophie, I felt it was the only time I had been physically plural—two in one. But of course it had happened before, when I was the one inside that first place. Uterine space is mysterious. We can't remember its liquid reality, but we know now that the fetus hears voices. After the violence of birth (all the classes, breathing, and birth-cult nonsense in the world do not make the event nonviolent), the newborn's recognition of his or her mother's voice forms a bridge across that first, brutal separation.

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By its very nature, original space, maternal space, is nonsense; human experience there is undifferentiated and so can't be put into words. It lives on in our bodies, however, when we curl up to sleep, when we eat, when some of us bathe or swim. And surely it leaves its traces in our physical desire for another. Paternal space in an ideal sense is different. Although we are "of" our fathers, just as we are "of" our mothers, we were never "in" our fathers. Their separateness is obvious. In the real lives of real people, this distance may be exaggerated or diminished. A lot of children of my generation grew up with more or less absent fathers. I didn't. My father was very much *there* in my life and in the lives of my sisters, and like my mother, he was fundamentally shaped by the place where he grew up.

He was born in a log house in 1922, not far from Cannon

Falls, Minnesota. That house burned and the family moved close by, to the house where my grandparents lived throughout my childhood. That house never had plumbing, but there was a pump in the front yard. My sisters and I loved that rusty pump. I remember being so small I had to reach for the handle and then, using both hands and all my weight, I would pull down several times and wait for the gush of water. My father remembers a world of barn raisings, quilting bees, traveling peddlers, square dances, and sleighs pulled by horses. He attended a one-room schoolhouse, all grades together, and he was confirmed in Norwegian at Urland Church—a white wooden church with a steeple that stands at the top of a hill. For me, that church is a sign of proximity. When we reached the church in the family car, it meant we could spot my grandparents' house. The church was the last landmark in a series of landmarks, to which my sisters and I gave such inventive names as "the big hill." Every landmark was accompanied by an equally inventive song: "We are going down the big hill. We are going down the big hill." My parents were subjected to this for years. The trip was about seventeen miles and took about half an hour on the small roads. My sisters and I, like most children, were creatures of repetition and ritual. Places revisited were given a sacred and enchanted quality. I use those words carefully, because there was something liturgical about going over the same ground so many times. The products of both Lutheran Sunday school and fairy tales, we infused the places where we grew up with what we knew best.

Despite the fact that my parents shared a language, the worlds in which each of them grew up were very different. The Norwegian American immigrant communities formed in the Midwest in the nineteenth century and the country left behind were separated not only by miles but by culture. Those

"little Norways" developed very differently from the motherland, even linguistically. The dialects people brought with them took another course on the prairie. English words with no Norwegian equivalents were brought into spoken Norwegian and given gender. Norwegians who visited relations who had lived in America for several generations were surprised by their antiquated diction and grammar. The legacy of homesteading, of primitive life on the prairie, along with the real distance from the country of origin, kept the nineteenth century alive longer in America than in many parts of Norway.

My grandparents' small farm, reduced to twenty acres in my lifetime, was our playground, but even as a child I sensed the weight of the past, not only on that property, which was no longer farmed, but in the community as a whole. I lived to see it vanish. The old people are dead. Many of the little farms have been sold and bought up by agribusinesses, and when you walk into a store or visit a neighbor, people don't speak Norwegian anymore. When my grandmother died, at ninety-eight, my father spoke at her funeral. He called her "the last pioneer." My father shuns all forms of cliché and false sentiment. He meant it. She was among the very last of the people who remembered life on the prairie. My paternal grandmother, a feisty, outspoken, not entirely rational woman, especially when it came to politics, banks, and social issues, could tell a good story. She had a swift and lean approach to narrative that nevertheless included the apt, particular detail. I often wish now I had recorded these stories on tape. When she was six years old, Matilda Underdahl lost her mother. The story, which became myth in our family, is this: When the local pastor told Tilly her mother's death was "God's will," she stamped her foot and screamed, "No, it's not!" My grandmother retained a suspicion of religious pieties all her life.

She remembered the polio epidemic that killed many people she knew, and in a brief but vivid story, she made it real for me. She was sitting with her father at a window, watching two coffins being carried out of a neighboring house—one large and one small. As they watched, her father spoke to her in a low voice. "We must pray," he said, "and eat onions." She remembered a total eclipse of the sun, and she said she was told that the world was going to end. They dressed themselves in their Sunday clothes, sat down in the house, folded their hands, and waited. She remembered being told about the *nokken* in the well, a water monster that pulled little children down to the depths where it lived and probably ate them. Clearly meant to scare children from getting too close to the well and drowning, the story lured little Matilda straight to it. And there she tempted fate. She laid her head on the well's edge and let her long red curls dangle far down inside as she waited in stubborn, silent horror for the *nokken* to come.

But there is another small story I heard only once that has lasted in my mind. When she was a child, she lived near a lake in Minnesota in Otter Tail County; and during the winter, when that lake froze, she and the other children would take their sleds onto the lake and fit them out with sails. I can't remember what they used for sails, but when the wind was up, the sails would fill with air and propel the sleds across the ice, sometimes at great speed. When she told me this, her voice communicated her pleasure in this memory, and I saw those sleds from a distance, three or four on the wide expanse of a frozen lake gliding noiselessly across it. That is how I still imagine it. I don't see or hear the children. What she remembered is undoubtedly something so radically different from the image I gave to her memory that the two may be incompatible.

My great-grandfather on my mother's side was a sea captain. There is a painting of his ship that my uncle has now. She was called *Mars*. It may be that I have linked that painting of a great sailing ship on the ocean with the tiny ships on the ice in landlocked Minnesota, but I'm not sure. Tilly's family came from Underdahl in the Sogne Fjord. She never went there, but I saw Underdahl with my parents and sisters as we traveled by boat down the fjord where the mountainsides are so steep that farmers have traditionally used ladders to descend into the towns below. Underdahl has a tiny church. From the boat, the white structure looked almost doll-like, and the name for me has come to mean not only my grandmother but that miniature building.

The Depression hit my paternal grandparents hard. They weren't alone, of course, but my father's life was and is shaped by that hardship—of this I am certain. He has many stories about the people he grew up with, but his inner life and the pictures he carries with him, in particular the most painful ones, are hidden to me. I know that my father began working on other farms when he was ten years old. I know that my grandmother made and sold *lefse*, a flat potato cake, to bring in money. I know that there was a twelve-hundred-dollar debt on the farm that couldn't be paid once the Depression hit. Forty acres of the sixty-acre farm were lost. I know that after the United States entered the war my grandfather, like so many others, found work in a local defense plant. He was transferred to a town in Washington State and had to leave the family. He worked building the plant where the atomic bomb would later be manufactured. But he didn't know this until years later. Many people in that community worked themselves sick and silly, and their labor didn't prevent catastrophes of weather or economy, and people died of them—

physically and spiritually. It has become a truism to say that there was much that was unforgiving and brutal about that life, but it is nevertheless a fact, and by the time I saw the world where my father had lived as a child, a kind of stasis had set in. I remember how still my grandparents' farm was. The enormous sky and the flat fields and the absence of traffic on the road that ran past that place were only part of it. There was an inner stillness, too.

High in the mountains above the town of Voss, in western Norway, lies the farm that gave me my name: Hustveit. At some point, the *tveit* became *tvedt*, a different spelling for the same word, which means an opening or a clearing. I have been there. The place is now owned and cared for by the Norwegian government. You have to climb a mountain to reach Hustveit, and a landscape more different from the Minnesota prairie could hardly be imagined. I wondered what my great-grandfather saw when he imagined "Amerika." Could he have seen in his mind a landscape as open and flat as what he actually came to? Immigration inevitably involves error and revision. What I imagined it would be, it's not. For better or worse, some mistake is unavoidable.

My sisters and I loved to listen to a simple story about an immigrant's mistake in our own family. My grandfather's first cousin, whom my sisters and I called Uncle David, left Hustveit when he was twenty-two years old to make his way in America alone. He arrived at Ellis Island in August 1902. He spent his first day in New York City and was flabbergasted by the chaos, color, and crowds. Somewhere in the city, he saw a man selling apples, the most gorgeous, red, perfect apples he had ever seen. He had almost no money, but he lusted after one of those apples, and, overcome by desire, he splurged and bought one. The story goes that he lifted the ap-

ple to his mouth, bit into it, and spat it out in disgust. It was a tomato. Uncle David had never seen or heard of a tomato. My sisters and I roared with laughter at this story. It encapsulates so neatly the lesson of expectation and reality that it could serve as a parable. The fact that tomatoes are good is beside the point. If you think you're getting an apple, a tomato will revolt you. That New York should be nicknamed the Big Apple, that an apple is the fruit of humankind's first error and the expulsion from paradise, that America and paradise have been linked and confused ever since Europeans first hit its shores, makes the story reverberate as myth.

On the other hand, if not violently overthrown, expectation can have a power in itself, can invest a place with what literally isn't there. When I saw Hustveit, I felt the same reverence I felt the last time I was in Mandal. They are both beautiful places, it is true, the stuff of postcards and nineteenth-century landscape painting, but no doubt I would have felt reverent in less lovely places, because I imagined a past I connected to myself. Walking beside my mother up toward the house where she lived with her parents and siblings, I imagined what she must have felt walking over that ground where she walked as a child, remembering people now dead, especially her father and her mother, and that empathy provoked in me deep feeling. My father never lived at Hustveit, nor did his father, but it was a strong presence in both their lives. In 1961, out of the blue, my grandfather Lars Hustvedt inherited 5,850 crowns, about 850 dollars, from a Norwegian relative, Anna Hustveit. He used the money to travel to Norway for the first and last time, visiting Voss and Hustveit during the trip. He was seventy-four years old. My grandfather's sojourn in Norway was a great success. According to my father, he impressed his relatives with his intimate knowledge of Hustveit.

He knew exactly where every building on the property lay and what it looked like from his father, who had described his birthplace in detail to his son. Hustveit was and is a real place, but it is also a sign of origin. I don't doubt that there were times when that sign alone, carried from one generation to another in a name, accompanied by a mental image, anchored the people who had left it and anchored their children and grandchildren as well in another place, crushed by the vicissitudes of nature and politics.

My grandfather remembered what he had never seen. He remembered it through someone else. It is no doubt a tribute to his character and to his father's that the image handed down from one to the other seems to have been remarkably accurate. Every story is given some kind of mental ground. The expression "I see" in English for "I understand" is hardly haphazard. We are always providing pictures for what we hear. My mother and father both lived through World War II, my mother in occupied Norway and my father as a soldier in New Guinea, the Philippines, and finally Japan during the occupation. They were both inside that immense historical cataclysm. Each has a story of how it began, and I like both of them, because they are oddly parallel. In the middle of the first semester of his freshman year at St. Olaf College (the college where he would later become a professor and where three of his four daughters would be students), he was sitting at a table covered with index cards, on which he had tirelessly recorded the needed information for a term paper he was struggling to write, when his draft notice arrived in the mail. My father told me his first response was: "Great! Now I don't have to finish this damned paper." Reading his draft notice, my father didn't look mortality in the face. That would come later. My mother told me that the morning after the Nazi in-

vasion of Norway, April 9, 1940, my grandmother woke up her children by saying, "Get up. It's war." Rather than fear, my mother felt only intense excitement. I have given both of these stories settings in my mind. When I think of my father and his index cards, I see him in a college house where a friend of mine lived when I was a student. It's a false setting. My father didn't live there. I needed a place and I plopped him down in that house unconsciously. I never saw where my mother lived during the war either, but I see my grandmother waking her children in rooms I've cooked up to fill the emptiness. I see morning light through the windows and a white bed where my mother opens her eyes to discover that the German army is on Norwegian soil.

Both of my mother's brothers were in the Norwegian Underground, and I have given their stories settings, too. Neither one of them ever said a word about their involvement, but my mother told me that one day she saw her brother Sverre talking to the schoolteacher in town and she knew. I see my uncle near a brick building speaking to a short, balding man. My mother never provided these details. They're my own, and I'm sure they're wrong, but the image persists. I have never changed or embellished it in any way. Later in the war, my uncle Sverre got word that the Nazis had been informed of his Underground involvement, and he skied to Sweden to escape. He spent the remaining years of the war there. My mother and her sister took him into the woods and waved good-bye. Again, not a word about where he was going was ever spoken. I see the three of them in the snow among bare trees, a few brown stalks protruding from the snow. My uncle has a backpack and he skis off, propelling himself forward briskly with his poles. Often the origins of such images are untraceable, but sometimes the associative logic at work announces itself

after a moment's thought. The chances that the building near which my mother's brother stood was brick are unlikely. The red brick in my mind is conjured from the word *schoolteacher*. All my schools were brick.

And sometimes a detail provided by the teller grows in the mind of the listener, as is the case with potatoes in a story my mother told me. She was jailed by the Germans in Norway for nine days in February after the April invasion. She and a number of other students had protested the occupation in December. Nazi officers came to her school and arrested her. Rather than pay a fine, she chose jail. As my mother has often said, had it been later, the protesters would have been sent to Germany and would probably never have returned; but as she also always adds, had it been later, nobody would have dared protest openly. When I was a child, the idea of my dear, pretty mother in jail filled me with both indignation and pride. My sisters and I were the only children we knew of in Northfield who could boast of having a mother who had been in "jail." She was in a tiny cell with a single high-barred window, a cot, and a pail for urine and feces—just like in the movies. The food was bad. She told me the potatoes were green through and through. Those potatoes loom in my mind as the signifier of that jail. When I imagine it, everything is in black-and-white like a photograph, except the potatoes, which glow green in the dim light. After only nine days, she left jail with a bloated stomach.

My father has talked very little about the war. He once said to me that he kept himself sane by telling himself over and over that the whole thing was insane. One story he told me left a deep impression. While he was a soldier in the Philippines, he became ill, so ill that he was finally moved to a col-

lecting station. His memory of those days is vague, because his fever was high and he passed in and out of consciousness. At the station, however, he woke up and noticed a tag on his chest that said YELLOW FEVER. He had been misdiagnosed. I have always imagined this memory of my father's as if I were my father. I open my eyes and try to orient myself. I am lying on a cot in a makeshift hospital outside, along with other maimed and sick soldiers on stretchers. The tag is yellow. This transfer of the name of the illness onto the tag is, I'm sure, ludicrous, but my brain is obviously in the business of bald simplification, and that's how I see it. This scene takes place in color. I have certainly borrowed its details from war movies and from what I have seen of Asia, not where my father found himself but farther north, in Thailand and China.

Why I imagine myself inside my father's body in this story and not inside my mother's body when she was jailed is not, I think, accidental. It corresponds to the distinct levels of consciousness in each story—that is, in order to understand what happened to my mother, it is enough to move myself into that jail and see her there. In order to understand what happened to my father, I must imagine waking in a fever and making out the letters that spell imminent death. I rechecked this story with my father, and he says there was no yellow fever in the Philippines then and he really doesn't know who made the diagnosis. In reality, he, not the tag, was yellow. He suffered from severe jaundice, a result of having both malaria and hepatitis. Because my father has never shared the other stories, the horrors of combat itself, this experience became for me the quintessential moment of war, a tale of looking at one's own death. It can be argued that accuracy isn't always crucial to understanding. I have never been in jail and I have never

been a soldier, but I imagined these events and places to the extent that it is possible for me, and that imagining has brought me closer to my parents.

After the war, my father finished St. Olaf College on the GI Bill, with a lot of other vets who are now legend in the history of the school. A college started by Norwegian immigrants and affiliated with the American Lutheran Church, St. Olaf attracts the mostly well-behaved offspring of white middle-class midwesterners, many of them with Norwegian roots. It is not a wild place. Dancing was forbidden until the 1950s. I went to college there, had some wonderful teachers, but the students were by and large a sleepy, complacent lot, more conservative than their professors and easily "managed" by them. My father and his veteran cohorts were not. He tells a story about a man I knew as somebody's highly respectable "dad" literally swinging from the rafters in one of the dormitories. I see him flying above a crowd of heads with a bottle of whiskey. The bottle, however, may well be my embellishment. Four years at war had turned them into men, as the saying goes, and they took the place by storm, not only with their poker games and Tarzan antics but with their intellectual hunger. All this is true, and yet it has taken on the quality of fiction. I read the stories I've been told in my own way and make a narrative of them. Narrative is a chain of links, and I link furiously, merrily hurdling over holes, gaps, and secrets. Nevertheless, I try to remind myself that the holes are there. They are always there, not only in the lives of others but in my own life as well.

The stories and pictures I make for the lives of the people closest to me are the forms of my empathy. My father took the place he knew best and transfigured it, but he has never left it behind. He received his Ph.D. in Scandinavian studies from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. His dissertation,

which became a book and was awarded the McKnight Prize for literature, is a biography of Rasmus Bjorn Andersen—an influential figure in the Norwegian American immigrant community. The book is not only the biography of a man but the story of a time and place. My father has used his gifts to understand and preserve "home," not in the narrow sense of that single house with those particular people but in its larger sense of subculture. I think it is fair to argue that his "place"—the world of his childhood, the world I glimpsed in the old people I knew as a child—is now paper. My father has been the secretary of the Norwegian American Historical Association for over thirty years. The association publishes books about immigrant history, but it is also an archive. Over the years, my father has devoted countless hours to organizing what was once unsorted mountains of paper in innumerable boxes and is now an annotated archive of letters, newspapers, diaries, journals, and more. These are facts. What is more interesting is his will to do it, his tireless commitment to the work of piecing together a past. Simple nationalism or chauvinism for a "people" is beside the point. The archive provides information on fools as well as on heroes; it documents both hardy pioneers and those who died or went mad from homesickness. There is a story of a farmer who thought the flatness of the Minnesota land would kill him if he looked at it any longer; unearthing rock after rock, he built his own mountain in memory of the home he had left. My mother felt a natural sympathy for this man, and when a huge rock was dug out of her own yard in Minnesota, she kept it. It's still there—her "Norwegian mountain." When I worked with my father on the annotated bibliography of that archive, I began to understand that his life's work has been the recovery of a place through the cataloging of its particularity—a job that resembles, at

least in spirit, the Encyclopedists of the eighteenth century. By its very nature, the catalog dignifies every entry, be it a political tract, a letter, or a cake recipe. Though not necessarily equal in importance, each is part of the story, and there's a democracy to the telling, I think, too, although my father has never told me this, that his work has been for his own father, an act of love through the recovery of place and story.

I remember my grandfather as soft-spoken and, as with my grandmother on my mother's side, I remember his touch. It struck me, even as a child, as unusually tender. There was no brusqueness in him, and I remember that when I showed him my drawings his sober, quiet face would come alive. He chewed tobacco, and he offered us ribbon candy as a special treat. He lost four fingers to an axe chopping wood, and I recall that the stubs on his hand fascinated but didn't scare me. When I think of him, I remember him in a particular chair in the small living room of his house. He died of a stroke the year I was in Norway: 1973. I was too far away to attend the funeral. We were not a long-distance-telephone family. They wrote me the news. I spoke to my parents once that year on the phone.

3

My first real memory takes place in a bathroom. I remember the tile floor, which is pale, but I can't give it a color. I am walking through the door toward my mother, who is in the bath. I can see the bubbles. I know it's a real memory and not a false one taken from photographs or stories because there are no pictures of that bathroom and because the proportions