MATRIMONY

Ritual, Culture, and the Heart's Work

Stephen Jenkinson

Author of *Die Wise*

Foreword by Kimberly Ann Johnson

Praise for Matrimony

"*Matrimony* is a triumph, analyzing and reconstructing marriage through the ages. This illuminating work challenges the paucity of the modern wedding ritual and offers inspiring, practical pathways for deeper, more meaningful rituals. It's a bold, clear-eyed view of what the marriage ritual could be, if we are courageous enough to tune in to the ancestors and to follow our truth."

Manchán Magan
documentarian and author of *Thirty-Two Words for Field*

"With *Matrimony*, Stephen Jenkinson trails a troubled beast. A beast many regard as simply AWOL, rarely glimpsed or woefully stretched on the rack of whatever progress report is currently doing the rounds. A beast with hurt feelings. With chewy wit, nimble storytelling, and the unmistakable tang of lived experience, he sets our sights for the initiatory core of the endeavor. Turns out, we barely knew the thing at all. This isn't a book about groovy intuitions, but mythically reasoned imaginings; far may it sail."

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the award-winning Mythteller trilogy

"*Matrimony* is a summons, a reckoning, and a blessing. With the raw grace and precise poetics that are his signature, Stephen Jenkinson lays bare the scaffolding of love and commitment—not as sentimental refuge but as a culture-making labor, as an inheritance both weighty and wondrous. This book will shake loose your assumptions, invite you into the work of witnessing and being witnessed, and, if you let it, alter your understanding of what it is to be bound—to another, to time, to the making of meaning itself."

Elena Brower
artist and bestselling author of *Practice You* and *Art of Attention*

MATRIMONY

Also by Stephen Jenkinson

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Angel and Executioner

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Rough Gods (with Gregory Hoskins)

Dark Roads (with Gregory Hoskins)

Reckoning (with Kimberly Ann Johnson)

MATRIMONY

Ritual, Culture, and the Heart's Work

Stephen Jenkinson

sounds true
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For Nathalie Roy, my wife

Women usually know better than men the extent of catastrophe.
—John Berger, *Pig Earth*

Catastrophe: *kata* (Gk.) down; *strophe* (Gk.) something gathered, choreographed to turn and face the same direction. A way made by those who came before to go down into the Mystery Days.

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FOREWORD

One of the unexpected consequences of working with Stephen Jenkinson is that I got married. I'm not saying that I wouldn't have done it otherwise. I am saying that he, possibly inadvertently, pushed me over the edge.

Stephen and I didn't talk a lot about matrimony specifically. During our conversations, I saw that my mostly unquestioned desires for freedom and autonomy had dovetailed with my feminist and spiritual worldviews. I realized that holding on to being single was one of those ways that I was keeping the doors and windows of the adult house open. I was giving myself outs. I was scared of the responsibilities and obligations that come with being married. I didn't want to fail again. I was suspect of my own ability to choose a partner. Marriage and matrimony would detonate my independence.

As I wrestled with my own desires and prejudices about marriage and listened to the pleas for culture-making, getting married started to make more sense. And so, I did it! I said yes to a wedding and to marriage, and then I set out to court matrimony.

I married a man from Brazil, devoted to the religious practices of Candomblé. There was a lot of tradition to lean into. Still, not being from there and also not wanting to abandon my own life and beliefs entirely, I had questions: Would there be vows? If so, what would I say and in what language? Would we have rings? I found myself Google searching "meaning of rings in weddings," "vows in pagan times," "alternative wedding ceremonies." I knew I didn't want a hybrid event, but I became more curious about the meaning behind some of the wedding customs that I was familiar with, customs I had dismissed because they seemed superficial

and devoid of much depth or meaning—like bachelorette parties and toasts and something borrowed and something blue.

What I want you to know is that there were things that were set in motion because I got married that wouldn't have happened otherwise. My husband's mothers, the one who birthed him and the one who raised him, each got new dentures and dental work for the wedding. They flanked him down the aisle, smiling with tremendous pride. One third of the guests were people I had never met and whom my husband did not know well, but they are the people who paint, sweep, drum, sweat, cook, and make ceremony for all the spirits and entities of the grounds where we got married. I was not present for about half of the wedding. I was sitting next door waiting to hear the drum beat that was for me and for Oxum, the goddess of the fresh waters. When I walked in, no one was sitting in the seats that I had spent hours upon hours charting and assigning, and my husband was on the opposite side of the altar than the one we had rehearsed. There was a chorus of teenage girls who my husband wanted to be a part of the wedding, but they didn't have the attire they deemed necessary for an occasion of this kind. My husband was able to buy them the fabric, which enabled them to not just sing at our wedding but left them prepared to sing again when they were called upon.

If I was hoping to feel like a princess, or if I was hoping that the day was going to be the best one of my life, or if I was hoping that it was going to be all about me, I would have been disappointed. But through my time with Stephen, and at his farm, I'd become more ceremonially alert. I could then recognize that my own wedding was a culture-making endeavor, a meeting of two worlds, a chance for hospitality to appear, and an occasion to rise for. I could also recognize that the Gods are not asking for perfection—in fact they do their good work amongst imperfections. At my wedding, I was not the singular focus of attention. There was no singular focus. The focus was on what was happening between and among all those who were gathered, including the entities, the animals, the unknown guests, the person who wandered in off the street, and the two doves who perched at the threshold. Not being the bride princess chafed me in a few moments, and I recognized that chafe as a matrimonial exfoliant of my singleness, preparing me to be a married person, a wife. I was tempered and humbled by my wedding. It was not a walkthrough. It was a razor's edge plea to the spirits, the gods, and the people of the place. So much

was set in motion on my behalf and on behalf of my people, present and unseen. Matrimony was summoned.

This book in your hands is about Matrimony—something larger than dating and weddings, larger than mate selection or romance. Matrimony, as Stephen wants us to know it, is absent from many weddings, and this absence may be the reason why both weddings and marriage have become so suspect and so easily cast aside. The absence of alchemy at most weddings may be why it's so easy to leave one and feel like it was flat or empty or a letdown. I don't think that most people actually want a party instead of a ceremony. It's just that there's no obvious path to travel from party to ceremony for most modern people.

This book will not necessarily help you have a better wedding or a better marriage. It won't automatically make your wedding sacred or your marriage last, for this book is not only for those who have married or will marry. This book is for those who know that our ancestors are not receiving the honoring that they need. This book is for those who sense that kinship goes beyond family. This book is for those who know that our children need some handholds in a spiritual-not-religious time absent of rites of passage. This book is for those who have been asked to be keepers of thresholds and know that make-shifting ceremony has consequences. This book is for people who are at the end of their rope with borrowing the sacred from everywhere else. This book is for people who crave the village and are willing to be villagers. This book is for people whose grief for what has been forgotten propels them to remember.

The spirit of Matrimony is here.

Kimberly Ann Johnson

PROLOGUE

Two by Two

At first blush, there's not much here telling you how to negotiate the storms and still waters of romance, not much for the doldrums and the drastic days. I can't simplify the soulmate business. You've been around. By now, there's not much you haven't heard before, not much that you haven't tried when it comes to getting along.

I have something about matrimony, instead. I have something about the flesh and bone of love in the world for you, about the bricks and mortar of culture. This is about the culture and the restoration of culture that is made in matrimony.

Some of us hold romance in high esteem, some at arm's length. We often do so for the same reasons. Attraction is a wild business, so simplifying the work of romance is usually a matter of melting difference, upping affinity. But I'd say that most of those differences between us belong right where they are. Romantically, we're drawn to what we aren't likely to be or see or know, or realize on our own. That's usually how it goes. That is as it should be. We need those differences to be there just to make a go of it. This is a book that makes a throne for differences.

In the trenches of life, affinity has its limits. All the marriage I've seen is intermarriage. Couples make a life for themselves by setting sail on a raft of difference, at sea often, storm-tossed, then becalmed, grappling with the unlikely side of life.

And much of ordinary married life can be a tangled garden of habit and hubris, torment and testament, vagaries and verities that summon the

best of us and then the rest of us to do their bidding. All of it is drawn up through the hydraulics of desire and design, or down from the dream of utter companionship. There are the fits of personal style and conviction, the warp and weft of psychic family inheritance, the raveling and unraveling of social contract. Part fracas, part fun house, part high five with the unknown, marriage is doable and daunting. Drudgery and begrudgery and most of life's joys are made there. Tyrants and torchbearers are made there. Truths sought and unsought are its daily bread. The poet laureate of the broken heart, my countryman Leonard Cohen, passed on marriage altogether. His reason: he hadn't courage enough for the work, nor for what he called the "homicidal bitching" of authorized cohabitation.

> I think marriage is the hottest furnace of the spirit today, much more difficult than solitude, much more challenging for people who want to work on themselves. It's a situation in which there are no alibis, excruciating most of the time.
>
> —Leonard Cohen, 1975

The hard facts are these.
The agent provocateur of marriage is matrimony.

Matrimony is the bone house—the body,
the moving parts—of the heart in thrall.

That's my claim. Matrimony is the periodic table, the algebraic alchemy, of the heart's gamble to be understood and to get some understanding done. That's the polestar of this inquiry.

Matrimony is the place, too, where culture leans on love for its portion, its tithe. Matrimony is the mothering of culture, and ritual is its vehicle, and patrimony its precursor and waymaker. And matrimony is in trouble.

Detonated and provoked by a feeling that something vital to our mutual life is in peril, this book came to me. It's a civilian's ceremony, a guide to the wild ride of love in the cultural ruins, a working person's manifesto for making culture, for matrimony's redeeming power to do that work.

Full disclosure: I'm seventy years old now. I've twice been a married man (to women both times) and a father for all of my married life. I do believe in the marriage thing, as awkward a practitioner as I've been. I believe in it more now than when I started. Your experience and your preferences may be otherwise. With some translation, you may find that there's room and board for you here even still.

I wrote this plea for matrimony five or so years ago, after presiding over a handful of young people's dreams for a wedding ritual they could believe in, after learning what an uphill climb a redemption of that auto-piloted ceremony can be. Then a pandemic came on, and it eclipsed most things matrimonial. Public and private ceremonies were out of bounds. I found no takers for this book in the trade, and I moved on to other kinds of work. But the word that the Death Guy had somehow become the Matrimony Guy got out anyhow, and once the all-clear call rang out and people began reconvening, I was occasionally asked to orchestrate wedding ceremonies in different parts of the world. After careful consideration, I declined. I remembered well enough being in the matrimony business before the pandemic, the unexpected hostility of friends and family, their resistance to rethinking the spirit of matrimony, their strange dedication to the usual wedding, the disfigured instinct for conservation and rootless tradition. I needed no further contact with it to round out my life. That kind of culture work requires vehemence, and I'm not the culture warrior I once was. I did talk those couples through the hard choreography of the heart that such a thing properly asks, though. I didn't leave them hanging. But that was as close as I wanted to get to it all. So I closed this book of striving and ceremony.

My personal fortunes have reversed since then. The feel of time passing through me has quickened. A few good people pushed me hard to get behind this book one more time, so I took my pulse on the matter to see if it was still alive in me. I thumbed the work through, to see if it had legs. In years past, I've written about money and soul, about death and grief, elderhood and plague and the reckoning of generations. It was plain to me that matrimony was on that list of endangered cultural treasures, that it deserved the same kind of spirit inquiry. But on the matter of the heart's work, I blinked. Maybe I was claiming too much for matrimony in calling it a culture-making, culture-mothering crucible. That could be

too much to ask people in love to sign up for. Maybe the redemption of culture isn't a civilian's business, I thought. Maybe we should leave that to the ideologues, the new puritans, and the pros. Maybe marriage should keep its distance from matrimony, keep it simple. Maybe modernity has it right. Almost no one's complaining.

Then, just a week ago, I was asked to attend a wedding—not as a celebrant this time but as a caterer. I thought I could handle the scullery. I'd never borne witness to the ceremonial stutter step of our culture from the galley. I took the job to find out if there was something of matrimony that I got right.

To my mother's generation, catering meant "indulging, hand and foot." If that's still so, I figured it was a fair trade to be relieved of the drink-in-hand small talk with strangers that I singularly fail to manage well. We were set up on a hill, beside the big house and above the tented yard with the creek running through. It was a handsome rural setting. The groom climbed the hill, thanked us for coming, asked if we needed anything, showed me a text a friend had sent, the matrimonial gallows humour that even at this eleventh hour it wasn't too late to change his mind, that he could still get out. He laughed, then ambled down the hill to his guests and his future. Circled by prep tables, coolers, wood-fired barbeques, pop-ups and cauldrons and ice boxes, we were in a ring fort of purpose and protection. We'd soon find out if we knew what we were doing. I felt in my element, strangely enough. I didn't have to teach or talk or guide the proceedings. Nothing depended on me. I was a civilian this time.

Aprons on, knives and cutting boards at the ready, smudged in cook smoke, we could see the movement of people to the usual folding chairs in the usual theatre seating arrangement down below. In a few moments, they were joined by the groom and then the bride, both near seventy, the lateness of their years a touching thing unto itself. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes later, we heard a scattering of applause. And that was it. The great transubstantiation of witness and vow and death-do-them part was done. Scarcely enough time for the straight lines, the odd joke, the legalities, the I-dos.

And then, after a bit of milling about, people began to leave. Not only the distracted kids, the unimpressed teenagers. Older people left. They weren't going for a smoke. They were making for the parking lot. We kept cooking, but maybe a quarter of the guests were done. The quorum was no more. We felt the letdown from our hilltop. I could guess what it was like down below. There was a crack in the ceremonial chalice, and

alchemy was leaking out into the creek behind the altar and the folding chairs and the flowers. No one seemed to miss it. The people who stayed climbed the hill, plate in hand. And matrimony was on its own. Again.

There are witnesses to a traffic accident that has no meaning and changes lives anyhow, and there are witnesses to a ceremony that was once meant to change people utterly by gathering them into a citizenship of the heart. You know that, even though we use the same word, it's not the same kind of witnessing. One you can't help, and the other is something you faithfully bear. When we turn witnesses into an audience, when we ask little of them save showing up, when we ask little of them now and nothing of them later, we can't really be surprised when they smile and clap on cue, go mute otherwise, leave when it's done, leave us as on our own now as we were before all those details and expenses, leave us on our own at crunch time to remember the vows, should we feel the need or take the hint. It's an encounter with irrelevance for them—their irrelevance. Among the lace and the flowers, that devolution is there. They know in their hearts that they are not in any way vital to the proceedings, that we newlyweds can be newlywed without them—and would, if it came to that. It happens every weekend. They know that this is a spectacle, and they are the spectators. They know we'll rely on the wedding pictures more than we'll rely on them to remember the vows.

Two by two, the culture is in trouble. Two by two, the redemptive power of cultural renewal and reconciliation that awaits us in matrimony is still born. I've seen it. You've seen it.

Romance, especially modern romance, especially app-induced romance, is the Wild West of the heart: lawlessly self-governing, anarchic often, free of tradition. Divorce—especially modern, no-fault divorce—solves the vagaries of the heart by dissolving them. It's simpler now than in the bad old days, and it works. And matrimony? Is it somewhere in between? Is it romance becalmed, a bit in its teeth? Is it slow-motion dissolution until death does us part? Are we matrimony's masters? Its minions? Is it nothing more than the sum of our opinions? Is there anything left to lift up into the light?

Let's find out. Two by two, let's proceed for a while like this matters. Let's find out how it got this way, what we're up against in changing anything, why there've been generations of neglect of this precinct of love, why it's a fallow field. We're going to become scholars of matrimony here, our hearts married to our minds. Let's see why in some places it's still called the holy state of matrimony: a mothering of culture. Let's see if it could still be so, if we have the nerve to get it right.

1

If Only There Were Words to Say It

Love and marriage, that loping old song says, just go together. Like necessity and invention. Nothing to do to make it so.

That notion is from a time that has come and seems all but gone. You'd think, as a postmodern person, that the autonomia of the notion has left us. Our early adventures in love, and our first marriages, tend to loosen the grip of any love song. You'd think.

Still, the true romantics hold on, while the wizened rest of us go easy on the realization of our hearts' desires, underpersuaded in spite of ourselves. More heartbreak doesn't make for more heart, so you'd think. And yet we all resort to the same language, the same bedraggled glossary, whether we be pro or con the heart's business, or in the lee of it, or in the lurch. That makes for melancholy in the madrigals, mica in the murk.

For the record, *love*, *marriage*, *matrimony*, and *wedding* are not variants of the same impulse or outcome or affection. They don't come from the same word. Yet we are hard-pressed to keep them separate and clear, such is their reputation among us and the claim they make upon the inner life. Such is our questionable discernment and discipline in matters of the heart.

And then there's their aid and abettor: *ceremony*. It's doubtful to me that you can have any of these without the others and make a good go of

it over the long haul of life. That's a minority view now, though. It is a fashion of the age to try.

There is their precursor: *patrimony*. We know the shabby pedigree stapled onto anything prefixed by *patri*. Then there are their ragged, disreputable spawn: acrimony, alimony, palimony. We have more words for their undoing than for their doing.

A glossary's important for this wrangling of the heart and its business that I'm proposing. Some precision in tracking the heart's ways is in order. I'll try to make a case now as to why.

Gregory Hoskins, my partner in *Nights of Grief and Mystery*, is good at writing love songs. He doesn't have drawerfuls of them, but those he does have are solid, tested, and tempered. In one he offers this recommendation to the English language and its custodians and practitioners: "There should be as many words for love as the Inuit have for snow." And why might that be? What is it about being able to say something and say it well that brings that something clear and obliges it into the world to be with us? Do you suppose we're bereaved by the brevity of our emotive vocabulary when it comes to love? Does it put a crimp in our love life?

I would guess that the Inuit's sense of self-preservation and sense of well-being once required, and may still require, a working definition of the intricacies of the world of snow—given all the climactic climate changing that's going on, maybe now more than ever. But you know there's probably more to it than that. It may be that the Inuit depended upon their lucidity and their eloquence and alertness to that part of their existential landscape that we in the south designate simply as "snow." It may be that their social standing, the part they played in their communities, the stories told by and about them, the presence they exerted upon the living after death, might all have relied in part upon their psychic and tradition-bound snow literacy. *Snow* is a southerner's word for that syntactical and terrestrial and mythic universe that the Inuit inhabited. Their eloquence in the matter of the living world around them, I'm sure, was deep in their moral intelligence. It's likely still there, where climate change may be at its most intense. We southerners could take a lesson.

I've made a case in two previous books, *Die Wise* and *Come of Age*, that eloquence is at least as vital to the human body and soul making a go of it as is food supply, shelter, and companionship. Eloquence, I think, is fundamental to mythic transmission, psychic intactness, and ontological aplomb, so much so that it is reasonable to imagine that if you can't say

it, you can't see it. Eloquence isn't description. It's invocation and conjuring, cyphering and reckoning. There is a semantic, cogent, and mandatory capacity for "at-homeness" that appears and persists in the elaborations of the spoken word. So it stands to reason that there is something like poverty, perhaps a desolation of the spirit, perhaps a desecration, wherever that lucidity and eloquence has standardization, ossified authority, and a globalizing polemical and semantic monolith in its stead.

Spell casting and spell breaking both employ eloquence in their work. That alone should claim our attention in matters of the heart.

In English, we have quite a few words with which we describe, invoke, approach, or grub about in the inner terrain: *soul*, *spirit*, *heart*, *energy*, *mind*, *psyche*, *self*, *temperament*, *character*, *light*, *spark*, *God*, to name a few. That's an even dozen, and most of us would be pressed to make good, enduring, workable distinctions between most of them as we go about our days working at love. Sitting there on the page, they make up a kind of bog of the inner life. In common use, on the street, especially in the email universe, they lose whatever specificity of place and origin, function and purpose they may once have had. They occupy the simplified, stratified psychic suburbs that separate higher from lower, sensation from understanding, intuition from knowledge, human from divine. The simple syrup we call God/the devil isn't far away from all this. Once, these estranged bedfellows were known to be co-creators of the world and our inner life. Not now.

We have *intimate*, which we use in a nudge-nudge-wink-wink sort of way to mean "preferable," as in "bound to please," but which actually only describes a relation of relative proximity, not preference. Then we have *remote* or *distant*, which has never been taken in modern life or modern love for just another kind of intimacy, or as anything preferable or promising. From the misapprehension around *intimate* you can get a taste of just how suspect, unworthy, and frankly menacing distance tends to be for us. In inner-life terms, distance is an iceberg in the sea of intimacy, frozen isolation, paralyzing, despairing, a prelude to divorce.

You could say it's just me, and it may be, but it seems that the stuffing has been kicked out of most of these words, probably all of them. From overuse and misuse and no use at all, square-pegged and round-holed, useful mainly to pitch artists and life coaches, they've lost their shape and purpose, and they've lost their nerve, their charge. We try to find reasons to live. We reach for things to say about the inner life that aren't dead

on arrival, straining to tell our beloveds we have love for them, and it's a lineup of the usual semantic suspects and likelihoods we've got, any of whom could pass for each other in dim light.

The words themselves have a speckled and sullied past. They come to us via medieval universities from Greek philosophy (*energy*, *psyche*), via the early church fathers from Latin systematic theology (*spirit*, *character*, *mind*), and from Proto-Germanic legal concepts (*heart*). The words have power and echo enough to provoke the romantic and devotional among us, those of them left. But the conjuring power of the words isn't there. They've become a list of interchangeable ingredients with which to whip up an inner life. They are brands of cola on a shelf in a big-box store of feelings, awaiting our mercurial allegiance. And they are the weathervane—and the weather—of the self.

Our one true self seems to begin here, at the edge of the semantic world, where eloquence wavers. Or that's where it ends. It's hard for a civilian to reckon. In the West, it is a hypothetical frontier out at the edge of the self, the Great Wall that snakes across our ontological and devotional maps and charts, keeping something out, keeping something in. Who knows, of course, where existence itself begins or began (there are more authoritative voices describing its end now, in detail, with timelines). But if the whole thing is not a cloud of unknowably unknowing the unknown, then the line marking the inner from the outer is both severe and smudged. It's the cliff edge of consequence. These are everyday phrases, but they carry an utter separateness from everything upon which we depend for our spiritual certainties. Given the way most of us speak of these things, it is hard, bordering on the impossible, to imagine that it has ever been any other way, that we have ever stood in easy kinship with what grants us another day. We tend to have the heart's point of view and regard the world uneasily and forlornly, from a long way off, wondering if it means us harm or, worse, indifference.

Extend all of this in the direction of relationship, and it's "me" and, frankly, "everyone else," everything else. The estrangement is part of our education, here in the early aftermath of the secular humanist experiment. Estrangement from the world and the unravelling of village-mindedness put acute pressure on romance and union to soothe the separation.

Attending university brought me eye to eye with how meagre my sentimental education had been as my formal education rolled on. I sat on the lawn outside my residence in the waning September light and read and reread and read again the same introductory paragraph of my medieval philosophy sampler. I distinctly recall looking up from the book periodically in utter despair, realizing that everyone hurrying past me to their class was in every important way smarter than I was. They had the words.

I asked the philosophy teacher for a meeting. I described the rereading, the paralysis over the paragraph, the feeling I had that the thing was written in a senseless, foreign tongue. I asked if he had any suggestions that might help me out.

In the voice of a dead man, he said, "Well, university's not for everybody." His bedside manner was austere, surgical, acute, and most unwelcome. He was right, though.

Flirting with a breakdown of confidence that bordered on the intellectually disabling, I went to speak with a poetry professor. I told him the philosophy story, told him of my slow-to-awaken realization that I'd never really read—especially novels—in my life and that I was beginning to understand how little I understood about much of anything worth understanding. I didn't have language. On the spot he gave me fifteen titles of books that might save me. Bless him. There was Flaubert and Zola, Shakespeare and Kafka, Beckett and Joyce and Yeats. One of those titles was Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. I read it in a weekend, and it did me some saving as it situated me somehow in the world of proper storytelling.

One of the characters in the book describes a behavioural psychology experiment with rats in a maze in a sensory deprivation chamber. Nightmarish stuff. They can't see anything, can't hear anything. They bump into each other from time to aimless time. Crazy making. Beware of any psychology experiment that orchestrates utter despair in the name of ascertaining behavioural norms, I'd say. What to do? At one end of the maze, there was a metal bar that had a low-voltage but palpable electrical current running through it. If the rat, in interminable and purposeless scurrying, accidentally touched the bar, it was jolted. If you've read any of Atwood's work, you'll recognize a few of her prized themes here.

Initially the researchers saw that the rats would rear back in panic and careen off in some other direction when they got a taste of the bar. At first.

But as the experiment wore on, the rats seemed to begin to seek out the bar. After a time in this dark and silent hell, the rats would blast themselves with it. Routinely, and then manically, many times in succession, they jolted themselves. Atwood's conclusion: rats prefer any sensation to none at all.

Moral of the story to me? We're in the dark as we bang around in the inner life. We speak darkness, often. We go for obscenity in our comedy for much the same reason the rat goes for the jolt: to feel something. Lots of procreative euphemisms and body slang there. Harsh words are almost the only conjurers we know, and we rely upon them heavily to impress, to prevail, to exist, to make love known. Eloquence, subtlety, and nuance have few takers. This is real trouble when we set about our love work. Vagueness, feelings, intentions, and formulas rule.

You speak your way toward your love life. If you go the way of wedding and you find that your matrimony comes down to what you say about what you mean, as it so often seems to do, you might wish for a steeper, more demanding tutorial than the tired phrases intoned by the celebrant. You might do so all the more when you've crafted those vows yourself. Vows don't banish or collapse the distance between the betrothed. As you'll see, that's what promises do. Vows brail their way across that old, hallowed ground. They're not intended or meant or felt. They're spoken. Wellspokenness is something they rely upon. Vows are not the government meddling in your affairs. Vows are your heart seeking its tongue, its way, aloud, for all to hear.

What follows is a beguiled romantic's glossary.

The word *love* isn't very helpful on its own. There's more than one kind, and they need their sussing out. Romantic love is the condition of fluster, striving, and uplift that tends to follow upon someone finding you worthy. The physical persuasions of the thing are almost narcotic. A flood of undiscerning well-being comes on. That, and a sense that the unkindness that's in the world cannot possibly harm you anymore. It's an expansive thing. In its matured and tempered form, there is a real other person or persons on the other side of all these feelings. But real other people compromise our penchant for infinity, alas. They pose important challenges like reciprocity, delayed gratification,

unequal distribution of feelings, and weather. Romantic love is soul work, and it can end without any notice or fanfare. Words can ignite it, prompt it, and persuade it, and all but end it, too. Some people trust this and go all in. Some people don't. Some people can do it, some can't. It's not a democracy. It may be an invention of the troubadours; it may have always been.

Another kind of love, kinship love, requires a bracing mix of the birth/death crucible and a lot of time together from an early age to make a go of it. Usually you're born to it, meaning it didn't begin with you. You can be adopted in, no recourse to blood quantum required. There's a little more room to maneuver in kinship love, more wiggle room, and often more opportunities for forgiveness than in other kinds. Families can be good at this. Some are not so good.

Friends, comrades, those who share the fellowship of devout lifework and the harsh blessings of the barricades—they can go years without seeing each other, consoled and girded by the knowledge that their friends are in the world, and their quiet love for each other binds them to a troubled time. They love the same things as much as they love each other. These people are more often chosen than found.

There's a love that outwaits the fizz and disorientation of excitement, Burgundy to the Beaujolais of mad attraction. It's not exclusive to older people, but it does seem to resemble them, even reward them. It looks quietly across the table, wants for little more than that it might continue a while yet. This love knows what ending means.

There's the love of the desert saints for the silence of God, the silence of God for the saints. There's the love of one at the window for the world still going by, the love of the water for the shore, the lion for the lamb, the ear for the word, the stranger for the strange days. Matrimony seems to know these differences in love. It employs them. There are others, but that's a beginning.

When I use the word *marriage* in these pages, I mean the career arc that people make of their romantic love. Marriage takes a good while to unfurl. It needs a starting gate in order to have clearly begun. It needs time to show itself, its colours—time it may not get. Marriage *shows*. It's not a matter of opinion, nor a scheme of convictions, though many convictions will show themselves. Marriage is a state of affairs, a political entity, a translation of striving and affection and childhood learning and fears. It can qualify you for inclusion into some of life's mysteries, all

but disqualify you from others. It lends belonging to the heart when the work is being done. In marriage, you can grow into a love or out of one. It takes two (or more, perhaps) to agree, to call it into being. It takes but one to call it a day. It begins in something like unanimity and usually ends arbitrarily. Yes, the state is in there. It's easy to enter, a calamity to leave. It's a day-in, day-out business, more barter than commerce. It has one face to the world, another in the whorl of culture work. The culture lends the partners the tools of the marital trade for employment and safekeeping. Fond as they seem to be of novelty and agency, the partners are not often aware that they inherit marriage's work. And though the law may say otherwise, there are no marriage equivalents, nothing like marriage-lite. Love walks through that door, or it doesn't. It survives unchanged by crossing that threshold, or it is tempered and trued or done or undone by it.

Alimony and acrimony both rise from the ruins of formal love. Palimony rises from the ruins of informal love, matrimony adjacent. Parsimony bedevils them all.

Ceremony marks out the holy ground that the betrothed and their kin will walk toward each other, the place where matrimony will find and lay claim to their love. Ceremony has no script, no audience. It has witnesses—needs them in fact. It is mercurial when it works, tracing as it does the deliberate thinning of the membrane keeping this world from the Other.

A wedding is the time and place where some kind of love signs on the dotted line. It's not hedging its bets anymore. It's showtime, meaning it is time for it to appear, coalescing around a clutch of declarations. A wedding is where you face the culture and say yes. It's where you say *amen* aloud, when *amen* means "It's all too vast, it's beyond me reckoning it, it'll change most of what I know, so I'm in."

Patrimony is a word that rarely appears on the English-speaking tongue. Sad, that is, since it is matrimony's predecessor, midwife, and all but indispensable patron. It is the making of a material and spiritual home for matrimony to do its conjuring, its womb work. It is the fathering of a culture.

Now, *matrimony* is the mystery business. Matrimony takes the partners and their love in one hand and their wedding in the other and lifts them into another kind of light, a light full of shadow too, and commences to conjure.

Matrimony is the workings of alchemy upon the solitary, sufficient human heart. It isn't the affirmation of human affection. It is the redemption of that affection, recasting it as spirit citizenship. It is the mothering of a culture.

I hadn't thought about matrimony much during the first half of my life, the toe-testing part, the part clotted with beliefs and convictions. I should have done so, I can see now, but I didn't. I didn't know how to. I didn't think it counted for much. Matrimony struck me as something older people graduated to once the fizz of love dissipated. A state of affairs, minus the affairs, if possible.

I married twice, which might say something about the depth of my distraction from the thing. Marrying twice had me considering my suitability for matrimony, but not the matrimony itself. But that's common, isn't it? Of the everybody that everybody knows, a good number of them have been married twice. Or they've taken another kind of vow and haven't been married at all, as these things are going now. Of course, not marrying at all isn't a sign that the general population has spent days and nights coming to grips with the nature of matrimony. Not necessarily. It's more likely a sign that we've been weighing the pros and cons of matrimony, its merits and demerits. It seems that we are more concerned with how it has or hasn't worked out, is or isn't working out, will or very likely won't work out for *me*. Not what it is but only what it is when I'm in it. That's probably the heart of the thing now. Matrimony, or swearing off the matrimonial stuff, is more a lifestyle declaration, a murmur or a snarl of preference. When sovereignty's the prize and autonomy the moral code, matrimony is as often as not a failure to resist the regime, or just as likely a failure to comply with the resistance. You need a therapist to tell the difference.

Well, you might be thinking, *what else could it be?* And *that* opens the door. It could be an act of engaged citizenship in a time of trouble, say. It could be direct action. It could be civil disobedience. It could be a radicalized heart called to the barricades, or radicalized hospitality meted out to a stranger. It could be the culture finding its footing and finding its way, at last. But mostly it's nothing of the kind. The mystery that belongs inside the wedding is a lot like the mystery inside dying now. It happens every

day, yet it isn't that visible. It's a knowable thing not much known, and people seem shocked when the full brunt of the thing comes to call, as if there was no way of knowing. People sometimes act as if there was such a thing as "sudden matrimony," too.

Undergoing matrimony or marriage has begun to resemble undergoing a funeral. Because of the expense, the occasional chicanery and upselling involved, because of the sheer unhesitating and unapologetic roteness of the thing and the officialdom leaning in, people who are trying to "keep it real" tend to have a dim view of both. We think we know what a funeral is and how to do one and what it's for and how it works and what happens when it doesn't work and what remedy there might be for that. It's the same for matrimony. We seem to think we'd know it if we saw it, recognize its spots and tracks. We're convinced that it'd do our bidding when we bring it to heel. We're convinced too that the more it resembles us in spirit, style, and substance, the better the outcome.

And there are those common and heroic deathbed demands for no funeral, for no big deal made of the thing. They're there in the matrimonial set, too. What happens, do you suppose, when ceremonies devolve into expensive spiritual bypasses, or when those bypasses are banned outright in favour of inner rituals and personal work? What happens when the psychic and spiritual and mythic status quo gets another pass, prevails another day, and the confounding power of weddings and funerals are reined in in favour of comfort-giving events that fit neatly into our plans, our lives, when Sunday segues seamlessly into Monday? Maybe nothing happens, nothing at all. Maybe nothing to speak of happens, nothing to live by. Maybe that's what culture dissolving before your eyes looks like. Afterward, you drive back to your life, to everything as it was.

So maybe in a time like ours, when the culture is bereft of revival, dying people and marrying people don't have the right to take from the rest of us a crucial rite of passage, a rite by which the living are drawn down into the reality that their lives will be changed irrevocably, a rite detonated by their dying or their loving. Maybe that's what matrimony and mortality are: *lives changed irrevocably*. Anything that volatile, that consequential, may not belong to the people at the centre of the storm. Most probably it belongs in the public trust. In a working culture, that's what mortuary rites and matrimony rites are. They are cultural patrimony, entrusted to the culture by ancestry so that the culture might be articulated, nourished, and affirmed, that it might recognize the best of itself in them and abide in

them. In a culture in recession, they're private property, fenced and gated, guarded and portioned out to one or two persons at a time.

I ask you to consider this: it isn't their funeral, and it isn't theirs to take away. Nor is it their wedding. These are village rites, communal affirmations of the village's ways of going on, sometimes not quite knowing how to. The village, or what's left of it after private truths and globalization have taken their principal and interest and retributive pound of flesh, deserves a rite of recognition of the seismic change in their lives that matrimony would make, given half a chance. Matrimony doesn't belong to the betrothed any more than mortality belongs to the dying. They belong to the communities around them that live out and enforce and endure the changes in life that matrimony and mortality are supposed to bring. So there is real, palpable consequence to turning away from public ceremony, and not just for the celebrants and those at the front of the room.

As the last two decades rolled out their public malaises and private poverties, I was approached a dozen times or more by couples—not just young couples, either—who were bedazzled by love and forlorn at the prospects of living that love out loud in the world in an enduring way, a way recognizable to and cherished by others. They instinctively seemed to know that matrimony should be a big deal, in a different way from how weddings were a big deal. And they seemed to know that, aside from the fracas, the expense, the anxiety, and the hangover, it hasn't been. And they wanted me to do something about that. They wanted me to do something for them and their love, yes, but they wanted something else, something that might show up in the wider world. They knew in their bones that something was missing from those elaborate and self-made matrimony moments, something big and something mandatory. But they weren't able to articulate the ceremonial thinness of the status quo, nor what to do about it when it was their turn. They didn't know what they wanted for their wedding, but they wanted something that counted.

Coming to me to do your wedding is like coming to me to do your lung transplant. C'mon. I've been the Death Guy for twenty years. That's how most people know me who know me at all. I've had some breathing trouble over the years, yes, but that doesn't qualify me to lift a lung from

you, put a new one in you or your loved one, and send you on your way. Never mind to do it in tandem, two by two. It was a desperate act, asking me to do a wedding. I'd been married twice, but that's no qualification for much beyond possibly giving me some good stories to tell. I'd never been married like I imagine matrimony can be, nor in any way that they were haltingly asking for.

And so, as proper preparation for this undertaking, I came to wonder about the event itself. Not relationships, not commitment, not attachment. Just the bare bones of the event. And as I did, it became clearer to me that matrimony—not marriage, not love, but the act of making these things known to whatever one has for a community—has become mostly spectacle, mostly performance. It is rehearsed, it is professionally planned. Its traditions, whatever of them remain, are arcane, ghostly presences, habits without stories. Or it is self-penned, self-directed, an autonomous, tradition-free affair. After rooting about in the history of ceremony, it became clearer to me that, for the most part, the betrothed have turned to each other instead of to matrimony. Doing so doesn't make a ceremony. It doesn't make something happen. It isn't a crucible for mystery. There's none of this "two being made one." It's a reflexive imprimatur affixed to something that has already happened. It isn't transformative. At its best, it's affirmative.

Apprehensive, I agreed to do the first wedding. And then the second. And something began to happen. People who'd been contemplating marriage themselves and had been to one of the weddings I'd done, or heard about them, asked me to help them with theirs. People who'd given up on matrimony altogether second-guessed themselves. There was a kind of yearning stirring. That much was clear. The food of matrimony was making a hunger for it. Those people and I—we were onto something.

So this book grew from what happened when, after long and careful consideration, I undertook the matrimonial ritual that these people and a few of their friends were pleading for. One result, the one nobody was hoping for, was that it became clear early on that the cultural impoverishment that has claimed matrimony from the commons is exactly what most people look for in a wedding. The lack of matrimony was what we count on and have come to expect. Strange or deranged as that might sound, it was the persistence of those poverties that made the drastically curtailed event recognizable to many of them as a wedding. It was the absence of matrimony that made it a comfortable wedding.

Another thing that grew clear: nobody comes to a wedding to change the world. And my contention was and is that that's precisely what matrimony is in an intact and vital culture. It is an act of deep contemplation and a claiming of the responsibilities of grown-ups. It is an act of uncommon and radical hospitality where the circle of inclusion is stretched to the point of breaking. When people are rewarded by the dominant culture for self-absorption, when they are sleepwalking through their time, matrimony can be a revolution. It is an act of redemption, and almost all of its consequences are cultural, not personal or emotional or psychological. Politically spiritual, you could say. And, most amazingly yet, I came to see that the shards of the wedding chalice of old were still there, scattered and hard to recognize in the contemporary pageant but enduring anyhow.

It dismays me to say that the results of proceeding otherwise in the teeth of this cultural poverty weren't easy to bear. The degree of resistance and outright, manifest hostility—particularly from the families—before, during, and after these weddings was disarming in the early going, and it was shocking. It was clear that their families took the kind of matrimony I crafted for and with these couples to be worse than weird or made up. They took it to be a kind of assault on something they seemed to hold mysteriously, emptily dear. By their condemnation, they were defending something they couldn't articulate.

So I've taken it upon myself here to do the articulating. Again, this isn't a book about marriage or relationships or intimacy. It is about the mythic, poetic, eloquent act by which matrimony is conjured from romance. This is a book—like *Die Wise* with my time in the death trade, like *Come of Age* with my being approached by younger people as a hoped-for elder—that is steeped in disciplined contemplation of the threadbare cultural, postmodern Anglo–North American inheritance that is our present moment. In it, I try to imagine how things have come to be as they are regarding matrimony, ritual, and ceremony. It's also an act of cultural memory. I'm fingering the shards of contemporary matrimony here, reassembling the few of them that are left, as an archaeologist might do bits of pottery or bone, in order to recount something of the unauthorized history that was once matrimony. Chief among them: matrimony once was sacramental trade between clans, trade in what sustained them and what they treasured most. Most of the choreography we know, most of the choreography I describe toward this book's end, comes from that conjuring.

Along the way I've had to contend with some of the jittery cultural questions that now bear down upon matrimony: What is a man now? And what is a woman? What is the work of the feminine in a working culture, the work of the masculine? What are people being included in when the institution of matrimony is extended to them? What is a family? There are questions in the book that don't surface in the culture, among them: In an age prizing inclusivity, how is it that men are asked to enter into the holy bonds of matrimony, but there is no parallel invitation for women to enter into any kind of patrimony? There are stories here that come from my adventures in ritual making, true stories that really happened. There are investigations of folktale renderings of the torturous mile suitors endure on their way to matrimony, how it is more infernal pilgrimage than a traipse down the aisle. The final section of the book is a composite rendering of what I've imagined Old Order Matrimony looked like when it was done up right, the kind that seems to have prevailed before modernity, before urbanism, before forced conversion to monotheism. It is the kind that remains mysteriously doable now, the kind that prompted those young people to seek me out years ago, the kind that I did when the young people came calling.

2

The Rhythm in Ritual

I was born to a time that had a penchant for desire matched only by a capacity to take from other cultures and from the world to soothe, calm, and sate that desire. Learning that desire without soothing it—learning its old root, its chemical adamance, its ruthless procession toward a reward never found—is almost out of the question now. Cultivating that desire until it relaxes its grip on the imagination of this age and begins speaking its poverty instead is out of the question, too.

And so the spectral hunger for substance and depth for our days, the longing to be descended from palpable merit and from time-proven and well-wrought culture, is there at the end of each meal, at each juncture where day meets night, at each birth and death, each coming into and going out of life. The hunger is insinuated into every ordinary moment and every lunge at heroism. Surely the flight into spectacle testifies to it. Self-styled grief rituals cadged from people we wish we were: culpable, not credible.

So we begin with the word *ceremony*, which was brought into written form in the English language in the 1380s by John Wycliffe when he translated the Bible. Wycliffe turned to Old French and ultimately Latin to do so. Or he thought he did. Latin was the language of Rome, one of England's early and most penetrating conquerors. The conquest lived on until Wycliffe's time, as it lives on now in the Latinic burden on the

English tongue. Wycliffe thought the Romans had a word for ceremony. They didn't. They had somebody else's word for it.

People working in the lexicographical trade can be cantankerous in print about what they love most: words. And while there's often something less than consensus about word origins, there is general agreement on a kind of linguistic forensic audit method and its efficacy. It seems to be so that if, in its infancy, a given culture had a particular tool or stirrup or shoe or loom and ways of making those things, then it had its own words for those things, too. If the tool or stirrup or shoe or loom and the ways of making them came from elsewhere, the words to name those things came from elsewhere, too. This is true too of ideas, political structures, understandings of justice and mercy, mythic practices, nuanced poetic sensibilities. So those skilled in these matters can help us know about a culture's history and material sophistication by their study of words.

Going out on a historico-geopolitical limb, it seems to me that enterprising, expansionist, imperial kinds of people tend to be opportunistic and predatory in their relations with their neighbours. They tend to take for their own the philosophical, aesthetic, and spiritual achievements of those they subordinate. I think that's because it is in the nature of expansionist, predatory peoples to be deeply unsure of themselves, their lineage, their material and philosophical sophistication and legitimacy. There is a kind of persistent sense of inferiority in their political and aesthetic culture, and that makes for bellicose, overbearing, and intolerant domestic and foreign policy. That uncertainty is both parent and child of their war making and their appropriation of the mythic and poetic understandings of others.

The Romans are, among many other things, poster children for imperialism. They were, from early on (c. 400 BCE) until they flamed out (c. 400 CE), enterprising, expansionist, and tyrannical when they could afford to be, imperial and atavistic. They plagiarized, purloined, and abducted culture from surrounding peoples, then founded the legal, moral, and philosophical rudiments of the Republic on that plunder and swag. And they knew they did. And it unnerved them, I would guess. You find all things Greek, for example, in Roman architecture, language, legal code, philosophy, and mythology. It has to be unnerving to lord it over most of the known world, to have slaves doing most of your life's work, and not have your own stories, your own Gods along for the victory march, your own ceremonies for propitiating them and thanking them for your hollow victories.

One of Rome's early victims was the Etruscan people. (*Etruscan*, however, is not a word those people knew themselves by. It is the name their Roman conquerors called them. The ironies endure.) Etruscans were an Iron Age people deeply influenced by Archaic Greek culture that appeared in the historical record circa 900 BCE in the area now called Umbria and Tuscany, and disappeared into the Roman Republic some seven hundred years later. One of their cultic centres, when transliterated into Latin, was called Caere. This name was taken by the Romans to signify religious institution and practice and, it appears, is the origin of our word *ceremony*.

Taking this word into Latin from a conquered, cultured neighbour tells me that it is more than possible that the Romans were, in some fashion, impressed, awed even, by the spiritual and ritual life of this people they conquered, so much so that they decided upon a word to carry that awe: *caeremonia*. It tells me too that the Romans needed to find or invent a word for this kind of engagement with the denizens of an other world because they had no word of their own, no practice of their own that compelled them the way the Etruscan example did. When you do what the Romans did—appropriate another culture's public spiritual life, invent a word for it that's from that culture, pretend you didn't do it, or pretend that it's your way of honouring what you've conquered, and then forget that you've done so altogether, and within a generation or two proceed like it's your word, has been your word, your culture, all along—you are confessing something black hole–like about your own culture.

Consider, then, the brittle excitement that rises when modern people today talk about "doing ceremony" for healing, about going to the mountaintop or to the jungle for a ceremony, about crafting their own wedding from scratch, every detail an expression of their life, the one they've been working on for years, the unmarried one, all of their untested convictions about love decocted there, all their hopes for the thaumaturgy of that special day. The sense of arousal, anticipation of catharsis, the expectation of getting what you want is palpable. And frail. And Romanesque. It isn't a magic word, *ceremony*. It doesn't make things happen in the saying of it.

Well, what about *ritual*, then? What if we use *ritual* instead to talk about the magical matrimonial moment and get out from under the weight of that old misfortune? *Ritual* is generally used as a synonym for *ceremony*. These days *rite* refers to the architecture, technology, and paraphernalia of religious observance or performance. When used disparagingly, it lampoons the practice of elevating habit to the level of devotion, nursing

a shame for sketchy origins. But you've seen the word before, in other guises. It is there in *rhythm*, the steadying pulse, the cadence of things. It is there in *rhyme*, something often resorted to in trance making, spell casting, popular song, and advertising. *Riddle* has it, as does *algorithm*, the odious-sounding calculus by which the internet wonks shorthand how to anticipate your every monetizable whim and desire via tracking the habits, the rituals, of your screen time.

It can be a bit dark in ritual land sometimes.

Then there's the mellifluous-sounding adjective *arithmetic*, the repeatable, the reproducible. It's there in *ars metrica* (Latin), in *arithmetike* (the much older Greek), "the counting art." It's there in *reckon*, and it's certainly in *repeat*. Going as far into its story as we can, the Proto-Indo-European root has *rit*, which once was *re*, meaning "to count," "to keep track of," and more latterly and more abstractly, "to reason." It comes to us from the earliest days of numeracy, I figure.

You might think people have always counted as we count, but it's not so. When we teach counting in school, we are teaching kids the ability to keep track of more stuff than they can use, manage, or imagine. But the oldest counting systems, including the Mesopotamian precedents to our own, seem to have been based on what people could hold, what they could carry at one time, and they typically came from seminomadic cultures whose daily life resisted and often forbade the accumulation of stuff. They were based on the number three: what you held in one hand, and then the other, and then what you could hold when you brought your hands together. So there were words for "one," "two," and "three," then something like "four" (a bit more piled on top of three). And then there was a word for "everything else," all the other stuff you couldn't carry and so didn't need to be able to count or count on.

The decimal system comes from a more sedentary way of life, where you stored what you weren't using. It seems to come from the fingers, true, but it really comes from surplus and, subsequently, from the trade in surplus. Numeracy, you could say, marks the dawn of the transgression of the self-regulating natural order, an order in which all the stuff of the world was an attribute, a limb, of God, an order in which the moderation of possession was a moral precept that prompted moving things about in a gifting circulation. And that gift-giving became a ritual in itself.

But people did begin to acquire and amass. The counting system let them, inveighed upon them to do so. They tithed, yes, but they kept,

too, more than they'd ever need, until "need" became a matter of opinion and feeling and not of fact. (That's probably why there's some dispiritedness in that efficient counting system called the bridal registry.) And they prompted others to keep and count exponentially, as they did. You can imagine the wonder and moral queasiness that must have gathered around those who could do so, who could leave the confines of the hand, the fingers, the memory. There would have been something sophisticated about it, yes, but something otherworldly too, fearful even, slipping the bond that once had been, to take the measure of everything. It's that otherworldliness, that uneasiness, that the Latin and Greek words are remembering. When the Normans conquered England, they set about enumerating every made and owned thing on the island and sent accountants round to do so. The resulting tome is with us still: the Domesday Book, often and ominously and probably accurately pronounced "Doomsday."

And so in its semantic infancy, *ritual* was a verb. It didn't exist, waiting to be undertaken. Instead it happened. And then it was gone. Or, as likely, it didn't happen. It didn't work. The oldest meaning of *to ritualize* is probably something like "to trace as the Gods traced, to track their ways in the world, to remember it all as they do." And, failing all that, "to remember them and plead with them to remember us."

A ritual, if it is truly a ritual and not a gauzy affirmation of the best of life, or a threadbare disdain for the lowly and the prosaic, carries something of the radioactive about it, something of the dark arts. Rituals are out at the edge of what is likely, what is familiar. They are ill-advised. The ordinary days are more shaken than shaped by them. They are not habituated soothings, utterances of reassurance, making everything right, taking the bored and the bereaved to the emotional mountaintop for a psychic spa day. They are conjuring acts, iffy, nervy, doubtful as to their outcome. Rituals are waltzes with wild things. If you don't know what you're doing—and ofttimes when you do—things can go sideways with unnerving suddenness and ease in ritual. Intention does not rule the day in ritual. In ritual, everything but you rules the day. Imagine, then, turning your love and hopes for a better day over to *that*. This book tracks ritual.

Matrimonial ritual is the tracking of two-by-two love as it is prompted out into the world, the rhythmed way that betrothal is translated into radicalized citizenship. Or it still could be.

3

The Still Points and the Storms

Folktales have turning points, axes around which events centrifugally spin. These turning points organize the narrative and the pedagogical thrust of the story by ceasing to appear to be turning points. Instead, they start to look like details that fade in significance by ceding centrality to the next event, the next thing that appears. One of the principal disappearing turning points in these tales? Disobedience, meaning "poor hearing" or "didn't hearken to." Somebody was told to do something they didn't do or forgot to do. Somebody went the wrong way in the forest. Somebody planted the red seed under the bed before they went to sleep, forgot the white one recommended by some old woman, and the whole story tumbles out from that indiscretion.

Here's a bit of irony. There are moments in life made to measure for cresting intensity and deep autobiographical declaration, times when you are invited without constraint to mean, to be seized and occupied by the obligation to proceed as a person of consequence, not interest. In working cultures, these are times for the rudiments of the culture to be laid bare, told again and toasted again by the oldest among them, the living bridge between the alive and the dead, and learned anew by the youngest. Seats of honour are left for their dead. The door is unbolted and ajar. Their Gods are at hand.

In cultures with no such sense of themselves and their place in the order of days, with little or no shared understanding of much that matters,

these same events are occasions for topoglyphic, autonomic poverty to congeal and appear. When these peoples undertake ceremonial doings, there are scripts for banality where there could have been dicey dalliance with another world. Recipes for reassurance placate and enervate, and everyone present knows how and where these things go before they've gone anywhere. There's no chance even for the meagre depths to be plumbed long enough for something like a longing for something authentic to appear. The contemporary wedding, and most of the contemporary alternative weddings, tend to be such articulations of this meagreness. That's what you are invited to. They are a kind of disobedience, a mishearing. And nobody means for this to be so.

I was asked some years ago to do a wedding for a couple in their early thirties. Through them, I asked their families and guests to come for two days. Saturday was to be an hours-long dis-orientation of sorts with some discussion of the nature of ritual; what matrimony is for; what its missing-in-action partner, patrimony, is for; the part they were being asked to play in this very old, barely remembered, mandatory thing. Sunday was for the hours-long ritual proper. Not too much to ask, I didn't think, given that it was the rest of these two people's lives we were gathering to forge and warrant and witness to.

Toward the end of the Saturday meeting, as people began to wander out of the tent, never to return, a bit confused and contrary, I thought I should give the remaining people a sense of what tomorrow wasn't going to be. I talked briefly about contemporary wedding practices. Not the almost indefensible expense of the things, not the autonomic sameness of the things, not the wedding-mill nature of the event-planner approach to the things. Instead, I harped on the brevity of the things. I don't know why, but I started wondering aloud about the possible reasons for what I ended up calling, ungenerously, the fifteen-minute wedding.

It started to get clear. Why are they so, well, curtailed? Is it because people have other things to do? Well, people always have—have *always* had—other things to do. Anyway, the reception lasts hours and hours longer than the ceremony, to the point where very clearly the reception is the main event and the ceremony is the opening act. Their busyness doesn't keep them from that. Is it because, after the prior weddings, all the preparation, that awkward rehearsal, everybody pretty much knows what's going to happen? Yes, that's partly why. Everybody does know. Everybody knows what a wedding is for, what a wedding's like, what a wedding's

supposed to do. There's a party line, and there's little or no confusion about it. There's disobedience in that habit. Nobody, I'll wager, comes to a wedding ceremony thinking, *Well, I wonder how this'll go*, or, *This should be interesting*.

Though they may not allow it to break the surface, people do come dreading the fact that there is no wonder in it all. The planning sees to it, yes, but the brevity sees to it more so. Maybe a few people remember the wedding scene in the film *The Graduate* and are wondering if there'll be a spited, spirited, unrequited ex-suitor banging on the door, upheaving the proceedings. One thing's certain, though: nobody, or next to nobody, comes to a wedding to see if the world can be served by it, to be in on something that could drive them to the barricades. And so those weddings happen year after year and, changing dress styles and self-penned vows aside, not much really changes.

My guess is that weddings are shorter and shorter now because they are foregone conclusions, making as if they are ceremonies. They are rubber-stamped affirmations of something that's already there, that's already happened: love, in this case. Check the invitation you receive. It probably says something like "Join us in this celebration of love between . . ." It'll never say anything like: "Come see what happens. Come see what matrimony might do to their love. Come and be in on person-making at its finest. We'll fling the doors wide open, and the Ancients of Days and the old Rafter Dwellers may come. It'll be stout work. Witnesses needed. We'll be up against it. God help us all."

That's because there's nothing at stake in the event, nothing up for grabs, nothing yet to be found. Weddings have become not much more than what people want. You don't need an hours-long ceremony for that. You need the secularized equivalent. You need a psychic manqué. You need a placeholder, a stand-in. You need a spirit drive-by, or something with the life force of a teary high five.

Look carefully up and down the smooth-running brevity, the tucked-in, nailed-down nature of the thing, the assurance leaking from its four corners. You could notice a dark lining to the taffeta cloud. Modern weddings are climate-controlled events. They're too sure of themselves to be trusted as rituals. They are trying too hard to be calm. They've short-circuited the ritual in favour of a kind of meet-and-greet with temporary royalty. What's with the script? What's with that rehearsal? All of this is what Shakespeare warned us about when he wrote, "Me thinks thou dost protest too much."

No, the brevity is really there to make sure that nothing happens, nothing of substance, nothing of consequence. No alchemy. No mystery. No crazy other-world stuff. That overreach there in its scripted heart tells me that, deep in the rayon-wrapped bosom of that special day, the modern wedding is scared silly of something happening. That's because it has an ages-old, abandoned memory of a time when a wedding was a place where the Gods came round, where human testing and trying and making was at hand, when the dead lingered in the wings, awaiting their turn to testify and inveigh.

That's apostasy in a self-made, psychologizing age like this one. So the fifteen-minute wedding is there as a customer-satisfaction measure, to give the high-paying families what they want, to affirm nuptially the love that's in the air, to bar the door to the Other World. Check the guest list: no Gods, no dead people. No chance.

And that's what I told the people in the tent, those of them left. Next day, about a third of the way into the ceremony, the groom-to-be's father (who I was informed later was a to-church-every-morning-before-work Catholic) was the first to take up my invitation to the families to speak. The first words out of his mouth, spoken with genuine and practiced belligerence, were, "I had a fifteen-minute wedding. I'm proud of it. I'm proud of everything we did."

He got a good laugh. He stole a glance in my direction before continuing, just so we both knew. There was nothing in it that was kind. There was titanium certainty. Yes, he certainly was proud. Not of what we were trying to do that day. Not of his son. He was proud of the uncontested and incontestable, surefire, in-the-bag, foreseeable thing his wedding was, and maybe of what his marriage and his life had become.

You could think of it as you might dry cleaning. There used to be a chain of these outlets, featuring a service they called one-hour Martinizing. These were the days, kids, when takeout was crazy modern. You can tell from the name what the pitch and the appeal of the new technology was. It was better for your prized clothes because it was dry. Wet was out of fashion, too hard on the fabric. Who knew? *And* it was fast. It was all but "while you wait." That's how to take care of what you love in the modern world: dry and fast.

But every shortcut can be a costly detour—in dry cleaning, in matrimony, and in life. That one-hour Martinizing was, I would guess, one part smoke and mirrors, one part cheap offshore labour to do your cleaning for you, one part hands-free assembly line hellishly top-heavy with unpronounceable chemicals that fouled the water supply. That bouquet on your

clothes was more like embalming fluid than soap. They didn't feel clean. They felt treated for infection. At least they didn't get wet, though. They didn't go through the prolonged and iffy degradation of getting cleaned. They were processed, stiffened, and readied for the demands of a modern lifestyle. The cleaning *hurt* the clothes into sanitized submission.

The comparison of a modern wedding with dry cleaning might seem harsh—it is harsh—but here's what I'm thinking: The modern wedding is supposed to be a special day, yes, but not "weird" special. Not "What the hell was that?" special. More like "touching and funny" special. Unless your kid is marrying somebody from a less globalized culture than your own, you should be able to recognize all the gestures, all the moves, all the promises, all the food. That's what makes it "a real wedding." The only way you can get that out of a ceremony that was once devoted to the utter subversion of the interiorization of love, for the sake of the world, in the presence of the Gods, is to turn it into a kind of cryogenically enhanced version of the usual, and to make sure that nothing will happen that hasn't happened a thousand times. Not alchemy. Preservation. *Dry cleaning*.

Modern weddings, in the main, are theatrical. They are foregone conclusions. That's not to say that they're false in any way, only that they are choreographed to stiffness, like a coronation. There's a structural difference between ritual and theatre, to go along with the aesthetic ones. When ceremony took upon itself the idea of an audience to replace the participants and a script to replace the hovering presence of the Other World, theatre is what ensued. Where ritual warns the participants to buckle up, performance invites the audience on a stroll down memory lane. Performance is four-fifths memory work. It relies on sameness, repetition, and recognizability to be successful.

But rituals pose a real and present danger to that sameness, that repetitiveness, when their outcome is yet to be known. And that means ceremonies are rituals when there is a real and present chance of failure. Imagine a wedding failing. What would that look like? What would it mean? Disappointment? No. More like danger. More like something vital is suddenly in doubt.

I worked in what I've called the "death trade" for a brief but intense period. I saw a lot, but there was a lot I didn't see, shrouded and appalling

and secreted as the palliative-care world was. Toward the end of my time there, I was invited to present things at conferences. If you've never done it, these can be unnerving affairs, heavy on expectations to perform and succeed. They were often exercises in jittery self-congratulation.

One such conference was in a Godless ballroom in a gaudy hotel in a very big city. I was in every way out of my league. I'd prepared well, I thought, but the woman who was on before me had set the bar very high, declaring with great fanfare and celebration that her brand of palliative counsel was about to go mainstream, causing the eight hundred or so attendees to rise in palms-up affirmation. As I made my way to the podium, the title given to the proceedings—"The Art of Death"—elbowed everything else I'd come with to the wings. I knew suddenly that I had to talk about it. I didn't start with death, even though I was known as the Death Guy. I started with art. In brief, here's what I managed to say:

> Some of what's taken for art today is better understood as decoration. Decoration's job is to fit into the residential, corporate, and interior life of the buyer. At its best, decoration reflects well upon what's there, complements it, furthers and encourages it. This is why so much self-expression is taken for art these days. It comes from the artist's inner life, and so it has an indisputable lineage and credibility. And the buyer's inner life gathers that lineage and creditability to itself. That's IKEA's business model surely: commonplace, arty decoration that ups the domestic credibility without dishevelment.
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> There's no resemblance to art in that. Here's why: Art is not a piece of furniture. It isn't a "thing." It is a verb. It is not an identity. It is an action. That action is prismatic. Art's work is to take what is all but invisible in the culture and refract it to visibility, where the spectrum, the constituent parts—especially the ones in hiding, in witness protection, in apparent abeyance—show themselves.
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> The culture, not the artist's inner life in self-expression, is revealed in art, in all that culture's misapprehending glory. That makes artists culture workers, it seems to me. Their job is to get out of the way so their skills and discipline can serve their culture best by making that culture palpable, manifest, so often against the inclinations of the culture. The caveat of the job: the artist has no obligation to compliment or reassure or decorate the culture, but

only to make the culture utterly, ruthlessly available to itself, for scrutiny, for adjudication, for confession, for redemption, for work.

This troubles, of course, because the culture is challenged deeply by the artistic work in its midst. Sometimes it is indicted by the work. When the work of art devolves into "the artistic personality," into "personal self-expression," that's when the culture has begun to co-opt, buy off, and intimidate the witness. In a functioning democracy worthy of the name, all citizens have these artistic obligations. Some are better at it than others, but the function does not coalesce and atrophy into a subsidy ghetto or a personality type called "artist." It is part of being a matured human who belongs somewhere. Disciplined, faithful, costly witnessing: they are the marching orders of art making.

My point was that there are clear, present, and mandatory parallels between artistic and ritual work. Both are culturally employed actions that require craft, technology, discipline, conscience about the old days, learning and time in. In a spiritually engaged time and place, they are manifest in the political and spiritual marketplace of the culture. Like art, ritual is not, must not be, an inward-turned striving after affirmation and catharsis and healing, not individually and not culturally. When it is routinized, standardized, authorized, and predictable, ritual is no longer the best mythic, poetic, and spiritual part of the participants and the culture rising and reporting for active duty. It is sleepwalking pretending to be pilgrimage.

Birth is iffy. Rites of passage are iffy. Death is iffy. They're not iffy in their necessity, their belonging in the world. They're iffy in their outcome, their success. Matrimony is iffy, in all those ways. You don't know how it's going to go, if it's truly on. You shouldn't be able to know. Palpably, this is a terrific and onerous burden to lay upon people trying to make it up the aisle of matrimony without falling, without their nerves giving out. It is a burden upon all those called to officiate and attend and witness the thing. But this is about the rest of two people's lives, for a start. At least two. The stakes are high. The margins are slim. Who goes to a wedding to save their little corner of the world? Who *has*

a wedding to do that? Almost nobody I know. Probably almost nobody you know. It is this very weight, though, that grants something like stability, redemptive possibility, and gravitas to the emotional volatility of the event. That heavy lifting lends the proceedings something like worth and consequence.

If the ritualizing is real, then the perils and poverties of the times are recognizable in the wedding, in the intention of the principals, in the actions of the officials and the guests. They're not flaws or gaffs. They're signs of authenticity and belonging. It's counterintuitive, I know, saddling the nuptials with the prenuptials and the postnuptials of life. We'd sooner banish the everyday world for a few assured hours of touching and raucous stories, tears over those no longer here, and merriment. And why not? You can have all that and more in a wedding. But it'll be helium and smoky mirrors without the everyday world there to underwrite and endorse, enable and employ the reckless vows the two people are making. If the perils and poverties of the times aren't recognizable in the wedding, if they're not given a seat of honour at the head table, they'll as likely as not haunt the proceedings from the wings. "Special" wears off, and ordinary life seems uncalled for, disappointing, beneath the nobility you seek in love. The ritual of matrimony gives those vows a place, a this-worldly place, to appear. Those two people are the *occasion* for all of this showing up, not the reason for it.

4

Betrothal

A wedding transacts a lot of family and pheromonal business. It brings together the yin and the yang in an authorized, deliberate, and meaning-driven way. Be they same-sex or other-sex, weddings are an amalgam of something male and something female, of the getting and the begetting that made the betrothed. The mate choice might be calculated to ease those differences ("We're each other's best friends!"), but each chose the other for different reasons. Those differences will grow emphasis with the passing of time. Attraction is not the same thing as homogeneity.

You've likely heard the phrase "By my troth." It is, as you probably guessed, a kind of swearing, a kind of oath-making, a kind of vow. It employs the Old English word we translate as "truth," so we are in deep water here. Only recently has the word *truth* atrophied into a noun, signifying some indwelling, unerring sameness that renders out as "reliable, trustworthy, factually, and unfailingly accurate." It was, for most of its semantic life, a verb instead. *True* was something one did, not something one had or knew or was. The older meaning of *trued* was something close to "attested to, avowed by the worthy and the time-tempered among us." And so it had the twin attributes of merit and having been ancestrally affirmed. Its merit came from the willingness of elders to lay their name and standing in the community alongside what they were attesting to. That means that merit, or truth, derived from the status of whoever attested to

it and from their willingness to have that status tested. Its truth was not a quality of the thing being attested to.

It's not an easy idea for modern people to get behind. It doesn't feel trustworthy, largely because of the deep compromise visited upon those we would, in other times and places, have looked to for genuine leadership. Though it signified something solid, steadfast, and firm—qualities that recall something of those who were doing the testifying—"truing" also had some risk involved.

Most dictionaries will tell you that *troth* means "promise," but I'd say that is a modern confusion. A promise is something you make about something that is, at the moment of its pronouncement, not so. The prefix *pro* was originally a spatial designation, subsequently a temporal one. It functions prepositionally, and it says "before" or "out in front of." Later, it was abstracted to mean "clearing the way for, enabling by being out in front of, favouring, affirming." The root is *mittere*, a Latin word meaning "to release, to send, to throw." All in all, "promising" is a declaration you make about something you are intending to do. It requires a future in which to appear. You are sending your intention out toward the future when you promise. You are making the declaration now, yes, but what you declare you will do hasn't happened yet. It isn't happening now, either. "We'll see" is promise's operative condition. Promise, in other words, is promissory.

Vow (Latin, *votum*) is something structurally different. It is a declaration you make to the Gods. In its Proto-Indo-European beginnings, it meant "to preach, to speak solemnly." In other words, it was something you were doing, not something you were going to do when/if things worked out and favoured you following through on your promise. Doing so in the presence of the Gods, with the Gods forefront, meant that a vow was an incarnating act, something that came into being by the speaking of it. Like voting. Vows remember the old power of invocation. They bring something into the world by bringing it into voice. When you invoke a vow, you incarnate.

Promise describes something you might do. It needs some luck, some favourable weather. It barely means "probably." It more likely means "maybe." *Vow* describes something you're doing right now by speaking it aloud. I can't think of a veritable vow that's silent. It needs witnesses, yes, auditors who can attest to its occurrence. But it doesn't need good intention, good luck, and a future in which to occur. A vow is happening *now*.

And so "by my troth" is a weighty and considerable thing to say, to do. And to be *betrothed* is some serious business. The *be* prefix in Old English signaled that. One etymological dictionary says it meant "thoroughly." A fuller sense of it: *Be* intensified what followed it. *Be* raised the stakes, deepened the depths: think of *bedevil*, *besmirch*, *beleaguer*, *beguile*, *bemoan*, *becalm*, *bewilder*, *beware*, *bereave*, and especially *belong*, which means "to hold and be held inside a deeper longing," the bewildering, beguiling opposite of the expectation of having all your needs met once you belong to someone, something. You get the idea. These are stout, strident, solid verbs, the kind you want with you in the trenches. They are things you want to do, want to be able to do, when the time is upon you and something serious is wanted.

So *troth* was, for the speakers of Old English, something that their old people and the medicine people did for their village, by attaching their name and their standing to the thing they were declaring. It meant something similar to "attest," but with more mythic mojo and menschkeit and earthiness. The oldest meaning seems to be something close to "wood." You can hear "tree" in the Old English *treowth*. It denoted something that obtained for itself the qualities of a prized tree, the best wood: solid, bending in a storm, upright, shelter-giving and vertical and living, feet in the earth and head into the wind, something that approached the abode of the sky Gods.

Betrothal is for grown-ups, then. That much has been clear for as long as people have been betrothed. To make a vow is to underwrite your words with your standing, your name, with whatever renown or success might attend you. Betrothal is the intensification, the deepening, of truth. It is only incidentally a declaration of love for another person. It is much more so a vow to inhabit fully and be fully inhabited by the life one is granted, in concert with another person. It is a prayer, often mistaken now for a Valentine card. To be betrothed is to be a swimmer in a secret sea. To be betrothed means that something of you has changed, and it's not coming back. It means you will still have your ordinary days, yes, but even their ordinariness is marked by something numinous. *By your troth*, you have left your palace of personal preference and remove. Your vows and your ordinary days are staves that raise up the prayer tent of love. To be betrothed means you have given your self-sufficiency, your self-determination, your self-absorbedness time off. And it means you have gained favour. It means that you and your promising have submitted.

Years ago I was consulted by an older couple about the possibilities, the ins and outs, the shape, size, and nuance of a wedding. I knew them a little. They had been cohabiting and more for a good while, so the idea that they were contemplating matrimony after so many years together was a bit surprising. They seemed fine without it. They and their relationship didn't *need* matrimony. Their enduring union seemed to say just that. Whether matrimony needed them had probably never been considered.

That one-way calculation is one of the hallmarks of inanimism. Those who abide by today's dominant culture in North America are highly skilled at navigating a world they're not persuaded is alive. It's "natural" enough to us, but it's neither deserving nor requiring the regard we reserve for living things, for things alive in their self-awareness. Matrimony might be a social institution, a cultural habit, an affectation of sorts, but to us it's scarcely alive, and we have no obligation to mind it or tend to it or feed it. We ask not what we could do for matrimony but only what matrimony might do for us. Still, their adult children responded by saying that it was about time they did it, and their grandchildren were excited by the idea. There were friends who were pleased, probably one or two who wondered why they'd want to spoil a good thing by going straight, matrimonially speaking.

It's a strange, if common enough idea that you could be known by what you haven't done, and know yourself that way. You wouldn't say that it's part of your identity to never have smoked, or never have taken a club car across the country, or never have eaten turtle, or never have made love in a tunnel with a train coming on. But it's different with matrimony. That's in part because until maybe fifty years ago, marriage was just in the cards after a certain point in most intimate relationships. Culturally speaking, it was habitual.

Now, all of that has changed, or seems to have changed. On many postmodern street corners, not getting married is like staking a place on the ramparts, like a carbon-neutral, gluten-free, high-consciousness act of sovereignty. Everybody knows how marriage seems to have worked out for women, for children. Getting married in some politicized quarters is a lifestyle GMO. It's like giving up or giving in, going over to the dark side.

The reasons people don't get married are probably as many as the reasons people do: not ready; not a priority right now; hate the government; saving; haven't yet met the right person; *didn't* meet the right person; no such thing as "the right person"; didn't work out the first time; didn't work out for their parents; dating doesn't work; just doesn't matter/not a big deal/fine or more than fine without it; why wreck a good, uncomplicated, easy-to-extricate-myself-from common-law thing? Not getting married is often only a decision in hindsight, an identity by default.

All of this was in the air as I spoke with the couple. Though I didn't know them well, I guessed that there might have been a particular cardinal feature on the compass of matrimony that was a sticking point, that had been something of a deal-breaker until then. These are always hazardous moments in a human encounter. I learned this very well in the death trade. It isn't clear how much candour people have bargained for in this delicate waltz of "Where are we?/Who are we?/Should we?/Is this it?" People will say they want to talk about this important thing. It isn't clear, though, that they want to hear *everything*, including the things that might throw them off the scent of what drew them to speak with you in the first place. But adults deserve candour to go with the caution and courtesy they also deserve. I took a chance and said:

> There's something about matrimony. Not marriage, *matrimony*. The thing itself, the way and the day of it. It's no guarantee. But it is mandatory. There's no discussing it, no modifying it, no softening the thing by crafting personalized vows or anything of the sort. Matrimony's like death: it's bigger than you. It's bigger than what you think about it, all your opinions, all mine. It isn't in the least interested in those opinions. It is a deity in the House of Love now, in the same way a baby is a deity called Life come into the house to change everything by showing you what you really believe about life. In that same way, Death will be a deity when it comes to call, when it gives you one honest chance to look out and bid the whole thing goodbye. Matrimony is like death: something you enter into, not something you entertain.
>
> So here's the deal: You will *submit*, submit to this thing that is and will always be bigger than you, and you might have a chance of pulling it off. Or you will not, and you'll be hard-pressed. Those are your choices.

I didn't hear from them again about the idea. I heard from someone a while back that they did go ahead, though. So, bless them.

When a culture is at its work, it is making humans from highly adaptable, opinion-addled armies of one. Any culture worthy of the name knows that humans aren't made by copulation. They are made by winnowing and harrowing, by the slings and arrows of fortune mediated by elders and tempered by time passing. When a culture is at its work, the mingling of getting and begetting, of this world and another, is palpable in daily life, in the observable heavens, in the mat of root and tendril that is the made world. When a culture is at its work, love between people is one way divinity lingers in the world.

So a betrothal would not, in such a place, be a safe zone in a crazed world. It would not be time out from the fracas and the fray. It would be an iteration, an incarnation in deliberate human form of an imperative that life enforces: to bedazzle the self and bevel the hard edges that separate humans from each other and from all the world that would never be human. Betrothal, in such a place, would be a way that cultured humans imitate life, by coaxing lust and longing up into the light and then seizing upon and spending them so that life might live.

Imagine that you inhabited such a place and time, that you belonged to the world in this way. If that's too much, then imagine that you come from people who did so belong, some time ago. Imagine that, even in such places, everything isn't perfect or working superbly well. Not everyone is spiritually achieved, not everyone remembers this belonging. So then imagine that, in such a place and time, this inheritance is not extinguished because one has not followed the rules, has forgotten important things, has not lived accordingly. In a place like that, there is no primordial or cosmic or existential punishment for not doing so, no slighting or shaming that comes with that truancy.

Forgetting how to be human is part of being human in such places, and rituals are there to ease or cajole or oblige the errant back into the fold of mutual understanding. One of the signs that people have forgotten what guides them best in matters of the heart is their inchoate longing for something more. There's a sense that, well, you got your way and still things are not as they might be. Something's missing. Most of us know, or

remember, how easy it is for young people in particular to mistake another person for the reason for their lives, for the purpose and the reason they can't otherwise seem to find. There is this sense of belonging to something vaster than themselves, their strivings, their ideas, and their loneliness that has escaped them for the moment, and the laws of attraction in such moments seem to suggest that another person is that very "something vaster." In such times and places, matrimony is there to take the utter entrancement with another and turn it toward the world, the proper beneficiary of people with an errant longing for more.

On the day of your wedding, in such a place, with all of this at play, who would you have been? You'd have been another chance for that culture to get it right in its way of living with the world around it. And what would you know yourself to be doing? Probably, you'd know in some way that overwhelms your old sorrows that by marrying a fellow human, you'd be marrying God.

What?

Subtler and more knowledgeable people than me might have said you are marrying *in* God (though I don't know that that clarifies much). How, though? It sounds bombastic and eerie. How does that work? Here's how. Your willingness to submit your life to life is as much "God in the world" as anything is. How we are with each other, certainly in the heights and depths of our heart's life, is how we are with what is holy in this world. Our willingness to submit to that awkward-making, seemingly unworkable fact is what we do in matrimony. That's the work of the matrimonial moment. And initiated people would know all of this and live by it, and their ritual work on behalf of your wedding would be carried out as if life depended on how they dressed, moved, ate, spoke, and provisioned the event. Such would be the gravitas of the thing. They used to call it "the holy bonds of matrimony." That's residue, the smudge mark of this mostly evaporated understanding. They used to say, "What God has brought together let no man put asunder," or something similar. That's what matrimony might have looked like before the advent of courtly or romantic love.

So then, what happened to all this? *Who would want to marry God?* you might think. I'm not sure in those places and times that personal romantic attachment, even of the enduring kind, was the high-water mark of the human spirit's presence or work. More likely it was one place where the spirit could do its work, nothing more. So I don't say that people *wanted* to marry God. Instead, they knew somehow that their matrimony was a

way of living the closeness of the divine in this world. How did we get to celebrations of love on a beach in Barbados with a few friends who could afford the trip? How, if so much is at stake, did we get to fifteen-minute walk-throughs in a suburban-mall church or town hall? I'm not sure I know, but I've an idea that it has something to do with conversion from animism to monotheism at the point of a sword, of all things.

In the old days, strangers came to the places I've been describing here with their gospel, their soul, their hell, their "God is not a tree," and their "in the world but not of the world." Most of us in this dominant culture of North America have kin among the strangers, as much as we have kin among those who the strangers set themselves upon. I think it's important to remember that, should the temptation come to choose sides. Where did the old Gods, the old understandings go? Have you wondered that? It couldn't have been like changing your clothes, not in those days. People didn't just change the spiritual channel and carry on with life, did they? Did we?

The calamities, the feel of havoc and rupture and severance from what made life mean anything at all must have been incalculably fearful and confusing. It tore families and villages apart, no doubt. It certainly pitted traditional peoples, typically elders and medicine people, against the adventists, and cast traditional spiritual and ritual practice in a dark and ghastly light. A few things are fairly certain. Paganism was invented in just that kind of circumstance, defined partly by the converted people's lingering adherence to older, land-based, animistic practices, but more so by their distance from the centres of orthodoxy and their enforcement branches. The old understanding of the world as having centres gave way to one in which there was one centre, one origin, one point of power and authority: all the worldly roads led to Rome or Jerusalem, all otherworldly roads to God. Time once had many kinds of time in it (primordial time, reversing time, hierophantic time, end-time), but after conversion, it was progressive, sequential, intolerant in its tense order, bound to the future, leaving the past and the dead behind, blowing through the present, cheapening this life and divorcing it, elevating the soul by leaving it lonely, a stranger in a strange world. The whole subtle matrix of the thing was divided up neatly into light and dark, right and wrong, BC and AD.

The consequences for people's ritual life must have been acute, desolate, and devastating. Mandates for rituals for the world would have devolved to serving ruling elites or profiting their sponsors. Ceremonies became

translucent, papally endorsed walk-throughs, their outcomes never in doubt. Rituals became slaves of personal purpose. One clear sign is the advent of personal affection as the principal enabler of the ritual of matrimony. What we now call Romance literature, written through the period circa 1200–1500 CE in the Mediterranean and northern Europe, championed "romantic love." I know that many before me have cited the advent of "courtly love"—the fluttering kerchiefs and hearts, the arch gallantries of mediated attraction, the Guineveres and the Lancelots—as the fitting and final emergence of Europe from the Dark Ages, the rescue of human love from the chaste, church-bound straitjacket of social contract.

But I think it likely that courtly love was the privatization of matrimony. It looks to me to be the broken axle of an old conveyance that drew humans close to Gods. Courtly love seems to have foreclosed on an old understanding of God in the world, the honouring of the elder voice, that once prevailed in betrothal. Before, matrimony was there to benefit the Gods, the world, the village, the clans, and the families. When things changed in this regard, they changed fundamentally. Matrimony became an exercise in personal preference. For the most part, that's all it is now. The intensity of two people's feelings for each other is all the transubstantiation we can manage, all our weddings seem able to bear. The world and the village and the clans and the Gods, those of them left, are obliged to seek their sustenance where they can find it: elsewhere, otherwise. You could call it "marrying for love." Many people have. But you'd be missing a lot of detail if you did. With some hindsight, the advent of courtly love seems to have had the effect of seizing matrimony from the community. At best, the results are mixed. There's a lot more personal freedom, particularly freedom to choose romantic partners, than there probably was. And there's a lot of freedom from social obligation. In other times and places, that freedom would be a forlorn kind of purgatory. It's a prized possession now.

No wonder no one calls themselves betrothed anymore. It's awfully serious, not lighthearted at all. And it forecloses on all the other possibilities, the other combinations. It's too for real. The world's moving too fast for betrothal.

5

Profanity, Promise, Vow

Though I attended divinity school as a young man, and though I with requisite credentials sought entry into the precinct of a priesthood, the truth of the matter is that no priesthood of the time would have me. So I have no inside information on the doings of the church in any form, including its politics and hidden chambers. I wouldn't know my way around a Sunday morning service. I do know, however, that there is something called an altar, the scene of big doings. This is the gathering place at ceremonial crunch time, from what I understand, detonation place for the conjuring, such as it is. This means that most of the time even the faithful are kept a safe distance from the altar.

When public health and personal health allow, my band gets to tour a show called *Nights of Grief and Mystery*. Often, the local organizers will offer up a local church as a cheap and pliant venue for the event. We tend to refuse outright. It isn't beliefs, or lack of beliefs, we're acting on. These venues typically have miserable acoustics, but that's not it, either. It's me having to occupy the place where the altar would be, or the place just in front of it. God bless whoever occupies it in their nine-to-five, but I know enough to know that I shouldn't be occupying it when I do. I know that they have to pay their bills, too, and I know attendance is down, but they're going to have to get by without me standing up there. No hard feelings about the old days, but no sense being mistaken now, in this

world or another, for celebrant in an old order that wouldn't have me. I wasn't raised with it or against it, but still if I am in a standard worshipping place, I steer clear of the altar area. Out of respect, out of misgiving, I don't stand there.

But of course, there are exceptional times, when people gather down front, when the faithful are expected to come round the altar. Communion is one such time, baptism is another. The other exception is the wedding ceremony.

That's a detail that shouldn't be lost in any serious consideration of matrimony. A wedding is high-end stuff in a ritually bereft and truant time such as ours. That is a time when you get to approach the general precinct of the sanctum sanctorum, ground zero in the human encounter with Something Else. An altar is a place of proclamation, yes, of testifying and celebration of a certain restrained kind. Historically, altars are places of sacrifice, too. In obedience to the postmodern programme of symbolism, demythologization, and desecration, most altars more recently have been the scene of reenactments.

A brief word about *sacrifice*. Its old and probable meaning in the Roman world (it's a Latin word) is something close to "the making of sacredness" or "the fashioning of something ordinary, something mundane, into something sacred." It describes a dalliance with Godly work in the Godly realm, whatever is left of it now, and it credits the celebrants with conjuring powers mysteriously on par with Gods and Worthies. That's reason enough to pause over this word, but there's more. The very idea of sacrifice carries with it a memory of something gone awry, almost cosmically awry. What happened to the sacred, such that we have to be drawn into making it, or making it again, or making it good? Sacrificial acts are not creative acts. They are reaction formations. They are acts of coping with an ineffable, recurrent trauma, a demon that doesn't permit soothing or solving.

Think of it this way: Who makes "sacred"? The Makers of Life would be a good guess, or a good start. By the time you move down the chain of command and get to human beings, it is more than clear that we are recipients and beneficiaries of what is sacred, particularly when the sacred seems pleased with the proceedings, but even when the sacred means business. Unless you are a born-again atheist, agnostic, or inanimist, or a supremely autonomous biped with no past and no future worth acknowledging or looking to, you would probably grant that, in principle, humans

are not in the sacred-making business, and ought not to be. The sacred-acknowledgment business? Yes. Every day. That's what giving thanks is. That's one of the cornerstones of culture. But not making it, not fixing it.

So, if some of us—say, the hierarchs among us—take upon ourselves this function, it must be a sign that something is in deep disarray. There has been some kind of compromise of the sacred, in our lived relation with it, in our understanding of it, that needs setting right. It is extreme business indeed that prompts humans to take up that work of recreating sacredness here in this world. So it stands to reason that this sacrifice business carries a memory of something we have no lived experience of. With that in mind, I'm going to propose, for the sake of this discussion about matrimony, that every altar is set up on an ash heap of sorts. An altar is more raft than mountaintop, more a way of treading the cresting waves made by the Gods and their ways gone from among us, or we from among them, than it is companionship with the fundament of life.

After all, when you designate some bit of your grind or your ground as "sacred," you have, whether you meant to or not, disposed of the rest as needing redemption, as lacking in pedigree, as unsacred. As profane. In fact, sacrifice creates desecration. It is an act of desecration. It requires desecration in order to proceed at all. And this is what the current meaning of "profane" unwittingly remembers.

Etymologically, *profane* means whatever stands or goes "in front of or before the fanus, the precinct designated as the Gods' house or resting place; the altar." That means that it is only with the designation of the altar and the sacred space that the profane, the nonsacred, appears. You need the altar first. That's what brings the profane into being. Either that or your starting point is that everything's profane. You end up in the same desolate place either way.

So, approaching the altar to undertake the business of matrimony is a considerable thing, is it not? Best to know where you are, and why you're there, and what's likely to happen. There is a lot at stake when you take your place at the altar. Something's going to end, and not voluntarily. That, after all, is where our phrase "at stake" comes from. Animals were tied to the stake, to the altar, or to a post close by, and they were taken down. Not symbolically, either.

At the beginning of most modern weddings, the celebrant will begin by intoning "Dearly Beloved" and other affable exaggerations from the front of the house. There is, usually, some version of the standard declaration describing the reasons for the gathering. That is an odd way to begin, given that it is an invitation-only event, and though it might be the first time most of the people have been in a formal house of worship in quite a while, everyone knows why they're there. The doors haven't been flung open, signs posted outside imploring all and sundry to witness the proceedings like a real estate open house, strangers mingling with friends and family. This is a known thing, or so it appears.

It might seem another crude and rootless formality, that is, unless you credit the possibility that this formality is a shard of the old matrimonial crucible, now shattered and scattered by the vagaries and the verities, by conversion and courtly love and by the passing of time. The person making the declaration probably remembers no such august lineage going back to a time of noble matrimony. But I remember the lineage, and I recognize that the celebrants are standing in the front of the hall with bits of that crucible in their hands. By declaring the purpose of the gathering, those celebrants are taking care of some very important ritual business. They are getting the Other World on their side. Whether they see it that way or not, they are in some fashion summoning the saints.

I heard this line attributed to Carl Jung: "Summoned or not, the Gods will be present." I hold the man and his work in esteem, but if it is his line, I part ways with Dr. Jung on this one. It is, first of all, bad manners in ritual doings to assume the presence of anyone, anything. It is a mark of aching self-abnegation, too, and it carries the suspicion of utter personal inconsequence to assume that, in the case of the unseen world, your invitation is irrelevant, unnecessary. Jung had a lot of monotheism available to him, born to the Protestant hortatory arts as he was, and this observation of his has monotheism to spare. Historically, the attribution of omnipotence and omnipresence has always been hard on the local religious and ceremonial etiquette, wherever it has gone. If the God is always present, there's no bona fide etiquette for calling God to join the proceedings. This is another way of saying that there is no God but God.

But animists and polytheists tend to credit the possibility that their deities might be off elsewhere, doing other work, at a time that their presence is needed, and so they would have elaborate ways of petitioning for their appearance. Monotheists, followers of the God of Nowhere in Particular,

tend to assume the everywhere/always nature of the deity, and because of that the deity is, perhaps benignly, on call, on retainer, and because of that they may not make anything like a similar petition. But maybe not asking for the presence of the divine because the divine's always everywhere is something akin to not inviting your friend to a party you're planning to have in her house because she'd be there anyway.

The practice of beginning a ritual of matrimony with the announcement that it is such a ceremony could be a sign that this comes from an old time, a time before the missionaries sorted people out. The practice amounts to an acknowledgment of mysterious presence, possibility, and volatility, and it is an acknowledgment that there are those who may have been forgotten. It is not easy to be human, not even in the best of times, and so it can and does happen that not all ancestors, not all the Gods of place, not all the graces appear on the invitation list. Memory is where human frailty lives. That's why there is the arithmetic of ritual, the holy counting, the tally in the tale. Making the announcement makes a clear declaration that the throng from the Other World is needed, that their attendance amounts to a raucous blessing on the proceedings and the outcomes, that their blessing is needed, that uncertainty is in the wings, that matrimony isn't something undertaken entirely, exclusively, between humans.

Following this notice of intent, there are usually words from the front of the hall reminding everyone of the slings and the arrows of the matrimonial path. There are claims made on behalf of the inevitable upside of matrimony of the life-restoring, life-completing kind, some of which the time to come will bear out, some of which will sound hollow or nonsensical or cruel a decade from now, perhaps even a year from now, some of which will cause witnesses to wince, to wonder how anyone thought those claims were good ones to make. It's a kind of cheerleading on behalf of the institution. When the game is tight, maybe people are entertained by cheerleading, even emboldened by it. But no one in their soul trusts cheerleading. It isn't the news. It isn't the way things are.

Then there is the great summing up and the great looking forward to a fulfilled future, where the two become one, and the one can get all manner of things done. Often this is delivered as a kind of inside joke, as if everyone present knows the slings and arrows of marriage, as if everyone's got it sussed out. This is the time of ascertaining whether these two people have thought this through adequately (no one can; how many would go

through with it if they did?), and whether the hearts there at the front of the room are stout enough now to take on the fetters of state-sanctioned licensure (they don't really know, but the money is spent and the crowd is here, so it's too late now), whether they are willing to turn the page on every relationship real and imagined—every one—that might've been. In other words, this is the moment for vows.

If you hover over the word for a moment, there's gold to be found there. It's a simple word, and everyone you'd ask would say that they know what it means. As usual, you'd be served up synonyms, as if there are any synonyms for *vow*. There aren't. Not one, in my estimation. The first thing to consider is how often and in what circumstances you've used that word. You'll probably note the fact that, as a rule, you don't use it. It is, frankly, too strong for daily use. It would wear out your psyche if you used it accurately and faithfully even once a week. So it appears rarely, and it seems to accrue to events of genuine gravity. Vows are of that order of utterance that takes your breath away when you make them. Properly so, as you may see in a moment.

What is a vow? Maybe it's a deal. Cynics would probably say so. Deals bind the partners into some superintending arrangement that is supposed to benefit both, though not often in equal measure. Partners are governed by currencies that articulate equality by detailing equity. That's why matrimony isn't a deal between partners. Deals tell you what you're agreeing to do, and they tell your partner the same thing. Why don't they call it "the deal of matrimony" when the time comes for fessing up and making those declarations before the altar? Because matrimony isn't a deal; it doesn't partake of the spirit of a deal, that's why. Deals can change. They can be undone by (hopefully) mutual agreement. They bind, then they unbind. They are administrative and psychic and mutual weather. And so they aren't vows. Vows aren't weather. They're weathered.

Well then, are vows declarations of intent? Intention is all over the place when vows are made, yes, but vows are not declarations of feeling, sentiment, wish, hope, or striving. You're not crossing your fingers with vows. No one is likely to stand before the altar, before their friends and families, and agree to go for broke with another person based on that other person's wishes and hopes. Every one of these hopes—no exceptions—are bound to that person's ability to sustain them in heavy weather. They are conditional, the way all hopes and dreams are, and the condition is that you will be able to recognize them when you get there,

that you'll be able to carry them around, hold yourself to them. The condition is that you mean it, given all the evidence. The only binding thing you can say about a declaration of intent is that you mean it *now*. There is that unspoken business at the end, though: we'll see.

Many weddings are carried on in the presence of not very publicized backroom deals. Think of the prenuptial agreements and their ilk. The proponents say that they are realistic, even responsible. Well, this much is true: they are responsible for a residue of hesitation and a hue of bad faith that lingers over the proceedings, that is not banished by them. And they are realistic, yes, if realism means "just in case" or "one foot out" or "maybe." No, these agreements aren't vows. They don't take the place of vows, nor do they take up their work. They are limited liability indenture agreements. It's akin to agreeing to marry the person who is right for you, and then asking them to convert to your religion as an indication of their rectitude. What a strange event. You fall in love with an unconverted someone and then imagine that converting them will ratify that love. It says something about that preliminary love: you love what the person *could* be, if they loved you enough to stop being what they were that drew you to them in the first place and instead become an effigy of what you are. It happens, yes, and people agree to do it, yes, and they have their reasons, and it can work out. But maybe there's a shadow on the x-ray, and maybe that explains that touch of wheeziness when going the distance.

Vows aren't even in the same world as promises. It all comes down to the tense of the thing. Every promise, because it's a promise and not a vow, trades on potential, on what could be, on the future tense. Each promise made is a declaration of what you will do given a fair chance, even half a chance. "I promise to . . ." "I promise I will . . ." You can hear the out clause lingering there. You are declaring now what you will do later. And everybody knows that things happen, things go sideways, things you didn't think of happen. And all of them gang up on your promise. How can you be held to an old promise when the deal changes? Promises made in youth are a youth's promises, aren't they, based on a youth's understanding of the likelihoods, including the likelihood of what that youth is capable of, the limits. Things change. What are you going to do? The out clause: when you're promising, you aren't acting out the promise. You aren't standing in the land of the promise made manifest, made good. You're in the land of "not now," "not yet," "not quite," "not here." That's what a promised land is:

not *this* land. The promise trades on the future's market. It's a dealmaker's vow. That's the best that can be said about it.

So, we're left with this: a vow is madness. Or a vow is a vow and nothing else. Or a vow is both. When you make a vow, you are not talking about the future. You are not talking about the life that hasn't happened yet. When you make a vow, you are talking about now, about what you're doing right now. No, you're not talking about now. You're *doing* now. That's why the celebrant asks, "Do you . . . ?" Not "Will you . . . ?" or "Can you . . . ?" Vows are the architects of *right now*. No tomorrow. No yesterday to give you reasons to hedge your bets, to be reasonable, to mitigate your exposure. Only "Do you . . . ?" It isn't predicated on what you want to do. Wanting won't help with your vow. There is no want strong enough. What you mean to do looks good on greeting cards, on wedding invitations, but it isn't a vow. Trying? No, not trying. All of those feelings are felt in the present, yes, but all of them are promising and counting on a future in which they'll appear. The saying of the thing is the doing of the thing: that's a vow. It is incarnation, conjuring speech, magic. Think of that old-fashioned expression used to signal affirmation and assent: "You said it!" That comes from the land of vows. By virtue of making a vow, you are calling something from the void, out of Maybeland, into being.

And that's why vows are madness, sometimes a beautiful one. You are claiming to do something with and for and to this person beside you, and you have never done so before. Not with this person, at least, not these things. Maybe not anything like them, with anyone. It's nervy, it's unsustainable by any sane measure, and it has no enforcement branch, no visible means of support. Cold feet? I should think so, yes. "Cold feet" doesn't begin to describe the fit of sanity that might descend upon you if you consider what you're doing. You've no business monkeying with these claims, these allegations, these vows you're about to intone. They're not even your words, often. "Repeat after me . . ." You don't talk like you usually do in oath taking. You don't sound chatty or conversational. Or reasonable. You sound like the Bible, or somebody's holy book. In vows you're exposed like never before. You're hanging by a thread.

Well, come to think of it, there's *almost* no enforcement branch. There is the matter of the witnesses, the people invited to listen in and later to bear faithful witness and remember. Vows are like confessions. You do have to say it, whether or not you mean it or feel it. And someone

has to hear it, or the chances are good that while it was meant or felt or intended, it mightn't have happened. If there are witnesses, then none of this is interior, none of it apparition, none of it feelings or inside weather, none of it a matter of opinion. There is folie à deux, there is, but in a ritual of matrimony, in a sane place, the madnesses of you, the betrothed, are outnumbered by the attention brought to bear by your witnesses. There are more of them that are in on this than there are of you. Your vows have witnesses.

Even the legal part of this thing leans on the presence of witnesses, a few of whom are chosen to put their names beside your vows. It is among them that the vows will live in the early going, when the "wanted to" and the "meant to" will be off in the weeds, losing their way. In that treacherous three-to-five-years-in period, when the stats say you'll as likely as not—more likely, in fact—fail, it's your witnesses, if they are witnesses and not a Greek chorus of yes-women, yes-men, and yes-people high-fiving your higher self, who will be the custodians of these vows of yours. It's your witnesses that make a ritual of this thing, wrangling real-time and enduring consequences from what you're saying.

In the days to come, when you want to know how things are going for real, when you have to come up with an authentic answer to the question "So, how's married life?" that won't embarrass you, it's your witnesses you should consult. They were there in a way you couldn't have possibly managed. They have a memory where you have fantasy and performance anxiety. If they were the kinds of friends who'd risk the friendship for your sake, they have your vows on velum rolls wedged safely in the rafters. And they bring them down when you ask to be reminded of what you said, and when you don't ask. They recite a portion of them to you. Sometimes they'll bring them over to your house uninvited, when a lot of time has gone by and you've gotten along just fine without hearing them, or so it seems to you. They'll be more faithful to your matrimony in the early going than you could ever be. They'll be more faithful to your matrimony than they'll be to you. That's why they're not called cheerleaders or supporters or unconditional positive regarders. When the time comes—and the time always comes—they testify. You won't ask them to remember, but they will. They're the crucible for your molten feelings for your new spouse and for your new status as a married person. They're the truing blade running across the rough grain of your errant memory. They're the elders in training, soon enough taking your kids from you, if you have

them, to turn them into grown-ups and into humans when you aren't able to, when you don't ask them to. Best to choose them wisely, and well.

And if you are among the clutch of witnesses I'm talking about here, it means that you weighed out the invitation when you received it. You recognized it as the inadvertent summons that it was. You recognized it as a proper kind of jury duty. It means that you knew that in these days littered with sham rites of passage and glittering self-congratulation dressed up as ceremony and village-mindedness, ghosted by unlearned, unclaimed ancestry and shabby personal truths, you'll have to do your best to stand in for all that's gone missing. You're not standing for the bride or the groom. That's what they're trying to do for each other up there at the front of the hall. That's what their families are doing, up front in the choice seats. You're back here, standing for all those with no standing. You're standing where their elders should be, where their wayward and troubled ancestors should be. You are the ears of the world, lent to the proceedings for a while on the strength of the gilded, embossed invitation to register the murmurs of two of the world's children gathered in a confusion of dream and fret and forgetfulness and what they know of love, what they can afford to know of each other. You're there to be the faithful witness, to see to it as best as you are able in these times so bereft of deep instruction of the heart that the world is in the ritual, there between the betrothed. You are there as life's ambassador, making the case as we'll see for the world needing these two people, needing to be nourished by their drawing nigh one to the other across the broken holy ground between them, needing to be the better place their matrimony seeks for its early, tender time.

Or it's not like that at all. Maybe you invited people you knew would be on your side, no matter what, who had no hard feelings, no second thoughts or lingering doubts about what you are doing here, who have your back on this. Who wouldn't invite those people? In these days when everyone's a peer to everyone, though, where there are so few elders, who stands for the ritual? Who's got the ritual's back? Who's its ally? Who's tending to the vows? The officiants, as often as not, are a kind of hireling of the couple, service providers. They can't be leaned on for witnessing. Untested, uncritical friendship of the generally affirming kind: that's what's expected of the invited guests. Being supportive, though, is not the same thing as witnessing. That's being an audience. An audience is there for performances, spectacles. There is no audience in a ritual.

Nowhere is it written that matrimony brings out the best in people—not in those who attend, not in those who don't. The reason for this is probably that weddings are like funerals. They are kinds of peak experiences, and they are used as a kind of summing up, a kind of stocktaking. They are an arbitrary chance to make large declarations that swagger across the landscape of ordinary life and ordinary memory, declarations about what life has meant, about what people have meant, with an authority that daily life neither tolerates nor seeks nor employs or merits. This flirting with something like a prophetic voice, often with no prior experience, seems called to the fore by the unauthorized subterranean event that a wedding also is. It is a cascade of endings. And it's hard on the old habits that bind people.

Matrimony ends the marital status of its principals. Hence, the business of profane sacrifice at the front of the hall. It ends whatever rash promises its principals made to themselves about never marrying or never marrying again, for example, which are common enough promises. It contravenes every promise they made to themselves before they married about being sure about marrying, sure about whom they marry. In matters of the heart, "sure" only happens when a lot of other, contrary things are ignored. That's the hard truth of the thing. It ends the various subterranean plans parents may have had for their now all-but-adult children, or should. It ends the limitless fantasy for storied companionship that was born in adolescence, that proliferates out at the edges of loneliness. It ends ending up with anyone else, at least for the foreseeable. It forecloses upon the horizon of hope and potential. There are so many things you'll not do now, so many people you'll not do them with. It ends most untested ideas about independence, too. It ends parents parenting their children, or it should. Either way, anyway, matrimony is a strenuous exercise in letting loose and being let loose.

So the volatility of the thing should not surprise. We've turned weddings into intra-family events, mostly, and there aren't many extended families that can, crucible-like, manage the molten, unbidden orneriness that is unbound by them. As in so many other things, we go to the family for the forbearance and fortitude and scale of wise navigation proper to a clan or village. The frailties of the wedding are the frailties of the culture. They're nothing personal, for the most part. The reliance upon blood and personal identity is a sign of the poverty of community. The

bottleneck of DNA lineage is what chokes off so many people's capacity to testify three-dimensionally, candidly, at a wedding. This is why you suffer through those speeches. It isn't because people can't speak. It's because the blood/identity complex claims people's fidelity and loyalty, their sense of what the moment asks of them. It qualifies their presence at the head table, but it can compromise their integrity at speech time, where the party lines become clear.

The comparison of private to public property fits here. In a consumer culture like ours that places the family on the vacated altar of village life, private property is accorded a status similar to the family: fundamental, inviolable, meritorious, inalienable, and worthy of legal and moral defending and maintenance. Because it belongs to someone. That's the underground reason. Public property, like public life, like what's left of the commons and the village mind, scruffy and shabby and detritus-strewn as it's become, is left to fend for itself. Because it belongs to no one.

Psychology hasn't helped. Because of our psychodynamic take on adolescence and separation and attachment, we have enshrined rebellion and individuation as mandates of the hormonal tirade of this time of life. Youth is a golem now. It is a compelled visitation of the particular errancies of self-determination. Any kind of psychic or mythic continuity between the generations is an early and often permanent casualty of individuation. Traditions, including traditions of matrimony, are too often chattels left at the roadside en route to the personalized wedding.

So many young adults concoct legions of strategies of alienation and estrangement that seem, at least in hindsight, made to craft doubt as to whether their parents in fact gave birth and life to the family terrorist known as the adolescent. The strategies for alienation from parental approval are elaborate, and they enjoy some considerable, snarling success, often well into a person's twenties, even thirties. These lifestyle choices are loud and proud and unrepentant for the most part. And they are drawn down into the ideological and political condemnation of the older generations, which climate change, globalization, dirty oil, and the rest make almost inevitable now, almost mandatory. So the grudges are personal, geopolitical, moral. It's a lot for one uncertain, habit-bound ceremony to bear. Personal style has become indistinguishable from personal truth, particularly in the younger decades of life, and both have become surrogates for the real world, where truing is a verb that doesn't happen often, where there's nothing personal about it. Oh man. And any self-doubt in

this adventure spells regression and defect for renegade young people. It's banished, along with conscience and any memory of a time of total dependence and reliance upon their folks.

Wait, though. Self-doubt propels the whole enterprise? Of course it does. Self-doubt is the unsettled firmament of youth. Young people aren't going anywhere that self-doubt can't take them. And matrimony, in a time like this, is an exercise in covert self-doubt. Young people getting married is a perfect storm of uncertainties.

But never mind that unwelcome yeah-but.

So, off they go.

Then comes the wedding. There are challenges over making the invitation list. There are the questions of who to reward, who to acknowledge, who to pay back, who to punish, who to gather in, and who to banish. There are the questions of season and location, which mitigate who might come and who might not. They'll vet the celebrant, they'll write the vows, they'll count the whole thing down. When it comes to the calculus by which invitations to the parents are made, maybe an assumption of miraculous detente appears. Barring acts of gross indelicacy, indecency, or illegality in the distant or recent past, the parents are invited. They are at the top of the list. So begins the softening of the mind so characteristic of the prenatal period of matrimony. The kids enter into a programme of renegade peace with their parents. The thing of who's paying for all this comes up. That gets tricky. Individuation and autonomy prevailing, maybe the kids should pay. But there's all that unexamined, unsuspected churn from a few decades ago, a nagging sense of debt or something like it, a feeling of being owed something by life. And often matrimony and marriage or both have been put off for so long that the betrothed aren't kids anymore, confounding the arrangement still further.

From where the betrothed sit, their matrimony constitutes an automatic ceasefire, a cessation of all hostilities. Even the memory of former slights and hurts goes opaque. But it's a selective, capricious regime of goodwill that goes into effect. The betrothed are generally prepared to forgive and forget most of the slights and trespasses, real and imagined, perpetrated by parents in the name of parenting. But rare is the prospective groom or bride who begins fingering the rosary of memories of those epic gestures of calculated alienation and deep condemnation of their parents' lifestyle choices to which they turned. It may even be that the particular mate selected, the particulars of the wedding ceremony chosen

or jettisoned, all of this and more may extend that repertoire of autobiographical declaration and autonomy and parent stymying. You can marry, and marry who you're marrying, out of subtle, subliminal spite. You may not see it yourself.

And the ritual will be the occasion that draws all of these challenges. The memory of them, the hurt of them, can cluster in the hall, or under the arbour. Young people bound for matrimony will not imagine the sum consequence of these wild swings for the golden ring of autonomy, what these things have meant to their parents as the distancing years clicked by. And it can come as a primordial shock to the narcissistic system when the parents actively or covertly question or resist or demean the matrimonial stylings of their kids. The scions of the family have it no worse than the firstborn in these moments. The firstborn, experimented upon themselves by inexperienced first-time parents, are experimenting with gestures of imperious autonomy. The middle or last born can be aquiver with resentment at living on the leavings of the eldest, grinding away in melancholy or malediction on the cud of their complaint, railing against their predecessors and the arbitrariness of birth order.

Families, bless them, can lie at weddings. Or misspeak, at least. Not all of them, of course, and not all the time. Not knowingly, often. But they do. They sincerely do. Particularly in the speech part of the proceedings, the part hardest to get through if you are not clued in to the secrets being traded upon there. They toe the invisible family line. Family outliers can misspeak devoutly, too. Families are the keepers of the official revised standard version of the one they are offering up for marriage. They trade on the childhood of the bride or groom, and they tread upon it heavily. They are purveyors of the sanctioned memories of their young person. They tell stories of the bride or groom that are sanctified by infancy and childhood. They exercise the God's eye view of the life of their young person. They lay claim to its origins, its architecture, its reasons for being.

I presided over one matrimonial event where the groom's mother read a letter of intent that her son had written as a child, fully twenty years prior, where he outlined the life he meant for himself. He became, before our eyes, a more physically adept but otherwise unerringly faithful version of that child. No matter what he'd done since, no matter what his

wedding-party allies had to say about him, he was and remained a faithful iteration of the boy his parents had made. The fundament of him was perhaps ten, and the rest was accretion on the essence that they remembered and knew. The passage of time, all its necessary effects, how it might have contributed to anything like wisdom in him, was set aside.

It was as if consistency over time—an unerring, steady personality—was what he owed his family, and himself. At a moment like that, it's all but impossible for young people standing on the verge of their old lives to know themselves as having the makings of adulthood. He had no obligation to resemble that ten-year-old boy or be faithful to him. But, of course, with the nostalgia and the "special day" status, all of it passed without notice. It was touching instead.

There is no way for parents to engineer any act of emergence from the trance of childhood and adolescence for their child. They have no capacity for it. They have no instinct for it. They named the child, they wrote upon the child the story that was to come. They are conservators, and their child floats in the formaldehyde of their authority and memory, and at wedding time that child is dried off and on display.

I grant this probably sounds unforgiving, unnecessarily harsh. Perhaps it is. But it's what can happen when we entrust virtually all our mythic person-making practices to the nuclear family, when we nominate a tired, habit-bound couple of hours to take up the slack in what's left of our communal, ritual life, when the ability to be a clan or a village is gone.

The comparison might seem weakly observed to you, but this is something similar to what I saw far too often in my days in the death trade working with dying kids and their families. Routinely, parents would align against any treatment protocol I tried to implement that engaged the whole-person sadness of the child. They complied with the offer of often extreme kinds of medical intervention, but they resisted any nonmedical, human-centered engagement with the child that foreclosed upon the possibility of cure or prolongation of that young life. They knew that any such candour would somehow undo that child's capacity to be a child, as it would undo the parents' capacity to protect them in their childness, as it would undo the parents' capacity to parent. Their ultimate defense: "I know my child."

And I would agree. I had to agree. They knew their child *well*, as in they knew their child principally or exclusively as a well person, a premorbid person. But I knew their child dying, a mortal person, and I had to tell them

so. There was no war between these two ways of knowing. By then they both belonged. It was our natural obligation to bind them together, for the sake of the dying that we were now caring for. It was an extremely tough sell.

The parents' position, of course, was understandable, reasonable, intended for good. But it was rooted in an incorrigible, adamant, Teflon understanding of love. There are times when parental love, the kind that defends and protects, doesn't serve their kids well. I say that as a parent, recognizing, along with my adult kids, how lamentably true that can be. With everything changing under us, parents take up a vow to see to it that the love itself, all its machinations, does not change. The more inflexible the love, the more faithful, the more infallible, the more parental, and the more we are inclined to take a strange pride in it. When the incontrovertible verities of human life come on, as they do, that kind of loving proliferates. There's not much willingness to witness the limits of that love nor its frailties.

Matrimonial events precariously resemble many of those dying days. They have the same power of undoing about them. They have the same implacable deities present. There is the same obligation to recognize the limits of what one holds dear. There is the same obligation to be defeated by the new, counterintuitive understanding of love that the deity helps us to. Not many would welcome the distinction, or tolerate it, but in its structural invocation of endings of all kinds, matrimony does indeed resemble the ending of people's lives. It requires many of the same submissions, the same willingness to watch and warrant time bearing away from us what we treasure and hold dear. And our old understandings of love, the kinds that remain monumental and above the fray, should be an early casualty of matrimony, as they must be of mortality.

Families can't help their centripetal habits. They can't seem to put down the burden of "official status," particularly in the lives of their young ones. They have all the backstage/all-access passes to the wedding day. Even the estranged and dystopian families, even they for a day or so make as if they were always there, always with their fingers on the pulse of the marrying one, never really taken in by the postures and inventions of the older, adult version of the person they claim intimate authorship of. That's why they need the elders and the witnesses present, so that the rest of the story of the marrying, like the burying, can appear and be told. Without them, there's sacrifice on the altar. Without them, there's the profanity of promise.

6

Invitation

Invitation lists are notches on the social belt, often. When you think about who you're going to invite to a wedding, you think about the venue size, and then the per-person expense, and then the sometimes rancorous list of often involuntary reciprocal obligations you've racked up as you've gone your way, and then you think about family.

Ah, family. The tithing and the calculus that goes on to determine how many whorls there are out beyond the "ma-pa-kids" centre of the family universe is daunting. Who, or what, is a family these days? Is it simply whatever you want it to be? Never mind the legal snakes and ladders that now festoon the enterprise, the new inclusive legal umbrella opened over the various preferences. There are tax implications, inheritance implications, banking and ownership and custody implications aplenty in deciding what and who constitutes a family, and there are hosts of personal associations. But maybe the more enduring ones are cultural.

For era upon era, place upon place across this world, a family was a flower on the trunk of culture. Families were arranged and then born, arranged and born again in tireless sequence. Let's say that there is some degree of love in the beginning, in most cases, and attractions of many kinds. There were probably as many caveats about with whom you'd enter into the family way. It was not a piece of business left up to young personal preference. In days of yore, the sanctions and bans were all declarations of

the culturally endorsed take on the natural order of life. In the early going, until perhaps half a dozen centuries into the common era, family structure in the West was an imitation of a religious or spiritual understanding of the primordial order of creation. A family was creation in miniature. The getting and begetting, the skein of obligation and loyalty was a human-scaled rendering of the wider world that sustained families. Family was only subsequently a structured expression of feelings a certain number of people had for each other, expressed in blood kinship and arranged marriage. Extended families were mutual-aid societies, and clans were bundles of extended families, and villages were the amalgam of family-mediated belonging to a given piece of holy ground, bound by stories, ancestral memory, and a willingness to live for and, sometimes, die for the same kinds of things.

This understanding is scarcely available to us as a cultural memory due to the immense consequences visited upon the structure of the family by forced conversion to monotheistic religions in the Western world. Monotheistic missionaries took steady aim at the village, the institution of elderhood, and the clan when they undertook their work. They clearly recognized that tenacious allegiance to village life and clan business was the principal impediment to having the natives knuckle under to the merits of an individual soul and the salvation of that soul. The historical record is clear on this. In the period circa 500–700 CE, missionaries and synods set about reconfiguring the native European understanding of family, and this they did by narrowing its definition. The extended family was discredited as overly self-reliant, incestuous by nature, prone to consanguinity, resistant to conversion, unsophisticated, tending to conserve traditional understandings and practices. And then it was banned. Clan affiliation withered. Remarriage was forbidden, adoption was restricted to close blood relations, inheritance was by blood kin only or by the church, matrimony was subject to clergy approval. This was social gene modifying before such a thing was imagined.

The consequences are demonstrable and with us to this day. Without the clan, people's allegiances devolved to local gentry (eventually to the state) and church on the one hand, and to what we call now the nuclear family on the other. In the old arrangement, your older family members were in many ways too close to you to be your elders, though they were eminently qualified to be everyone else's elders. Elderhood in a clan culture would likely have been more a horizontal arrangement across bloodlines

than a vertical arrangement through generations. But after the regime change, elder status was blood quantum status. Your elders were, for better and for worse, your blood geezers. And there were, at any given time, only a few. The other geezers were somebody else's elders to listen to, somebody else's elders to clean up after, not your elders. They became a kind of grey background. And that's for the most part what they are now.

As we understand and obey the term *individual* now, there may not have been any individuals in the clan times in Europe. Clan ties were forged through matrimony and then through blood. What you were called, the work you were afforded, the meaning of your life were literally in the hands of the people around you. The conversion to Christian monotheism in the West created individuals out of the shambles the missionaries made of clan life. Those individuals were charged with independence, though I'd rather say they were afflicted with it. The obligations to conform to clan life were weakened, compromised, or sundered altogether in favour of credal fidelity. You can hear the recipe being written for contemporary Western life: singular, independent, low conformity, compromised association with ancestry, the advent of the lonely crowd, the interiorization of social structure until it becomes personal identity, the primacy of personal feelings and ego strengths, overreliance on social acceptance, the personalization of what constitutes "true." All in all, a terrifying, staggering, overwhelming, irredeemable, irrefutable ethnocide.

This is a hard business. The contemporary family and all the rancour around its alternative permutations seem less like the Enlightenment finally taking hold and more like an unclaimed bastard child of conversion-driven psychic cleansing. Having some sense of this bit of the unauthorized history of the West in mind, our current turbulent contention around identity politics perhaps starts to sound less like a matter of social justice and more like an old, unremembered, unrecognized trauma surfacing again. The missionized mauling of the old clan ways is recognizable in the standardization of "personhood" that so many are reacting to these days. It isn't really challenged by the standardization of "alternative personhood." A bit of the mauling is there, too.

Standard dictionaries define *kindred* as "corresponding, matching, congenial, homogenous." *Congenial* means "agreeable" now, but its old meaning

was "sharing the marks of a common birth." That sameness is the basis of the word *congeniality*. *Homogenous* means "internally consistent" now, but its old meaning was "made the same." And *sanguine* means "cheerful, hopeful" now but once meant "same blooded."

I mention these first to alert you to the narrowing range of associations the Old English word *kindred* has been subject to since the conversion times. Once you consider what *family* has undergone in the last fifteen hundred years, *kindred* begins to show the scars of conversion. Birth and lineage and descent figure heavily in the contemporary and the historically documented use of the word. That's because by the time *kindred* first appears in documented form, all of the compromise of *kinship* described above had already happened. There was no memory of former times that accrued to the word any longer. "Family relation" is what the dictionaries tell you it means; "fellow feeling." It does these days, yes, but it didn't for most of its semantic life. Nothing like it. The conversion-enforced rupture of village identity, the devolution of the village into the family, and the subsequent collapse of village into "personal interior condition" are all there in what has happened to *kindred*.

Kindred has its etymological root in the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) word *gene*, meaning "to beget." (The lineage is recognizable in the close phonetic resemblance of *kin* and *gen*.) The procreative aspect is but one association. *Gene* refers more to the web of connectedness that binds people to place, time, ancestors, and the divine. In *gene* we find people wondering what lends meaning to human life. And we know from *ritual* that the PIE root *re*, meaning "to track or reason," is here again in the suffix. *Kindred* meant something like "the web of belonging by which I remember and am remembered," "the ways that we follow that make us family to this world," or "the ways by which I am made human." *Kindred*, then, is a kind of emotional, spiritual, and political practice that makes a wide path to the world for humans.

Clearly, most or all of this has changed in our corner of the world. Few of us know in our bones what a village is, or how it works, or what it does to and for its members, or how to join one or whether we're capable of doing so, or whether a working village could make use of the likes of us. We use the word, yes, but we do so typically to describe the nuanced bundle of feelings a given number of people have for each other. To most of us, it seems that a village is an interior, psychological condition predicated on homogeneity, a tangle of feelings and counter-feelings, the sediment of

sentiment. In our imaginations and fantasies, it is a centripetal, collapsed family-reunion kind of a thing.

I suspect this is why I'm asked periodically to assist "intentional communities" with what seems to them to be their most taxing, most unnerving and dangerous dilemma: conflict. Some that I know of have resorted to getting counsel from nonviolent communication practitioners to "resolve their conflicts." But conflict is a feature of village life, not the key to its undoing. Villagers are skilled at conflict, not so much at avoiding, reducing, or containing it. As a verb, conflict is something you do *with* people, not *to* them. It is in the repertoire of meaning-making. It's one important way you become tangible to another person, they to you.

The assumption that conflict is a prelude to violence, that it needs nonviolence to subdue it, probably lives there in the rickety foundation many intentional communities seem to have enshrined somewhere in their nascent times. The hankering after community often contains the assumption that sameness is the root condition of community viability; that sameness is the safe haven from all the contesting, independent, lonely, often predatory individuals out there. Is it, though? Is it not as likely that the seeking after sameness is the psychic off-gassing of independent, lonely, often predatory individuals? Homogeneity as an ideal seems like a kind of involuntary, unwitting tyranny born of the atrophy of village into nuclear family.

So it's come to this: mostly, a village is an idea with no place to go, no work to do anymore. The withering of kin until it became family is drastic, but more so when you realize that the contraction into nuclear family was the open-pit mine for the base metal of the secular humanist West, the autonomous (from the Greek, meaning "a law unto the self"), industrious, achieved individual. A family is no longer what you and yours believe. It is what you and yours believe a family to be, a law unto yourselves.

The woman had a dying husband upstairs. She was the third wife, and he was a wealthy man. Being younger than him by a few decades, she was able to give him a gang of late-life children to deepen the old man's days. Though it was in the cards from the earliest days, it wasn't clear that the woman had thought much about this particular ending, how she'd be widowed and with children and youngish; how she'd be in that contentious

place that money, death, matrimony, probate, custody, ex-spouses, and kids from the first and the second marriage can put you.

On what turned out to be my last visit to the house, the woman was in the well-appointed kitchen working on the obituary she was going to put in the local newspaper in a few days' time. Casually, she asked my advice.

"You sure?" I asked.

She was sure. Specifically, she asked me who I thought should be included in that recitation of who begot who, which is the schematic blueprint of the standard obituary. Now, of course, this was really a question about who should be excluded. By her reckoning, there were a lot of contenders.

"Well," I said, "what is it you're hesitating about?"

She said, "I'm thinking of including his nieces and nephews, whatever siblings, aunts, and uncles might be left. And our children, of course."

"So, not any of the other wives or their kids?"

"Oh no," she said. "I don't think so. They haven't come around. What for?"

Leaving aside the money, the gold-digger accusation, the dying thing, the triumphalism of the last wife standing, this lady was as confused as the rest of us about what a family is, what it should be, who it includes, how far back it goes before it stops being a family, when it starts being one. But her question wasn't rhetorical. It was vital. She had been trained very well in the modern skills of kindredness. She was asking, "Who deserves to be recognized as this man's family?" What she was doing was making a very small circle, calling it a family, then seeing how many people could fit into it before it was a charade of a family, and she was using the obituary as a kind of invitation list to do it.

In any event of gravitas and moment, what is the invitation list for? What is its part to play? According to the soon-to-be widow, the invitation is a list of who's in and who's out, who counts, who's good, who are the most deserving dependents, the most faithful. And it is a Godlike chance to count the worthy, to make the magic circle of merit and kinship, to draw up the citizenship criteria of the Republic of Us. Being included on the list is salary for time in, for staying the course and not straying far from the authorized version of "us." There's room for the prodigal and the errant one, if proximity by blood is there, less so if not. Families can be like that. But they aren't often kind to genuine outliers, the ones who question the hard line, the family tree, the need for it all, what it does to

have the whole world reduced, subdued, sundered, and subdivided into categories of for or against, mine or not mine.

So the invitation can be a murderous plot against the old story of what makes people kin to each other. It's a plot against anything that was there before the Great Stenosis of the village, the clan. It can be the whisper campaign that trivializes tradition, yes. But it can just as well be the door to the banquet hall of life swung open, humming on its hinges. The calculus of merit can be ruined by the invitation. It should be. It dulls the honed edge of grievance, of reciprocity required and overturned.

The invitation is alchemy, really. In spirit it is the ruin of grudge. It does that work not by improving people, not by doctoring their habits, but by subverting the ages-old rupturous recording and calculation of trespass.

In a functioning culture, you might say that in a general but persuasive sense of the term, everyone knows how to "behave." The repertoire of signs and signals by which people recognize and regard each other is known. The nuances of honour, respect, generosity, inclusivity, and reciprocity are known too, but they are not regulated. To regulate them would be to thwart or undo their power to deepen, ennoble, and articulate the ways by which a given people know each other and themselves, their power to heal rancour and intergenerational wounds.

Invitations to ritual communion are, among a host of powerful things, sweeping gestures of forgiveness and reconciliation. They are roll calls of recognition, of the willingness to outgrow the smallness, the triteness, the contractions and the grievances of the wounded and the slighted and the excluded. They are another chance to roll back the old ruination of village-mindedness, using the quiet alchemy of inclusion to do it.

My recommendation to the amateur widow? Shooting from the hip, I said something like, "What's it for? To do something you can believe in twenty-five years from now, when you are the one on your deathbed, looking at your kids twisting around these old grievances of yours, wondering perhaps how they themselves got so mewly and small. That's what it's for. That obituary is a test in a time of trouble. It's there to see how wide your arms can open when everything around would have you wrap them around the mandate of your anguish, your entitlement to get even.

"If you're asking me, I say you include the other kids, the other wives, their dogs, the 'former' of everything in his life. Especially the ones who didn't come around, who didn't call. If they don't come to the funeral, they know in their bones that they were not kept out, that something

mysterious happened, that you didn't obey the old marital malices. Include people who didn't know him but maybe should have, for both their sakes. Include people who didn't think well of him. Include the unruly mess of confused, erratic pilgrims on the way to their demise. Give everyone a chance to taste life full-fathom, minus family credentials, minus any credentials at all save having lived long enough to be included."

The same holds true of the guest list of matrimony. The same hurts seem to prevail. The same instinct to circle up is there, even when the event is devoted to joining two families. In these days of deep confusion and rancour over the traditional family and its values, it's worth considering that matrimony's principal attribute is hospitality. If it errs in its invitation list, it invites too many of the "wrong kind," too many outsiders. Matrimony is a place and time where we get to remember something of the old days, the days when the bonds of kinship softened the membrane that made strangers of unmet humans. Matrimony wines and dines and addresses strangerhood until it belongs, too.

7

Witness

Everybody knows that when it comes to meetings, gatherings, rituals, or audiences, who sits where is a very big deal. It is meta-communication for standing in a family, status in a community, closeness to the divine. It signals respect, and it signals disregard just as readily. Matrimonial events are studies in status tendered through posture and position. We're not exhausting the repertoire here, but plainly there are cultural traditions where bride and groom assume a seated position, often doing so side by side, rarely doing so face to face. In this position, they resemble deities at the centre of the matrimonial universe, on the receiving end of adoration, exercising a kind of centripetal sway upon the proceedings. Every one of the guests knows where to look, where to find them. After the procession to and through the venue, they've become the centre of the event. The guests orchestrate themselves—like acolytes, like pilgrims, like worker bees—around them.

Consider the current wedding regime. In our world, the betrothed are typically the last to appear, the last to assume their positions. This signals the formal beginning of the event. The guests are already seated, for the most part. In fact, if there were guests moving about or loitering in the wings, it would probably be considered bad form, bad manners. It would mean that everything is not in order, everyone's not ready. The wedding wouldn't likely proceed until everyone was seated.

What forum, what event, does this remind you of? It reminds me of a theatre. It reminds me of a play. It makes the people at the front of the hall performers. It allocates a very specific and, I would say, constrained function to the guests. The seating arrangement makes them an audience. This seems to trouble no one. So, let's see if there's trouble to be had. Or made.

Audience is from the Latin *audiere*, "the condition of listening." You guessed it, though. There's a much older root to this word, a PIE compound root, that tells us that the passivity perpetrated by *audience* is recent and unnecessary. It's made of *au*, which is there in *aesthetic*, *audition*, *obey*, meaning "to perceive"; and *dh*, meaning "physical," more likely something like "whole body." In its ancestral days, *audience* meant "to grasp physically" or "to have the sheer physicality of something in the world visited upon you, with your body's way of knowing such things now vindicated and employed." That's a step or two beyond "the condition of listening."

I linger over these etymologies so you might notice how rare it is that old words gain in subtlety or depth as they become modern words. The tendency is toward abstraction, utility, transparency. When all of that old subtlety and physicality is left out of a word in favour of disembodied symbolism, you might guess that the semantic, mythic, and existential weather of the culture has changed, too. It's a sign of something bordering on a catastrophic loss of primordial citizenship in the world, deep confusion over how and if humans fit into things, involuntary mourning over the loss of kinship with the Makers of Life, nothing less. I'm including these etymologies to give you a way of tracking these involuntary historical confessions about the psychic dislocation that we are unwitting heirs to. Etymologies are fireflies in the semantic night sky. They are little murmurations from our mythic kin. They'd have us know that we are probably still capable of more than forlorn homelessness, psychic refugee status, and that now, given everything we're up against, we have to be.

Once, there was no audience; there were only witnesses to a ritual. The witnesses' bodies shivered and swayed to what they heard, and that's where the ritual event happened and took shape. The etymology tells us so. Now? Well, unless adulation is the order of the day, the audience at a wedding is a note-for-note echo of the allegations made at the front of the hall. Not much is asked of an audience these days. "Behave" is

one. The obnoxious "C'mon, make some noise!" is another. "Affirm the proceedings" is probably the most common, the most recognizable one. It's tricky, though, as anyone in theatre knows. When you invite a group of people into a closed space and get them all to face in the same general direction, you enforce a kind of passivity upon them. You're asking for it, in a way.

People's corroboration is required. It is preferred. It is hinted at, built into the architecture of the event. But it isn't assured. Unsubtle affirmation is solicited and engineered at the same time. When corroboration is orchestrated in this fashion, unforeseen things can happen. Consumer-culture audiences are primed for passivity and for buy-in. The refusal to vote, to buy, to marry, to agree (think of the "strongly disagree" option in questionnaires), to come along quietly are low-grade schemes of resistance. Structural passivity rarely prompts a participatory tone. It tends to prompt the Caesar function: thumbs up or thumbs down.

This much structural choreography tells you a few things. The presenters are more than a little unsure as to the outcome, perhaps even the merit, of the production. Hence the choreography. This isn't good. There is heavy reliance on script, on predictability. The audience is not quite to be trusted. Hence the manufactured assent. You may have seen some silent, grainy, black-and-white footage of the Nuremberg rallies that Goebbels and his ilk engineered. They have scale. They have choreography without end. They have galling degrees of co-opting, trancelike, uniform, awe-inspiring-in-spite-of-yourself buy-in. And they are mostly audience—99 percent audience. The audience for these things is the enforcer of these things. Fascists mistrust audiences. They shamelessly, nakedly engineer cooperation and compliance in public events. Still do. You could say that show trials in public places and cast-of-thousands choreographed rallies are the devolved, extreme-sport version of ceremony in Godless places.

This subtle ill-at-easedness in such events is evidence, I suspect, of a kind of bruise on the psychic brain pan of the people's people's people that I come from. We can't really distinguish ritual from spectacle from performance. What's become of ritual in our time, the expectations for catharsis and customer satisfaction many bring to it, all seems to track a culture in slow, addled, distraction-dependent dissolution, the way a broken limb dragged across the forest floor tracks injury and a lingering demise. We can't tell—perhaps don't want to tell—ritual from therapy. And not many

go to therapy to throw the dice on life, to roll the knucklebones and see what'll happen, to find out, come what may, what's really in there.

The betrothed take their places centre stage. A proper hush descends upon the proceedings. The reassuring show begins. The not-yet-wed are *supposed* to be the centre of the universe now, and they are. Consider the whisper campaign launched against anyone whose dress, demeanor, or style draws attention away from the front of house. In our corner of the world, the couple is usually standing. Anyone standing is in the cast. This changes things slightly. It is not quite the set piece it might seem if they sat. Standing, they are able to move a bit, assume and reassume their positions. They tend to deliver their lines like actors do—not particularly skilled actors. The lines are canned. Not canned as in "not reflecting their core beliefs," not as in "not reflecting their true and unique identities as children of an inner higher power." No, canned as in "everybody knows the gist of what's coming next." Even their nervousness is actorly, has precedents. The preliminaries have them speaking to the officiant, facing that person. As the play unfurls, the principals receive in vivo stage directions as to blocking, where to face, tempo, lines. There are stage whispers, comic asides.

The core of the thing is what happens between the two principals, to a secondary degree what happens within them. That's what the assembled are gathered together for: to watch what everybody knows is going to happen, happen, like a coronation. And yet somewhere along the way, there is this third thing summoned: the union. Even in these uneven, untutored, ritually bereft days, most of the people present have the sense that something is supposed to, well, *happen* to the two people at the front of the hall. It's a given that it will happen. The sheer force of their wills, the adamant gale force of their love, is supposed to see to that. And yet that third thing, in some unnerving way, requires or relies upon the presence of the audience, and even in these days of demystification, something can happen to the audience. It can turn into a clutch of witnesses. I'm persuaded that there's magic even yet that has endured the demystifying cleanse of the various reformations. In the same way the old religions lingered at the missionaries' door and crept into the One God house, so matrimony manages to make itself felt in secular celebrations of love.

There's magic, and there's a war of sorts waged upon that magic. In many of the weddings of our time, these two things are happening at once. In the old practice of matrimony, people were invited to bear witness. Literally, they are to bear—carry—what they see. They corroborate, even mobilize, the alchemy. They don't just watch. They attest. They swear, over the long haul, that something happened. And of course, the war is there in the modern-feelings lab that two people have set up to safeguard their lives from this moment forward, in sickness and in health, whose tempest of affection for and reliance upon each other has all but shouldered the rest of the world—and the witnesses—out of the way.

The witness magic struggles, though. It is dimmed to opacity by the fact that matrimony has become an anointing of the desire and intent of two people for each other. It isn't the tempered and tried affirmation of a clan. It's a certification of what's already happened, especially what's already happened in private between these two people. There's irony there, irony of the unhip kind: the more idiosyncratic and personalized the union is, the less profound it becomes, the less magic survives the operation, the more rote it becomes, the more occluded. If a line is blown, if nerves win out for a moment, everything's okay, because it doesn't really matter how it goes or what gets said. What really matters is the love, and the love's already happened. In all but name they're already married. It happened some time ago. So gaffs just serve to humanize the mythically neutral thing. Because no matter how it gets done, it'll get done. Because nothing really *happens*. And because the through line of the thing is romantic love, nothing of substance from the pre-matrimonial life really ends, and so nothing really rises from the ash of ending.

So initially the betrothed are facing the celebrant, who is leading them down the well-lit path of their feelings for each other that, frankly, need no rehearsal. At the appointed moment, they are directed to turn and face each other. So far, they've had nothing to say to the celebrant, nothing to say to those gathered for their sakes, nothing to say to the great beyond, to their ancestors, to their dead, to the old Gods and deities of place. Nothing. The world and whatever remains of a village disappear in the murk and mist of romance. Now whatever they have to say is strictly to each other. The audience waits.

And still something of an old order lingers or haunts the proceedings, like a patron saint whose work is never done, like an old relative you never see who prays for you every night. It's in this very detail of choreography,

where the couple turn finally and face each other. It's a fragment of a memory of an old, highly dramatic, cliff-edge kind of moment in matrimony. It is the moment when those betrothed retired to consort and consummate. The heavy element, the one that has received all the modern attention and sophisticated opprobrium, is the virginity of the couple, more typically of the woman. It isn't hard to picture crones parading with the bedsheet, demonstrating the chastity of their daughter to all the assembled. We've heard these old stories. We have our feelings about them. There are things to be said about the fetishizing of virginity among young people, among young women in particular.

Was there ever a time when virginity was not the recipe for purity that it became, a time when it was not caught up in the currency of having and losing, giving and taking? The whole idea might strike you as a bit of a reach: people turning to face each other to make a few well-rehearsed declarations coming from the ages-old practice of sexual consummation inside the ceremony, within earshot of the celebrant, the invited guests, the families. It could well be, though. It is clear that historically this is by no means an exclusively European or Western or white-race practice. I am imagining that there were times when cultures had this matrimonial practice without the fetishizing of female virginity it has become synonymous with now. The fetishization of female virginity may be a relatively late-occurring thing. Until then, it may have been the consummation and not the virginity that lay at the heart of the ceremony. For it is in the consummation that the old life ends, making way for something to begin.

8

Counting, Kinship, Strangerhood

Matrimony trades in mystery. Transubstantiation is its stock in trade. It would make one from two, given the chance. It would give people reasons to live, places to live, ways to live. When it's done right, it affably compromises social and spiritual isolation. It makes humanity look something like a very good idea. Not every time, maybe, but we know it can. They used to call matrimony "a holy state," and there were reasons. There's a spirit algebra to the thing. It makes for fellow feeling. It confounds the dismaying, crippling accidents of birth. It whispers of what could be, of the magical confusion of love, of being seconded to the life of another. It does something to strangerhood. It can make kinship where there is none. It is the alchemy of inclusion. It's an ordinary kind of conjuring. It's a tally of the willing. I am, in case it isn't clear thus far, a fan.

How matrimony does what it does, that's worth wondering about. I'm thinking lately that matrimony is one of the oldest memories of clan times, the times before urbanism and the nation state, before iron and before agriculture. For now, it's masquerading as a tired, standardizing state saddlery foisted upon young love. But it isn't that. Once, matrimony was how we kept track of each other, how we knew each other. Once, matrimony made humanity. It is, alongside awe, the oldest

religion we have. Old Order Matrimony extended the range of kinship. It was a way of knowing who counted in your life, how you counted in theirs. To see that in action, a bit of a history lesson in literacy and the primordial ties that bind might serve.

There are fistfuls of theories for the advent of writing, most all of them calculated by literate people brailing the bristling eruptions of literacy in Mesoamerica, Mesopotamia, and China that make up a literate person's sense of lineage and history and progress. Given that many remain convinced that literacy is a secular stand-in for "God-given" and a basic human right, it isn't surprising that most of us think about the beginnings of literacy through the nib of a pen. It isn't easy for a literate person to wonder about literacy. It is there in the mechanics of our wondering, and it short-circuits our inclination to credit anything, any time, not radiated by writing. But, through writing things down in a book, I'll try.

You might think that the oldest form of anything humanly wrought might be its purest form or its best, most unadulterated form. I involuntarily think that way. On that basis we might figure that the first kind of writing or proto-writing that we have must be a clutch of poems, prayers, elegies, myths, or hagiographies. Surely when we first took up a sharpened twig or a knob of charcoal, and when we bent to the clay tablet or the papyrus or the velum, the very finest of our affirmations, our souls' honey, poured onto the surface. But that doesn't seem to be so. That's not what the history of literacy tells us. Far from it. Literature, as we know it now, is a very late incarnation of literacy. No, the history tells us that it's more like what happened when we invented the internet: a dispiriting, single-faceted reflection of what things had come to, appearing as a brave new world. What literacy seems to have done, especially in its infancy, is intensify what was already there.

It seems that there were two more or less coincidental old Mesopotamian versions of literacy from which the West's literacy comes. One is a clutch of clay tablets tracking trade transactions, chronicling trails of indebtedness. That's it? That's it. Of all things, why would those earliest of scribes bend this little psychic, spiritual, and mythic revolution in the direction of—to the service of—debt? My guess is that the indebtedness had become labyrinthine enough by that time, in that place, to frustrate and

then defy the limits of human memory. They are accounting ledgers, of all things. They are stories of a kind, yes, but you wouldn't call them literature or proto-literature or crypto-literature. They are stories of who owes who what. Literacy rose up from business dealings? It seems so.

Then there were a good number of stelae bearing declarations of the "I was here, and I was great" kind. These were carved in stone on behalf of various monarchs. Below the portraits of power and omniscience were chapter-and-verse renderings of legal codes and the largely financial consequences of the transgression of those laws. In other words: who would owe what to whom when wrong was done, or when malfeasance or accident prevailed. We have, at the very outset of literacy, records of the concerted practice of quantifying wrongdoing, monetizing hurt, indemnifying trespass, insuring against chance. Payback was the foundation stone shoring up these people's understanding of justice, and they bent their letters to warrant and track and script retribution.

Well, that's dismaying. You go as far back into the written record of the West as you can and you don't find prayers or poems, not praise or prophecy. You find the codification of retributive justice. You could conclude that humans—Western humans, at least—are just chronically disappointing: so much potential, so much sneering and snarling and wasted time. You could. Or you could wonder what had come to pass to turn even this strange miracle of murmuring score marks in clay over to tracking trespass and what "too much" and "not enough" were, what you pay to be wrong, what you're paid to be right, and what this has to do with kinship and matrimony.

This hankering after posterity, this insistence on being raised above the ruination of time passing that is there at the beginnings of literacy, tells us something sobering and maybe unexpected about how things might have been in the primordial good old days. It seems that disappearing without a trace might have been chief among the fears of the mighty and the memorable, leaving us to wonder whether there was any similar longing after eternity among ordinary people's ordinary worries. And alongside the fretting over fate and fatality was the devotion of this marvel in its infancy, this being able to write things down in a way that would last, this flirt with eternity, to tracking surplus and transgression. Debt, in other words. Debt was another form of trespass, then and now. That's why there is "principal," the dimension of the trespass, and "interest," the punishment for the trespass. And that's why the principal is a fixed amount, the agreed-upon wrongdoing, but the interest is variable, since it tracks your

subsequent behaviour and compliance with redress. The relations between the people were seemingly not enough to make their lives together civil. It had come to the point where those relations, and their willingness to be determined by something like good faith, weren't working or weren't enough. It was the need to codify human behaviour that seems to have been new, the eclipse of memory and counting by the proliferation of possessions. That's where numeracy and literacy came from, and that's what they were married to.

> An aside: Given their beginnings, their marching orders, it is obvious now, and has been for a good long while, that numeracy and literacy have failed, utterly, to do what they were made to do. Numeracy and literacy registered the sting of trespass and so of indebtedness, a sting felt by all parties to the encounter. Presumably, people began to quantify and monetize trespass and track debt in order to manage and subsequently limit indebtedness. But the effect has been otherwise. Numeracy has enumerated the failure of keeping track of debt to dissuade us from indebtedness. Literacy has traced the inability of literacy to mitigate trespass. We in the West have been quantifying and codifying our failures in this regard for upward of 4,500 years. And counting.

It seems very likely that numeracy and literacy, in the Mesopotamian example, arose to keep track of what couldn't, or wouldn't, be remembered. Instead of extending human memory, they replaced it. One reason would have been that by then there was simply too much stuff to remember. Another reason would have been that by then, in those places, there would have been too many people to remember. The new psychic and spiritual technology tracked whom you didn't know, whom you didn't trust. Numeracy and literacy didn't augment or amend human memory or even help it. They eclipsed it. They still do.

Exhibit A: Probably like you, I was taught to write things down. I'm still doing it, as you can see, this very moment. I was taught that we wrote things down in order to remember them. But ask yourself: Once you've written something down, do you remember it all the more? You probably don't. You might have continued access to it, provided you don't lose it to

the ravages of time. But it doesn't live in your memory once you commit it to paper or screen. It waits there, inert, and your memory moves on to other transient concerns, assured that it's backed up by literacy. The paper, the screen—the velum, the clay tablet—they're doing your remembering for you. No, in reality, you write things down to forget them.

So what prompts people to keep track of debt? Wanting to get paid, the possibility of not getting paid. Yes, that's one. How about grudge? Ah yes, the ten-ton stone we can carry forever without having to put it down once. That's another. But why not just *remember* the debt? Well, memory is a frangible, dainty, and irregular thing sometimes. But you *could* rely upon your partner in the debt to remember its particulars. True. That would work if you trusted that partner. You could rely upon trust, then, if you had a partner worthy of the word. Somewhere in the keeping track of debt, though, there is suspicion. There is an unwillingness or an inability to believe that it'll work out, that you can trust the situation, that you can trust the debt to sit still and behave and stay where you left it. In a place where people know each other well, have almost daily contact, who buy in and marry in, the debt is likely to be something close to common knowledge, part of the fabric of life for the people. The knowledge of the debt would be held in common, something that belonged in some fashion to everyone. But keeping track of debt, counting and recounting and calculating amortization and writing it down are all things that people who don't know each other, or each other's ways, do.

Something was up. There is some kind of seismic schismatic disturbance that describes the advent of numeracy and then literacy but doesn't explain it very well. I suspect it has something to do with the coming of "the stranger in our midst." People living in smallish groups over many generations in the same place tend to be endogamous people. What binds them is intermarriage and child-making, and the willingness to proceed together as if certain things are crucial and climacteric, and certain things are so. That is the condition I'm calling matrimony, the mothering of culture. What is unnerving and challenging to those bonds is an encounter with people who have no comparable willingness, who don't participate in the making of culture and humans in the same ways.

Chief among those crucial things might have been the incontestable necessity of getting along. Among Indigenous peoples living an approximately intact or traditional life, there were and are implicit and explicit guides for living a life that practices, fosters, and employs generosity

and sharing, and harbours a grim view of the accumulation of wealth and hoarding, particularly in times of hardship or scarcity. The irreducible sign of these people being able to get along, the standard that obliges them to each other, is that their culture is rich to the extent that its poorest members are relatively well-off and cared for. In such places and times, the people with status might tend to be the people to whom and then *through whom* riches flow on their way to other people. They might tend to be poor-ish, and honourably so. When a Western culture is in good working order, this care of the marginal person is a fair marker of a civility vouchsafed, too. Perhaps the Western version of this culture-level generosity is in the way of money, goods, and services moving in alms, not in commerce. When in its liquid form, when it hasn't concentrated in certain people and endeavours, money seeks out the lowest places and raises the people living there up a bit. Simple hydraulics. When injustice is in the ascent, the heroic, self-made paradigm is paramount; money, goods, and services concentrate and atrophy; autonomia is in the house and calling the tune; and it's every man, woman, and child for themself.

The dominant culture of North America is both spawn and squire of civilization, to be sure, but still we retain some threadbare sense of what civility should be. Even here, among us now, where strangerhood is the condition of our citizenship, one hallmark of civility is the provision of care to others, human and ultrahuman. We might understand it more than we practice it. When humans are humane, other people, places, and things are the principal beneficiaries. Civility extends the range of generosity, and generosity the range of civility, and culture ensues. By that measure, humanity happens when benefit flows to others. It occurs with the subtle extension of the bonds of kinship.

And that's what Old Order Matrimony was for: extending the bonds of kinship beyond meritocratic calculation or blood metrics. It was emphatically, beautifully apparent in the orchestration of hospitality, the ritual heart of matrimony. By that measure, matrimony and its magnanimity are older than civilization and its contraction around kinship and strangerhood.

What do literacy, table manners, and strangers in our midst have to do with a modern traipse down the aisle? They have everything to do with it. The ancestry of matrimony, in its Western guise, is wrapped around the advent of the stranger, the culturally compelled and conserving ways of treating those who come from away. The historical sequence in Mesopotamia and old Europe, as I'm imagining it, went something like this:

1. Clan-based tribal peoples tended to be endogamous and heterogeneous, meaning they were known and recognizable to each other by the signals of dress, the familiarities of custom and ritual, and the concerted willingness to proceed as if mutually held dreams, stories, and deities were binding. Their ancestors would have been recognizable to them, they to their ancestors. Their memories were good. Their matrimonies would have been proclamations of kindredness, acclamations from the enduring hearth of their mutual life. Their hospitalities, ornate and delicately drawn, traded on that familiarity, embodied it. They were living the stories they were told as children. Ordinary life was the medium of prayer and magic and thanksgiving. The passing of time was the deepening of days.

2. Whatever caused it—strife, climate reversal, or pestilence—tribal peoples were obliged to uproot and were involuntarily drawn to places of seeming stability in a storm, urbanized places, walled places. They weren't the first. There was sanctuary, but there was precious little sanctity. They occupied marginal places with other reluctant wanderers. They were strangers and, for the first time, saw themselves that way—the way the townies saw them. They were counted and tracked, and some mark on paper began to replace how they once remembered their dealings with each other. They remembered rudiments, fragments of what once seemed fixed and fast. Their matrimonies were spare then, acts of recollection more than living memory. Sooner or later, there was intermarriage with the locals to contend with, where even the recollections were marginal. Their hospitalities were explained more than lived, and as time went by they became a bit like empty houses with the curtains billowing through broken windows. They were rites without stories.

3. The sand of centuries drifted, then cleared and drifted again. Nation-states proliferated. Western proto-democracies were more gatherings of casualties in their early going. They'd lost track of the stranger stage of their ragged beginnings,

> or had traded it in in favour of fables of freedom-seeking and freedom-granting. They were cultures steeped in uneasy, fleeting consensus, held in place by national creation myths and regulatory commissions and fierce, indefensible patriotism, a fidelity that doth protest too much. There were spasms of truth and reconciliation. Though homelessness was more the binding story, there were shards of some other understanding that thrust up through the sand from time to time. Among them, remnants of Old Order Matrimony. By that time, all marriages were intermarriages, strange marrying strange. At such moments, awkward as they can be, the treating of strangers trails honour in its wake. In those moments, ancestors on all sides might marvel. Against the odds, against the disembodying tide and the virtual version of everything, the dulled instincts of an Old Order Matrimony's radical hospitality stirred. In the teeth of manic demands for safety from the stranger, the odd and open bans of kinship were nailed to the wedding hall's door.

In literacy-free places and times, I think it is unlikely that there would be codes of enforcement for hospitality. Here's my reckoning: enforcement of hospitality runs the palpable risk of violating or undoing the cultural value it is there to advocate for. Forcing people to share their good fortune with the less fortunate stretches to the point of undoing the generosity of spirit that the culture holds dear. Enforcement of hospitality is a sign of the eclipse of hospitality, typically spawned by insecurity, contracted self-definition, and the darkening of the stranger at the door. Instead, such places and times are more likely to encourage the practice of hospitality in subtle, generous ways, often by generously treating the ungenerous.

Consider security at airports. If there *was* any real security, there'd be no need for an enforcement branch. In practice, security at airports is many people in uniform seeking it in vain, compromising the security they are proposing to protect. It isn't likely that you are sniffed by highly trained and vaguely manic dogs; patted down by highly trained people you don't know; x-rayed by machines you hope are made by highly trained people; encouraged, implored, and warned by the omnipresent intercom

person to be on the lookout for suspicious behaviour; and come out the other end of that arrangement secure in the knowledge that things are fine, that nothing weird can happen.

Something weird has already happened. You know that. You're passing through the entrails of the hyperactivity branch of the way it is. Enforcement of security comes from the absence of security. In the name of clarity, honest advertising, and well, security, the uniform should declare its function; and to mitigate the confusion, each member charged with protecting our security should have INSECURITY emblazoned on their backs. If things went that way, you'd know where you stood. You'd know what the deal was. You'd know why you were vaguely anxious and ill at ease and a bit exhausted.

Now, I'm troubled by all this, obviously and maybe excessively, but I don't think I'm naive about it. Obviously, terrible things happened in the sky when there was no enforcement branch for public security. And obviously those things are, for the moment, not happening, not in our corner of the world. Just as obviously, I think, the reasons for those things happening remain with us, looking for other chinks in the armour, other ways of manifesting. It is more than likely that the reasons for those things happening have exponentially intensified since the advent of the enforcement branch for public security. And then there's the question of what is happening to all that information they're gathering about us as they set about protecting us from the bad guys. It's Google Government time. We're tracked and counted and polled. It might be safer now. But it doesn't seem safer.

You run tremendous risk to the cultural fabric when you have no branch of the culture that enforces its deeply held values and practices. This is particularly true of open, pluralistic democracies. The real enforcement, though, is the faithful and consistent practice of those values that seem so much at risk. That doesn't guarantee their survival for another century, never mind another millennium or two. It guarantees something, though. It guarantees their fealty to what granted them their understandings in the first place: their ancestors, their deities, their homelands. There is no safety if by safety you mean insurance against your own era. That's what a culture faithfully practicing its ways knows. You'll never get an empire emerging from such places. You'll never get involuntary immigrants in their millions hankering to be free from such places, or missionaries sailing in their dark ships from such places to

save other people's souls. It's possible too, perhaps even likely, that cultures that are content to live their principled, ancestor-endorsed lives, unimpeded by the mania for growth, aren't likely to appear in the roll call of the famous and the infamous that passes for our history, the history we've written down in order to forget. Because nobody kept their records, and because most of them did without the "I was here, and I was great" stelae, we may know very few such places.

It sounds and feels counterintuitive, but the risk to a culture's long-standing values doesn't come from the absence of a designated enforcement branch to prosecute those values. The risk comes from a fissure, a rupture in the continuity of their practice. Human history seems to testify to the fact that that rupture is prompted by the often sudden appearance in that culture of stranger people who do not share the understandings of life that are reflected in the cultural fabric. That appearance had a trouble all its own. People had to choose: Is the stranger human? He or she has speech of some kind, the physical appearance of humanity, but it isn't clear that there are the makings of humanity there. Is the stranger civilized? (Some people made the distinction.) If so, then their strangeness belongs somehow to the natural order of things. But how to include them and their strange ways in your daily life, your ritual life? How to make way for them? How to be human yourselves with them in your midst? Double down on orthodoxy? Build a better wall? Wherever you have codes of punitive conduct designed to enforce culturally endorsed ways of life and inflict them on the strangers in your midst, you probably have a breakdown of those ways.

When people lived in clans, their numbers were small. They knew each other's skills, foibles, and oversteps. There was very little privacy of the kind many of us seek and defend and give away so readily now by pressing Send. There was little self-sufficiency. There were, I'm guessing, many who could have been self-sufficient but chose not to be, or were obliged not to be, or were shown how not to be. Self-sufficiency was hard on the neighbours and the neighbourhood. It had a Janus head. On one side was efficiency, on-demand access, lower sticker price. On the other, isolation, village poverty, withering of the ties that bind. Being okay was and is corrosive to social integrity. One of the key strategies in getting along in a

village might be not functioning on all cylinders all of the time, not maximizing your potential, not being all you can be.

When people traded for their necessities, they may have done so only partly out of want and dearth. The necessity that bound them in trade was the need each had of the other. They needed not only what each other might have had. They needed each other to be around for the long term, too. They were dependent, and this wasn't a state of mind and state of affairs they needed counselling for. They needed each other not to be good at everything, even if they were. It isn't likely that many people in such an arrangement were on a quest for personal meaning. Their meaning was a given. It was in the hands of those they traded with, petitioned, tolerated, venerated, appealed to, married into. As we'll see, matrimony was a spirited kind of trade, and it lived out beyond the rule of self-sufficiency.

These people would have lived in a kind of proximity that afforded most of them more than a passing familiarity with how things were made, done, sewn, and woven. To have that familiarity, they needed to pay attention and learn other people's ways. It's that second-order attention—the kind that has a soft focus that isn't bound to personal mastery but to the cluster of skills and intuition that makes up a working village—that is called upon in trade. And *the etiquette of trade is where the workings of ritual matrimony come from*.

When it came time to trade, each partner was deeply familiar with the latent and manifest worth of the items involved. They knew the lineage of learning. The principal exchange, then, would not be in goods or services but in mutual regard, respect, and acknowledgment of the life work that went into them. The proto-currency of trade is open acknowledgment of the other person's lifeways. That, in turn, is the spirit currency of a working village. That's what the partners and the witnesses and the beneficiaries are trading in. In the crazy wisdom of such a time, getting the better of a trading partner would compromise your own standing in the village. Overpayment, particularly in obtaining goods needed for ceremonial work, particularly when assembling gifts for petition or prayer or weddings, would constitute good trade. It would raise the merit and value of the goods beyond their utility. It would honour the participants, the goods, the village that produced them, the rituals and the deities they were crafted to treat and sustain.

When a stranger came to town with a view to trade, all of this was up for grabs. I'd say that trade is not possible between strangers when there is no

shared understanding of those goods' inherent worth or merit, when the way of life that produced the goods is divorced from them. They become inert, lifeless commodities. They go mute. They cannot bridge the psychic chasm separating the trade partners. In fact, the people in question are not partners anymore, at least not partners to each other. Their real relationship is to the items they are attempting to exchange. That's what produces trinkets, baubles, curios, gimcrack, memorabilia, tawdry and tired bits of ephemera—most of the stuff in the souvenir shop intended for people who're just passing through. Whatever spirit animated the items and the trade is gone. There's a price tag where there used to be honour.

Commerce is what happened to trade when the trading partners did not share a life that produced the goods to be traded. That is the end of trade and the beginning of commodity exchange, the beginning of cash currency, the beginning of the intermediary known as banks. It is the beginning of the dispiriting of the marketplace. The world in their hands has gone subtly unalive.

So far, this might seem to be a cautionary tale in favour of homogeneity of culture, deep mistrust of outsiders, reliance on borders and the concrete and virtual walls used to maintain them. But for one detail: hospitality. Intact cultures with living traditions that treasure hospitality are challenged to maintain those traditions by crafting certain kinds of hospitality specifically for welcoming and caring for the stranger. But the marvel of this dexterity of etiquette is that it doesn't require the elimination of the stranger's strangerhood in order to appear. This kind of etiquette *requires* the stranger, acknowledges the strangeness, engages it. It doesn't eclipse it or deny it or ignore it or look the other way or turn the other cheek. My odd idea is that the elaborations of hospitality, historically, were the redemptive gestures authentic cultures crafted in the face of dispirited, dispiriting trade with outsiders. Hospitality was how cultures, threatened by alien presence, remembered their souls. And hospitality of this radical, redemptive kind is the living blood of ritual matrimony. Old Order Matrimony relied upon the differences there between the betrothed. It trades upon them still, giving them a place to shine.

When Europeans first landed in what is now called North America, they chronicled the experience of often being welcomed by the Native peoples they encountered. The greetings were guarded and provisional, certainly, and they most probably were formal, but they followed an etiquette and a cultural sophistication that, for a time at least, prevailed over

hesitation, mistrust, and xenophobia. This, for the most part, was lost on the Europeans. The hospitality appears rarely to have been reciprocal—yet another thing that Indigenous hospitality was obliged to prevail over, for a time. Those chronicles go on to portray the first couple of generations after first contact, the challenges to Indigenous lifeways that the newcomers represented, their outright disregard of the standards of Indigenous hospitality, the gradual undoing of those standards. The European became an almost unlivable challenge to the Indigenous understanding of what constitutes "civilized" or "human" or "living." I imagine that it fell to the Indigenous peoples to craft what you could call "spheres of inclusion" that made the presence, and then the dominance of the European tolerable, livable. That strategy is, I would guess, still very much in effect. To wit: while Western governments, immersed in their numeracy/literacy trance, use blood quantum as a way of quantifying "Indianness" for purposes of determining inclusion in treaty negotiations and benefits (and other things), Native communities might tend to draw the circle of inclusion around those who live in certain ways that can't be counted, who live as if certain things are so.

I once knew a man whose father was Algonquin from northern Quebec and whose mother was Six Nations from upper New York State. He was, by his own calculation, a "blood." He met a woman from a Rio Grande pueblo, and they married. He went to live with her people down south. That's where I met him. He lived in an adobe house facing the plaza of the village. The Catholic church was on the other side of the square. He told me the story of his acclimatization to life there. He volunteered for work in and for the church. It was very much contrary to the lessons he learned from his own childhood encounters with residential school Catholicism, but he did it, he said, because most of the traditional people of that pueblo did the same and he wanted to respect the ways of his wife's people, the ways of the place he lived in. He wanted to fit in and earn his way there.

Slowly, over half a dozen years, he was gathered into the village's life. Except for certain times of the year. In those times, everything changed. There were seasonally prompted rituals the village elders undertook. There was no warning. There was no explanation. On the eve of these ritual days, a small delegation of elders, the signature and scrawl of time upon them, appeared at his door. One of them had a gym bag packed with clothing and toiletries he would need for the duration of the rituals. He was invited to accompany the old people. He was thrilled that he was finally being

taken into the inner sanctum of village life, and with a change of clothes and a spare toothbrush to boot.

He was taken by car several kilometres until he reached the highway, which was one of the pueblo's borders. They held the door for him. He got out. They gestured toward the motel down the highway, wished him a good and prosperous weekend, and told him they'd pick him up in a few days once the doings were done. Then they got in the car and drove back down the dirt road toward the pueblo.

He told me that as he stood there and watched the dust cloud billow out behind the car, his gym bag on the ground beside him, he knew that, at that moment, his wife and their children were gathering in ritual in the village. He knew that the children he'd had a hand in making qualified as members in good standing of the village. For all he knew, even with all that church work, he never would so qualify. It might always be this way, him on the outside looking in on every deep-running spiritual and communal practice of the place he called home, a practice they'd maintained over who knew how many hundreds or thousands of years.

As he said, he knew he was Native, but he wasn't *that* kind of Native, not *their* kind of Native—at least not yet, not without a lot of time in. Marrying his wife magnified the differences between them. Their matrimony was the working of those differences upon the village. There was no rancour when he told me the story. There was a kind of wily bemusement, as if he was telling the story at the expense of his tenuous outsider's keenness to belong. One of the criteria for belonging in that place was the willingness not to belong, to safeguard what he would hold dear by holding it dear from a distance.

A lot of things happened when Indigenous understandings of their Gods and lifeways swayed, veered, and cracked along their length and breadth, sundered as they were by the unprecedented appearance of strangers in the midst of a homogenous time and place. It wasn't all calamity, though. Some of it was clarifying, affirming even. One mark of authentic human culture is how it bends so as not to break, how it takes to the treating of a stranger as a time to remember what makes it the culture it is.

We plant two kinds of corn at our farm: a blue-black corn from Mexico and a bone-white corn from, well, Mexico, if you go back far enough.

Some people would say that our corn is far from home, being planted in eastern Ontario. And I'd agree. We don't have much of a growing season, not compared with corn's homeland. Our land is played out from the green revolution that seemed like a good idea in the sixties. We don't use anything but manure and some companion planting, milpa-style, to help the corn cope with the latitude. Some years go better than others.

But when the first people who looked like me came to the country around the Great Lakes, they found the Wendat and Six Nations people growing corn. They didn't know what it was, and it was everywhere. It turns out that corn was traded from Central America, up the Mississippi River, and out into the tributaries, and so to Ontario, a long time ago. There aren't many foods that have clung tenaciously to their origin stories the way corn has. My best figuring is that these stories were traded with the seed by the people millennia ago. The corn and its stories seem to have travelled together, as if the people who understood these things knew that the corn needed the stories more than the northern people needed the corn. Many elements of these stories are recognizable to Indigenous people living all along corn's peregrination route from south to north.

I've heard that corn is the most modified, tormented, and disfigured of all the GMO grains; that it appears now in car tires, fuel additives, house insulation, the most arcane industrial ephemera. I toured through parts of France and Germany a few years ago, and farmers in their scores were tearing up vineyards that had been there since Roman times in favour of getting in on the "corn craze." Still, with all of that, there are Native people up and down the Americas who maintain an ongoing, primordial, and emotional relation to this old ancestor of theirs.

One day, a Native friend of mine called me on his way out of town on band council business. He was heading down to Six Nations territory and offered to pick up some corn seed for me while he was down there. About 7:00 pm, he called and asked what we were having for dinner. This was his nervous way of asking to be invited over, which I did. We talked about everything but his trip, everything but the corn. Toward the end of the evening, by way of introducing what was, by his accounting, an epic story, he said, "The corn."

"Oh yeah," I said, agreeing to have forgotten the subject entirely until then.

At his lunch break, he said, he found an old, rundown variety store on the reserve. The old woman behind the counter asked what he needed,

and when he mentioned that he was looking for corn for friends of his, she directed him to a freezer in the back. Inside were bags of frozen, nixtamalized corn, ready for the soup pot.

"That's great," he told her, "but I think they're looking for seed, to plant."

"Oh," she said, "I don't know about that."

Now, factually, this wasn't true. Clearly she did know about it. She planted it herself. But culturally, this was entirely accurate and proper, as it turned out. He gently persisted, and she told him to come back later and she'd see. He walked back into the store at day's end. The old woman asked what he needed, and he reminded her that he was by earlier looking to get some corn. She directed him to the freezer in the back. He took out a bag of frozen soup corn, brought it to the cash at the front, put it on the counter.

"Anything else?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Any chance there's some seed corn around?"

"What for?" she asked him.

He began to tell her about our farm, the corn we grew, what we did with it at harvest.

"Who's it for, then?" she asked him.

"Well, it's for those people. And their school."

About forty minutes later, she'd finished telling him half a dozen old corn stories, along with planting tips, something like folklore, odd bits of things he wasn't interested in. It was only after he'd heard her out that she produced a plastic garbage bag from under the counter filled with a field's worth of dry seed corn. My guess: if he didn't hear those stories, he wouldn't have gotten that corn.

When he finished the story, he plunked the garbage bag on the kitchen table, shook his head. So far as he could tell, he was Native enough, but he wasn't *her* kind of Native. She knew corn wasn't in his ancestry, so she burdened him with the stories to ready him for the corn. That was her job, clearly, to see to it that the corn didn't go off into the world naked and generic and unadorned. She took care of her corn by seeing to it that the stories went into the world with it, by dressing it up in its best story clothes. When he told us that story of strained, slapstick corn etiquette, he was taking care of the corn. When we plant it and serve it at our school, at the weddings we do, we tell this story, as non-non-corn Natives ought to do.

This is what hospitality extended to strangers can look like. It's generous in its quirky, wending way. It is certainly respectful. It is friendly. And the courtesy maintains the culture's understanding of courtesy. That's its aim and function. The stranger is used by the host culture to remember that culture's ways. All is not revealed, nor is it given away for a trifle. The cultural treasure stays treasured. The stranger is treated well, but he or she can feel the borderline where the easy repartee properly ends and the road becomes uncertain. Entry beyond there is a costly, prolonged, and iffy affair.

What I'm not doing with these stories is holding up undifferentiated "Native culture" as *the* specimen of cultural aplomb. There is no such thing as a monolith called "Native culture," any more than there's such a thing as "African culture" or "white culture." The terms ignore nuance and history. In spite of hundreds of years of coordinated and happenstance ethnocide, though, there *are* Native cultures. Not as many as there once were, almost certainly, but here in their scores nonetheless.

What I *am* doing is marveling in a grievous way over the demonstrable and near-miraculous capacity of these cultures to adapt and somehow nurse a living memory of a time before us, a memory that is often translated into clear, consistent, and adamant reminders to us that people who look like me are—when we behave as such—guests in a place to which we still do not belong. We are interlopers, intruders, and thieves when we don't remember our outsider status, clumsy and disoriented as people are when they don't know how things are supposed to go. We are, no matter our passports or our beliefs in the matter, the grandchildren of forlorn cultural orphans who fantasized a new world where an old and established one existed, overstayed, who forgot to go home, who were illegals in every sense. Now we aren't sure where home is, and we're ignoring entirely the bill racked up by our squatting predecessors, incurred in our name, as we linger in another's house, living off the avails of their tolerance and our truancy.

Our kids, and the spiritually adrift among us, are in their droves seeking out Indigenous wisdom, Indigenous elders, Indigenous experience, for inner benefit, inner improvement, psychic legitimacy, redemption, forgiveness, belonging. It may be humiliating, it may be indicting, but it is mandatory that we recognize that there is no appreciable difference in approach or consequence between this kind of spiritual plunder, arrayed as cultural ecotourism or spiritual pilgrimage, and the work of resource

exploitation carnivores, government wonks in "Native Affairs" guiding pipelines through traditional territories, residential school functionaries, monotheistic inanimists, and missionaries. They are indistinguishable in mode of operation, in self-appointed purpose, in presumption of the right of access to whatever is there. They all lead with personal and cultural poverty. The poverty is acute in the matter of hospitality and guest etiquette. And guest etiquette, rooted in cultural continuity and living relationship with ancestry, is the armature upon which matrimony is draped. The poverty prompts the spiritual equivalent of "failure to deliver the necessities of life" to the living and the dead, and it rises every time another generation turns away from its own culpable, compromised ancestry and toward someone else's ancestry. It's that haunted hollowness that you're feeling when a wedding feels rote, or impromptu, or blithe, traditional in some way, and homeless all at once.

9

Radical Hospitality

Imagine for a moment that you're having a dinner party at your place. Among the guests are a few people you don't know, maybe new neighbours. The event's been a success. You may have started out with a stripped-down kind of grace spoken aloud, done to exclude no one, which might have been a bit awkward. It might have been of the "Here we are/we are lucky/we are happy/Let it continue" kind, which is great. Even if you reserve it only for the things that benefit you, gratitude at the table is still a good thing. Later, you make the rounds, offering second helpings. Anyone who doesn't want any more is likely to say something like, "I'm okay" or "I'm good." And it troubles no one at all, that phrasing. Except me—it troubles me.

First, the grace. Though not practiced so much these days, there is still an understanding that we are "giving thanks" when we do it. The words are directed elsewhere, to others not visible at the table. They are an invitation to join in the proceedings, directed to another world. Even in secular, Godless times, there is this rumour of another place or being that is to be thanked for our opportunity to meet and be fed again. It has some raiment to it, some quiet, rippling consequence. It opens the circle, makes the table a bit wider. It is an act of formally laying down any prior and reckless claims of self-sufficiency, recognizing them as insubstantial, the rumblings and ravings of amnesiacs. It recognizes that even our self-sufficiency we got from somewhere else, somebody else.

Though the probable powers of this other place could easily insinuate themselves into the soirée, likely even take the place over entirely, a formal welcome to them seems either mandatory or advisable for the sake of an affable evening. There is something about a formal welcome in that moment that seems, in every way it can be meant, right. The rudiments of hospitality bid us lift our eyes in wonder at the temporariness of it all, the unlikeliness. In those moments, a rumour of gratitude comes anyway, unbidden, involuntary, and it shimmers through the room. Gratitude, at table and in life, comes from the realization that none of this comes to you because you've been good or because you worked hard or because you deserve it. Others, plenty of them, have done all of that and more, to no avail. Gratitude comes from running your fingers along the edge of what you can do. It comes from knowing that the good and the bounty and the blessings of this life—and this life itself—will not last, cannot last. There's grief in gratitude. You can taste it. And in that cooking pot of grief and the love of life, the grace of hospitality is made.

Then there is this business of serving. It's a tricky thing in the North America that I know. As often as it is welcomed in social settings, it is resisted. Your teeth can be on edge if you feel you're being overly served. If you're not paying for the service via a tip, if you're a guest, you feel an imbalance that doesn't seem to favour you much. Things are being tilted in the direction of a transfer of obligation, as if you'll soon have to do something drastic, like penance or the dishes, to balance the evening out. It's a strange algebra we do to try to calculate just how much being served we have to endure before it becomes troubling. The more time in we have with people, the more informal we tend to be, and the less service we are comfortable being on the receiving end of. Looked at from the other end: the more we are a stranger to the proceedings and the host, the more the burden of the hospitality we bear. The alchemical magic, as we shall see, is in that burden.

The word *hospitality* comes from *hospitaller*, meaning "one who cares for the afflicted, the infirm, the needy." There's that thread of our misgivings about being on the receiving end of hospitality. Pull on it. For the written history of the word, at least, it has meant "being on the receiving end of a kind of care you'd rather not need." But there's mystery afoot with this word. In its Old Latin form, *hospes* meant both "host" and "guest." Either one. In its PIE origins, it is a compound word: *Ghos* + *pot*, and it meant something like "stranger/guest/host" + "powerful lord." It is amazing to

me that, ancestrally, the old word for guest, host, and stranger were all the same word. Potent ceremonial business, this is. In those days, the server and the served were partners in something mysterious.

This could be confusing, but only if you think of guest, host, and stranger as fixed identities. If you think of them as functions, as verbs, the confusion softens and begins to clear. The word *hospes* in its ancient root is telling us that each of the people gathered together in hospitality is bound to the others by formal etiquette, yes, but the bond is transacted through a subtle scheme of graces. Hospitality, it tells us, is a web of longing and belonging that binds people for a time, some hitherto unknown to each other. It is a clutch of mutually binding elegances, you could say. In its ancient practice, hospitality was a covenant. According to that accord, however we were with each other, that was how the Gods would be with us. We learn our hospitality by being on the receiving end of Godly ministration. That's what giving thanks remembers. We proceed with our kin in imitation of that example and in gratitude for it.

If you look anything like me, you might agree that none of our ancestors came to this continent to have their heirs go back to the land, go gluten-free, go paleo. Or serve somebody. All of that was supposed to change when we threw off medieval servitude, gained manumission, and got on the boats for a fresh start. And we seem to be as challenged in being served as we are in serving. The whole operation seems to give many of us the yips. It's an exceptionalism bestowed upon us that we don't particularly welcome, and we scramble to get out of the service attire as soon as decorum permits. Or we submit to being served.

Then there are the "helpings." It's no accident that we use that word to describe a duly amount of food. There are all kinds of contemporary compensations designed to remedy the imbalance of hospitality. "Help yourself" is one. It sounds affable. It also sounds like an abrogation of hospitality. There's "Dig in," not by any measure elegant. There's "Oh, we're casual here," which often means there is no seating arrangement, no order of who is served when, no status, no honoured place. It doesn't mean "We're all equal here" so much as "You're on your own." That's what it does. It isolates. It restores the outsiderhood that "helping" was supposed to remedy for a time.

The modern dispensation for it all, as you'd guess, is self-sufficiency. You're offered food, and you say, "Thank you. That's great." You're offered it again later and maybe you're not hungry, so you say, "No. I'm good." You weren't being asked anything about your goodness, your amplitude, but that's what you go with.

So what happened to the gratitude? Is the acceptance of food just a consequence of hunger? Of course it isn't. Is it just as likely that the social convention of table fellowship is designed for recognition of outsider status, and then for temporary inclusion into the magic circle? But if you've lost sight of the communion work of table fellowship, or are deaf to its beckoning, then eating other people's food comes from being hungry, and being invited comes from them having food, and the end of your hunger is the end of their hospitality.

Hospitality's strategy is to stretch the web of inclusion until the stranger is included. The guest's potential hunger is only the occasion for the ceremony. Food enough to feed others is another occasion. Deaths, births, changes of the year, birthdays, and anniversaries are others. But untutored and uninitiated into these understandings, you as a card-carrying, autonomous North American might defend yourself against that disarming inclusion, against the destabilizing effect of benefit, by citing your fitness. "I'm good," no matter how unconscious or innocently meant, is protection against the ministrations of another. You are being asked about the worthiness of the food and the service, whether you found it favourable enough to be served again. Your autonomy isn't being rewarded, nor is the extinction of your hunger the point of the proceedings. You are being asked to *join* the people who have invited you. The words sound a bit different, now, do they not? "*Join* us who are serving, helping. Give us a chance to serve, to help, to grace, to bless. Grant us this moment to honour the spirit and culture work of our ancestors." These are all spirit strategies for managing the stranger in the midst of the clan.

But we lost these understandings long ago. And so many of us respond as though we are being asked about our capacity, our fitness for duty, the condition of our autonomy. When it comes to communion, the worst thing you can be is "good." It is a gesture designed to reassert and preserve your stranger status. Without the burden, without the spirit alchemy of hospitality, you have what seem more like etiquette adversaries than partners. You have empty gestures, symbolic gestures. You have incorporations (literally enfleshments) without spirit. Without hospitality, food and drink

are lifeless commodities, bits of show, fuel. Instead of table fellowship, you have limited liability companies.

Greece, in its infancy, gave us the highly entertaining, very ennobling, somewhat disconcerting conceit we call theatre. This they did, deliberately or not, in part by deconsecrating ceremony, by institutionalizing the idea of script, by crafting an audience out of what once were ritual celebrants. The Greeks, largely through Homer's work, gave us other things, including the idea that how we are with strangers, be they civil or not, is a measure of our own civility. They also have a very particular vocabulary to distinguish the nuances of hospitality that were there from the beginning, and the subtleties are very fine. They gave us *xenia*, a word meaning both "hospitality" and "friendship." They gave us the closely related word *xenos*, meaning both "friend" and "stranger." And they gave us *philia*, which we tend to translate as "love"—hence philosophy, the "love of wisdom"; philadelphia, "love of brothers"; or philanthropy, "love of humankind." But *philia* is a bit subtler than that. It means a particular kind of fellow feeling that binds people known to each other by birth, family, or tribal affiliation. Philia is endogamous. It's a condition of kinship. Think of a double meaning of "close" as an adjective, then as a verb. You can sense that the one leads to the other. Philia trades on that resemblance. It is an inward-turning binding agent. It is a closed circle crafted from closeness, familiarity, and a stringent understanding of kinship.

Xenia is that bundle of expectations, obligations, and actions that bind people unknown to each other across their differences. It is not, at its heart, feelings people have for each other. Xenia is how people who don't share custom, daily life, or language behave when they are together. It is laden with formalities, with arch, even symbolic phrasing and gesture. Timing and nuance are everything in xenia. Often, the stranger would be seated in a way that conferred formal regard, then fed and plied with libation, and only then asked about his or her business and people and travels and name. He or she became known gradually and partially. The order of things places the emphasis on the right sequence of welcome and regard. Xenia was accord and respect granted to someone who, by virtue of being a stranger, had not earned it in the usual way. The skill of the

stranger in receiving that respect, and not struggling against the burden of being cared for in this manner nor trying to balance the books and get back to zero so as not be indebted, that was the subtle other half of this ethical, tactical covenant. The back-and-forth of it all was what these people meant by "civilized," and it determined one's standing in the kith and kin of humankind. And that understanding is there in *hopes*, in the condition of being drawn into the mysteries of the companionship of unknowns, as either host or guest.

The Greeks I've been describing even had proper formalities for ending the feasting, and a word to invoke them: *pompe*, which meant, literally, "to send." Their signaling of the end of hospitality had a kind of inner pageantry about it. The failure to invoke the end of hospitality was deeply inhospitable. The stranger was brought to the road, provisioned in some fashion for the journey ahead, informed about the likely conditions to come and possible hosts that might lay before him or her, and blessed. It was a formal kind of "sending." That's what *pompous* once meant.

Though not much has survived the deconstruction of ceremony, the instinct is there among us, even in a tawdry fashion, to make kin from strangerhood. Something of the old understanding is there when you bring the guest out to the street, to their car, wish goodness upon them, watch as the car disappears, and wave. If you're like my wife, you wave until your arm gets tired, long after they're gone from view, long after they see you waving them down the road. Just in case their ancestors are looking on. Or yours.

The etiquette of the table is of a certain kind when people are known to each other. They trade on their familiarity. You feel the sea change when a stranger joins you there. There's a more formal grace; a purposeful, long-hand grace. It's a grace that untutored, uninitiated people tend to find inauthentic or fake because it departs so markedly from what's familiar. But it isn't "less than familiar." At its best—at our best—it is differently elegant, something much more like the little, ordinary, epic achievement of making someone feel that they belong with you, maybe even to you, by how you seat them, how you treat them.

When the covenant is unknown, broken in some fashion, or violated, alienation, even aggression and violence, can come to hand. This was how

people contended with the stranger's strangeness, and how the stranger contended with the strangeness of the people they found themselves among. Those were scary days, too. People didn't eco-tour, not then. The road was more treacherous than it was fabulous. Pilgrimages were dalliances with demise. The stranger on the road was a survivor. And so the ceremonies of hospitality were passports to something like peace, to honest regard for what people did not understand or had never seen or heard, as it loomed at the gate in dusty array, in human form. Hospitality was how Gods-loving people loved their Gods and honoured their ancestors' ways. They fed the Gods of strangers by feeding strangers.

Strangers and beggars come from Zeus, the old Greeks believed. Foreigners and beggars came to test the civility of the people, to try it, give it a place to appear. Their table ways bid them pity and provision the stranger, lest they demean themselves and their Gods, lest they be turning away angels unaware, as the Bible says.

You may have already decided that this whole hospitality thing is a thinly veiled machine for channeling the inherent aggression that flares when strangers encounter each other. I knew a woman once who vowed never to teach her children manners: "If you do, you'll never know what they're thinking" was how she explained it. You may have decided, along with Dr. Freud, that civilization itself is smoke and mirrors, distracting us from otherwise murderous predation and tribalism, an inch-thick varnish upon a fathoms-deep snarling, tooth-baring slough of self-service, self-soothing, and self-sabotage, ardent betrayal and connivance and madness of the grimmest, autonomic kind.

It's hard to argue against that, especially if you lived some portion of the last century. We know that in the dominant culture of North America and beyond we have grown ever farther away from formality and ritual in our daily comings and goings. Many of us have deemed the whole thing wooden, discredited, inauthentic, cringe-worthy, fake, and unreflecting of our pristine and particular inner selves. It's embarrassing, awkward making at best. But rather than cast one more stone against the mediations of formal ritual, we could do something else instead. We could consider its strange, starched, precise ways. We could give ritual a seat at the laid-back, whatever-dude table of our communal lives, those of them left. This will be hard for people who are living in those trim and sleek condos outfitted with a sink, a microwave, an island counter for snacking, a pile of take-out delivery boxes in the closet waiting for garbage day. Those things are

the apotheosis of the nonaligned, self-designating life. They have a hole where the hearth used to be. Still, I think we should try. We should try to learn from a time when there was no internet, no "global culture" to absolve the stranger of strangerhood, no chain hotels or event planners to absolve people of their right and obligation to treat the stranger, no currency exchange, no music-streaming app to palliate the generic din of urbanism. Hospitality of this radical kind is culture in its finest moments. Matrimony, I'll try to show you, is radical hospitality's Godmother. And hospitality is matrimony's alchemy at work.

10

Courtyard Courtship

You must be wondering at this point how any of these things can be translated into a wedding. Can you really invent something you haven't seen or heard some version of? I've seen no version of the Old World I'm thinking lingers in matrimony. At least, I don't think I have. Somehow in these pages I've been remembering something, gathering together again that which was once intact and has since been rent asunder (the transliteration of "remember") that I've no lived experience of, no experience of—that is, until I began to answer people's pleas to make something enduringly matrimonial for their young lives together. Now, I can't quite tell any longer if I'm imagining something that hasn't happened yet or if I'm recalling bits of old ritual that arose when we tried to get it right. I can't tell if I've been doing the calling or if I've been called, if I've been doing the summoning or if I've been summoned.

Whatever it is, I've been remembering lately that matrimony is still, in an age of lonely nuclear families, a ragged gathering of the tribes. In an age strangely proud of its globalized homelessness, are there tribes anymore? Is there wisdom in tribalism? Can a tribe's young people encounter the tumescent, self-expressive scree of YouTube, cultural callus of a devil-minded time, for example, and still be tribal? Does the cultural skill alive in tribes survive the modern era in a way that postmodern peoples may not?

Years ago, I was on the Canadian west coast on some kind of teaching tour. At some point, it involved travelling with a few Native people in a rental car, with me as the driver. Walmart had just invaded the country, and there was a brand-new one close by. My passengers soon started leaning on me to go there. I'd never been to one in my life, for strategic political and moral/aesthetic reasons, and had vowed never to do so, so this was a problem.

I resolved to bring them to the door and wait in the parking lot. I sat in the car and stewed over the near-compromise this had made of my anti-Walmart stance, how I'd probably aided and abetted the cultural degradation of people who already had it tough, so far as I knew. Mostly I was vaguely humiliated by the drastic, prismatic reflection of the measly culture I was from that Walmart was to me, and equally distressed by how easily, how merrily, the Native people passed through the doors on their way to the cultural dissolution I knew too well. That's what I was thinking.

And that's when it hit me: Maybe Walmart was *my* instead-of-a-culture flashing its plentiful emptiness for all to see. It was my embarrassment, my problem. The Natives I was with didn't seem fazed by it at all. To them, maybe it was just another crazy thing that white people had come up with to mobilize their money.

The place didn't trouble them. I thought it should, but it didn't. While I was streaming my social justice disavowal on their behalf in the parking lot, staying away from the tawdry, they were poking through the pink and purple vinyl of the good life, getting to know it. I figured I had the upper hand, consciousness-wise. Did their tribalism survive an encounter with rental cars and cheap shit from China? With the greeter at the door of Walmart? With me and my prejudices about tribe? Probably.

The word *tribe* has facets. It is a subset of people in some anthropological quarters, and generally it means that you can count how many people there are. "A people" is too many people to count. If you have enough tribes resembling each other linguistically, genetically, patrimonially, and traditionally, perhaps you have a people.

As a way of describing clothing or jewelry in the commercial or vintage-vending part of town, *tribal* usually means "funky; possessed of genuine, purposeful lineage." If people were wine, *tribal* would be their

terroir. As a geopolitical attribute, *tribal* tends not to be an accolade. It is used in a National Geographic sort of way to describe people who've been left behind or ignored entirely by civilization or its current incarnation, globalized market consciousness. Or it is a synonym for the small-minded, the parochial, those prone to malice for the sake of the cause. When the ideological gloves are off, *tribal* is used to mean "menace, blood feud, vigilante justice, inbreeding."

In the days before Lee and Levi's and Lauren and Just Do It, there were many places in the world where people could tell each other's tribal affiliation from a long way off. It was there in how they dressed. Dress, and the self-adornment that goes with it, is our fur and foliage. It is the skin we choose. It is raiment and pall. It is age and standing. It is the murmur of the wee self in the chorus of belonging. It is a language with all the subtlety, nuance, tone, and traipse any language includes and requires of its practitioners. It declares allegiance and marital status.

The standardization of clothing through industrial production, commercial distribution, and endless advertising is akin to the standardization of language through state-sponsored literacy education, the authority of dictionaries and style manuals relied upon by the publishing industry, through that same relentless advertising. But the articulation of belonging in cloth and dye is nuanced, and it's real, and it's still here.

There have been a handful of times during the course of the weddings I've done when I or someone close to me has been asked whether it was "a real wedding." Leave aside the slander in the question—and there was often plenty of slander in it—and still you are left with the mysterious allegation that there is such a thing as a real wedding. I would wager, heavily, that the person asking this question never asked it of the customary church arrangement, of the celebrant at the front of the room, of the book he or she was reading from, of the rehearsed declarations of general fidelity, of the procession down the aisle, of the white collar or the rented polyester clothes. It isn't asked of the destination wedding, nor the surprise wedding, the flash-mob wedding, of something that calls itself "a celebration of love" or "declaring our commitment." But it was asked of me.

This business of tribes is one of the reasons why. When you come into a church wedding, you are often asked by an usher or helper whether you

are a friend of the bride or the groom, and then you are seated accordingly. That affiliation sets the stage. This question of where you'll sit, along with how you dress, where you belong in the ceremony, and to whom is one of the vestiges of tribe. You are being asked what tribe you belong to. Because your standardized dress is inarticulate on the matter, and because stranger-hood is the order of the day in contemporary Western weddings, you are asked to declare your allegiance or to decide upon one.

Once, weddings were declarations of tribal identity. If a given tribe was small enough—and, long enough ago, they were all small enough—the genetic roulette wheel was crowded and monotonous. People were blood-close. We tend not to credit ancient peoples with anything like the same kind of fine-tuned understanding of life that we've managed. But I suspect they had at least one skill that is in serious atrophy today. They knew how to watch. They knew how to pay attention over long periods of time with no reward or encouragement. They knew how to wait. They were apprentices to happenstance. They had the discipline of stillness. They were sensitized to pattern. This was an era with no teachers, with practitioners in their stead, with elders long on looking. What we're pretty sure needs a microscope and experts, appeared in those days by cyphering and insinuation, by deduction. And so what we might imagine we invented—the articulation of human genetics, for example—they might have already been engineering for eons, using matrimony to do that work.

Cousins being attracted to each other during summer vacation, their clumsy flirtations, will bring out the vigilante in older generations. Everybody knows that it's wrong, that it can't happen. Soon enough, the teenagers caught up in the hormonal sway of familiarity and strangeness will know it, too. This is taboo. The world over, I imagine, there is some kind of sanction against close blood. While the taboos would vary in severity, still it seems likely that people have understood for a very long time, across most cultures, that close blood is big trouble. Iceland, for example, has a small, endogamous population; always has had. They kept track almost from the start of who came from where, who married who, who begat who, and so on. They have a national genetic registry that is there not to entertain the populace with extravagant tales of swashbuckling ancestral exploits but to equip the populace with enough information to avert second- or first-cousin procreation.

All of this suggests to me that well before plant hybridization, well before we knew the rudiments of genetics or saw the technicolor insides

of a womb, there were peoples who understood what these things meant and what they required from humans. They didn't know the microscopic mechanics of the thing, but they understood what it all meant. They understood that consanguinity brought trouble and mayhem to families, to extended families, to tribes. My guess: this probably was and remains the strongest influence upon mate selection in human history. It isn't love. It isn't attraction. It's blood, and it's alertness to the mandate of diversity.

People living in small, endogamous groups faced the challenge of genetic narrowing in every generation. It was there whenever hormonal stirrings among young people prompted sexual union into the light. In small clans, genetic diversity isn't a given. It isn't easily obtained. Attraction or not, you had to go outside the clan or tribe to sustain it. Arranged marriage has been one response. Given that it often happened well before puberty, arranged marriage was a kind of preemptive strike on behalf of genetic diversity. Another was the sometimes subtle, sometimes elegant, sometimes fractious casting and recasting of alliance. Power marriages ensued. Another was the now much-maligned and deeply discredited practice of bride stealing. The idea that a young woman is taken from her people and more or less cajoled into matrimony violates most of our sacred cows and vows: self-determination, mastery, freedom of choice, and autonomy, to name a few. It violates the currency and primacy we grant to attraction in the romantic and matrimonial scheme, too.

Many people, most people perhaps in our domain, report that the lion's share of their attractions come to them from some mysterious Elsewhere. They are not our subalterns. They rarely do our bidding. They *are* our bidding. We are, most often, on the receiving end of our attractions, of who we are attracted to, and why, and when, and how often. We do their bidding. Most of our love yammer attests to that. So do most of our love poems, our love songs. Calling these attractions "ours" is like calling the addictions that plague us ours, or the good fortune that flirts with us ours, or the children we're granted ours. If some aspect of our inner lives is as much consequence as it is cause of our attractions, then it is clear enough, and not only to the ascetics and the contemplatives among us, that our attractions relentlessly and sternly inform our elaborate ruses of independence and self-determination to the point of compromise. They are the hand inside the glove of our autonomy. They are not an exercise in self-determination or dominion, even when raised up to the level of preference.

You could say of independence, self-determination, and autonomy that they are three more things we're involuntarily attracted to.

So it is a mysterious exercise in self-deception, it seems, to hold up attraction as the sanctified state, the pristine and unsullied and true state, and to hold down arranged marriage or bride stealing or the presence and influence of anyone else's idea of what should become of us, or the rituals of matrimony, as violations and vexations of the natural order of the inner life and its management team. Mate selection is an exercise in autobiography and confession. You declare more about yourself then than almost any other time in life. And the matrimonial track record of the current regime, one in which we just let preference rip, is no indication that self-determination in matters of the heart, the overheat of feelings, constitutes wise counsel or practice, or that matrimony should be entrusted to the vagaries of self-assurance.

Imagine that there are two extended clans related by language and divided by dialect, bound by the caveats of climate and soil and foodways, separated by the vagaries of fortune and ancestral chicanery and several mountains or valleys. What binds them beyond ground, food, and ancestral ways is the genetic necessity that they both understand. They anticipate the stirrings rising in the young men and women. They know their near future is at stake. This much at least they share. They share an understanding that what distinguishes them has its pride and place, and that in matters procreant, these things are obstacles to be overcome. Though each clan probably believes itself to be the more materially, morally, and ethically superior, its members know they are not superior enough to be able to go through their eons without the other guys a few mountains or valleys over.

And so overtures are made. A delegation of elders or senior members of a family or clan whose young man has unwittingly and intemperately declared interest in someone, someone not too close by blood, appears at the gate of the family compound of that young woman. The young man is nowhere to be seen. This is as it should be. His attractions and desires are only the occasion for the delegation's journey, not the reason for it. The usual dignities are at play: tea and food for the guests, a seat of honour in the forecourt, the guests employing the slowness of gait and speech

that befits the moment. They speak of many things, anything but the business that brings them. Of course, all these people are distantly related. Everyone knows why the formal visit is occurring. There's no news here, no novelty at work. There is custom and elegance and the proper signs of respect and mutual understanding at work.

Where I live, mutual understanding is the occasion for cutting to the chase and dispensing with the preliminaries. We dispense with delay. Preliminaries are for beginners. Concluding our business is the purpose of doing business, and we get on with our lives, get on with what we'd apparently prefer to be doing. Bring this approach to anything ceremonial, and ceremony is an early and certain casualty of the proceedings.

But in the time and place I'm imagining, there are no preliminaries. No one is in the dark about what is afoot. All of the elegance of soul and culture is in the approach. Everyone knows why they are sitting together in that state of custom-sanctioned and ancestor-enforced affability. And everyone knows what is at stake. They attend to the details of dress and eloquence of speech. Everyone knows how these things have, on occasion, gone badly in former times. Everyone of age knows the ancestral weight that rests upon the moment.

So all of the remembered history of the clans, separate and together, is there. The standing of the present generations in the eyes of their ancestors and their Gods is at play and at stake. All of this and the personal encounters and history some may have had with others over the years are there. It isn't easy, but the proceedings are smoothed, and the old blood feuds are soothed by the decorum that binds them all to the table in the forecourt.

Everyone knows why everyone is gathered, but no one knows what will happen or what the outcome will be. The means are prescribed and formal as they are partly because the end is so unknown. Compare this to what prevails in this part of the world. Here, in matters matrimonial, the wishes and desires of the couple in question are enthroned as the very Gods of Necessity, and the end of the business is a foregone conclusion. Because of that, strangely enough, there's not much elegance. There's personal style, instead—loads of it. No intermediaries; no prolonged, prescribed approach to the matter. The ceremony is minutes long, the reception often a jet-fueled, at times awkward, eternity. It is clear that for many of us the wedding is one of the preliminaries to be dispensed with. When not dispensed with altogether, it is borne. It is one of the few remaining bits of tradition to get through so we can get our party on.

Now that might sound odd to you: the formalities by which people conduct their cultural business are there precisely because the results, the outcomes, aren't known. The weather of the heart is a place of imprecision and chance. Errant procession across sacred ground is another. Elegance of approach is advisable, even required, when encountering a holy place, the domain of a deity. It is not there to ameliorate chance or neutralize randomness, chaos, or caprice. It is there because the Gods of Life and Death are there. They've been stirred and summoned by that stirring toward life of the young. They've been called by the old and those steeped in culture to rise again to the old necessities and the old courtesies. They've been called by the gathering of the coterie of Worthies, the saints, and the conclave of ancestors of those who are loving their lives this way, by rising again in grace and arraying themselves as if battling for beauty, and bringing themselves to the gate of strangers, or those who are almost strangers, in the guise of elders.

When they opened their gate, those strangers became accomplices in praying and praising all the mysteries, wrinkles, and shadows of life. They became partners in the wrangling of an unassured life. Their elegance, poise, and practice in the unnerving presence of that unassured life is what makes the case they wish to make to all who have come before them; that this strange miracle of human life might somehow continue; that with all their amnesias and excesses their human life might somehow continue. That prayer, that plea, is in the details of what is said, and by whom, and when, how the tea is served and to whom first, and whether it is the best tea, and whether when news of the arrival of strangers came the mistress of the house sent one of the children to a neighbour's house with a child's urgent plea for that neighbour to part with some of her best tea, given what was at stake, given who was at the gate, given why. Decorum rolls through town.

So those who've come on the young man's behalf are engaged in the ages-old act of courtship, not seduction. This is to say that they are, by degrees, making themselves known. They are offering themselves into the social void, the unknown territory untamed by custom, but they neither buy esteem nor sell themselves, their merits, their knowledge. They are there on behalf of a young man, yes. He and his attraction are the occasions. But he and his attraction aren't the reason. They are there for the sake of clan integrity, for the sake of their standing within their village, for the sake of the matrimonial days of their son, grandson, friend, cousin, nephew, and godson. So, they would not sell him either.

In the old days in the Balkan countries, when two families would meet to wrangle the matrimony of their young, the woman's family would sing verses of a well-known song that diminished the prospective bride's merit. They would sing something like, "Oh, she's not who you want. She can't cook well, can't keep house." The next verse might say something like, "There are good girls everywhere. You should try there." And after each verse, the man's family would sing the refrain: "She's a blessing, we can see. She's good as she is, we can see."

It isn't subtle. It's mournful. The woman's people are making the case for her staying among them, and they're making it in the face of tradition and the genetic necessities they know could prevail. They are saying to people across from them, "If you have regard for life, you'll leave her here with us."

In the name of ceremonial etiquette, the man's family must praise the woman's family by praising the cultural education they've provided her, even though her homemaking skills are something they know little of. They can see the cultural education she's been raised with in the way her family is making known their love for her and their unwillingness to live without her in their midst. It raises her worth in their eyes. The grief of the moment is mutually held, mutually binding. They are saying to the people across from them, "We have regard enough for you to have one of your young among us, to bear us our own future." They are both saying things that sound foreign to the mouth, and they both know why. All this subterfuge is the matrimonial vernacular of elegance and honour.

Selling in a setting like this is seducing, and seduction is theft. Seduction registers at first like a compliment, like a gift. It's tricky, like a spell is tricky. Inside the storm of disrespect unleashed by seduction is the galling proposition that those on the receiving end wouldn't recognize theft, wouldn't know seduction when they felt it make its dark way into the proceedings, wouldn't hold dear their treasures, human and otherwise, when on the receiving end of shallow compliment.

Courtship has art, but no artifice. Courtship that has the possibility of matrimony in its vest pocket has the possibility of utter failure under its hat. I remind you of this because it is all but impossible in a deconsecrated time to remember that the cornerstone of all ritual doings is the looming possibility—the givenness, even—of failure, disaster. It lives in the poorly chosen word or moment, the errant thought, the taking of offence, the standard amnesias of human striving, the fear of failure, the disbelief in

failure, the real chance that you do everything right and it still comes out wrong, the broken-down-ness of old understandings. The chance of failure in ritual is higher than the chance of rain on parade day. It is 100 percent. That's what chance means. It means: Could it go crazy, given all our readiness? The only honest answer is: Hell yes, it could.

Ready or not: that's what you take on when you take up matrimony. When the ceremony of matrimony is taken to be the rolling out of two people's intersecting desire to be unalone for a while, the spell of inevitability has taken hold, and the pall of "got to," "will be," "can't lose," and "now and forever" has descended, and the ghost of unclaimed ancestral mayhem has come to take its portion of uninitiated people's hearts and spiritual range. The spell of inevitability has come in our time to take its portion, drawn by a whiff of the upsurge of life in matrimony to take its share. That's what happens when untutored desire meets ceremonial desolation, as it so often does in our peak encounters. It makes the alchemy of matrimony look like housebroken, nostalgic wand waving, like spiritual letters of introduction and credit. When that happens, elegant approach, proper seating order, well-chosen and practiced words, the petitions of the old people at the gate, and the posse deputized for this daring duty in whatever constitutes their Sunday best all look like mere symbols, cyphers, or stand-ins for the real thing, gestures to appease discredited habit.

A young man makes his way by himself to a young woman's father, asking a bit uncertainly for his approval, his blessing. That still happens, I hear, in an awkward sort of way. The father, probably never having been there before, still knows what he is supposed to do. In our corner of the world, he is supposed to be the affable and affirming arm of his daughter's plan for herself. He is supposed to approve and to pretend that this is what blessing is. For that is what blessing becomes in a desolate time: approval. Approval of what will happen anyway, regardless, approved of or not. And, in seriousness, how many of us have been asked to bless someone or something? Do we even know what it means to bless? Do many of us know the mechanics of blessing, the spirit alchemy, the whole-person mayhem of the thing? Do we know anything of the power at work, the consequence set loose in blessing? Do we know the word at all?

The word *bless* comes, I'm happy to report, from Old English. Alas, the meaning has been mauled on its way from the old people to us. It was the word Wycliffe and others used to translate two biblical terms: the Vulgate Latin *benedicere* and the Koine Greek *eulogeine*, both meaning "well spoken," "well worded," or "to praise or speak highly of." That's how the tone of genial affirmation or approval came to the word: it was the work of missionaries who, as you'll see, disfigured an Indigenous pagan word and practice by taming it, by obscuring old memories the word carried for its people.

The Old English word they chose to stand in for the biblical idea never meant anything like "affirmation" or "approval." It might have been closer to a combination of appeasement, awe, and amen. The word itself meant "blood." In its oldest verb sense, it meant "to consecrate," "to make holy by marking with blood." It is where we got our phrase *at stake* from. *Bless* comes to us from a time when encounters with the Gods were unnerving, fraught with uncertainty, probably perilous to the uninitiated spirit, marked by the spilling of life, by endings. In blessings, there's a willingness to know the gravitas of something, its numen, its telluric powers. It means something like "to be brought to the profanus, to the precinct of the Gods." When the old people blessed, they were doing sacerdotal work, a word meaning "to give the sacred its due," "that which is severed off for the Gods."

To be asked to bless someone, a younger person in particular, is not to be asked for your approval, no matter what the supplicant might mean by it. To be asked for your blessing is a cause for hesitation, for rumination of the deepest kind. It is a time for courage, not so much for encouragement, for discernment of the stilling kind. It means being, for a time, a stand-in for the divine. It means sharing the burden of taking on holy work with the one asking you to do so, in the name of life. Blessing bypasses your approval the way it bypasses your opprobrium. Blessing is the work of stout elders and their apprentices. It restores the older meaning of sanguine, not "agreeable, affirming, and conciliatory" but "bloodied by treating with the Gods on behalf of a younger person." It means something like "gathering the Gods round the strivings of the supplicant." What happens when you bless, what happens when they gather—that is mysterious business, the stuff of ritual, far from guaranteed. This much you can know, though: the mark of the other world will be upon you when you bless. You are overseeing endings, mostly.

It sounds different now, does it not, the prospect of a young man seeking the blessing of an older man, a father, the father of a certain someone? No young man should be left to that work alone. And no older man should come to that day never before having blessed or been asked to bless. We are, in our millions, not ready for that work, that day. A couple of decades or more ago, I heard a wise person say, "The best way to bless someone is to ask him or her to bless you." I didn't forget the feel of the thing, how honest it sounded, how forlorn, how confounding, how redemptive. Clearly, blessing is powerful work. It is blessing, the bloodying of all the prospects of life and the untested convictions, that should be at the centre of matrimony, not those marzipan effigies on a cake.

Our age grants automatic, irreversible, and irrevocable humanity to anyone born. We grant adulthood almost as easily to anyone who makes the age of majority. Though we don't use the term much, we grant elderhood to any person still upright, lucid, and old. Across the dominant culture of North America, there are no rites of passage undertaken to craft humanity, adulthood, or elderhood from the oft withering, oft bewildering chaos of personal experience. I wonder, then, what the parents of a young woman today would think of a young man who comes to them, very much cap in hand, to seek out something like blessing and permission to speak to their daughter directly about matrimony. I wonder what they think when, somewhere in the confusion and the carnage of inadequacies of all kinds, he finds a way to confess the awkwardness and waywardness of his heart. And what happens when a bereavement rises in the absence of serious, purposeful tampering with the heart that should have been his initiation rites at puberty, an absence so manifest and so easily taken for personal shortcoming? I wonder what the young man would think he is doing by putting himself through it all when none of it is highly esteemed or mandatory to the proceedings, or what the young woman thinks when it's unnecessary at best and at worse a dangerous throwback to patriarchal times. So the young people do what they can to make the spirit of the wedding a simple business: nobody stands between them nor tells them what it's all for.

But this isn't matrimonial circuitry. It is matrimonial short-circuitry.

Folktales, where the residue of culture wisdom still lingers, will often put someone or something between the betrothed, between the masculine pole and the feminine pole. The masculine in us all has to go through that someone or something on the way to wholeness. The feminine in us all has to discern and divine. He has to be tried by ordeal. She has to be tried by affirming the old architecture of trial. Neither of these are passive, damsel-in-distress renditions of weakness or lack of agency. They're not rites of heroic prevalence, self-mastery, and personal power. The tales know that the power is there in the delay, in the ordeal. Without the feminine affirmation of the primordial order, the masculine ordeal undertaken on behalf of that order has no agency at all, no redeeming consequence, no meaning worth retaining or retelling. The world would not endure without it, will not. The centre will not hold, is not holding, without it.

As we'll see in a later chapter, in folktales it is often the Father King who stands between would-be bride and groom. He appears to be the boss. I say "appears" because he scarcely does a thing. He has an authority, but the authority is far from comprehensive. He interferes long enough to get a dangerous quest up and running. His royal responsibilities include the care and maintenance of the world outside the castle gate, yes, but he is powerless to act upon them or enforce them without the premature self-assurance of the young. When matrimony is at hand, the Father King is the voice of the world, directed to the suitor:

> Just when the moment of helpless entanglement in the inner life comes on, go out into the world and find what ails it, and see to it that this hindrance I bestow upon the cadence of love turns you to serving that which has served you all along. Make something right, or wither in the attempt. Soon enough, the temper and timbre of the suffering world will tell us all which it has been. Your love is not shelter from the storm. The matrimony you seek you must seek in a world made right.

And that's his blessing. It isn't dominion. It's ritually tempered responsibility.

In some modern arrangements, the woman stands between the young man and the Father King. (The translation of this encounter to a same-sex context is something beyond my experience, and something

I'd encourage.) The ordeal of winning the bride has become the more seductive business of winning the bride's approval. It has come to pass with the discrediting of man, masculine, father, patriarchy—words that have become synonyms for toxic, predatory, privileged, condemnable—that many young men go to women for general approval and affirmation, just to make it through the day, for some kind of protection from the firestorm of opprobrium that prevails, and particularly for instruction on how to be a man. Given the confusion among older men on the matter of manhood, and given how many of these young men are on their own in this regard, there's sad business afoot.

I was once teaching a room full of nurses, all women, about some of my ideas for working in the death trade. Apropos of nothing I can recall now, I asked them a simple question: "How many in this room have, in your working or your private life, ever been mistaken by a man for home?" The response was remarkable. The looks on their faces told me that they'd never considered this question in these terms before. There were looks of derision; of vague surprise; of disinterest; of pained, sudden, and unwelcome recognition. And for all of that, probably four-fifths of their hands were raised firmly and fixedly up, like flags of confusion run up a confounding flagpole, as if some part of them knew exactly what the question meant, knew exactly what it was like when that happened. They were in on it somehow.

So, yes, to be clear, I am saying that in times to come, these days of the deep discrediting of one gender in order to hold another in some kind of esteem, and the wanton and criminal simplification of the ornate, elegant, and confounding psychic life of human beings into gender brigades that demand oaths of utter and exclusive identity and fidelity, including fidelity to the fluid kind, will likely be deeply lamented and sorrowed over.

When the young suitor in my postmodern set piece secures the approval of the young woman to approach her father on the matter of matrimony, if he even lets her in on the spirit or the strategy of his intent, he's been preapproved, you see. His ordeal is already concluded. It is the ordeal of a child seeking the approval of the one at the centre of his affections. Those folktales say it plainly enough: getting the woman to say yes to you is not the ordeal that the world might be nourished by. That is not matrimony. That is a folie

à deux. That is the world barred from the frail love of two young people. It turns citizenship in a world in travail into a velvet lair of personal safety.

Time was when the young man in question would have bypassed the approval of his beloved altogether in perilous pursuit of this pagan blessing of another man. It isn't a covert deal between men that ensued, excluding the woman, the fix already in. It is an overt ordeal. What he must do is make his way toward her good graces in a host of indirect ways. What the young man should be seeking is the father's blessing to approach his daughter with the weighty business that is on his mind and in his heart. In order to do that, he must reveal to this father the weighty business that is on his mind. And this he must do to a father who is likely to know what is on his mind better than he does.

Imagine that a young man in a custom-honouring culture has found a way to make his affection for a young woman known to her that respects the gradualness and elegance held in high regard in living cultures. The chances are good that he would have employed the services of a friend or two, an age-mate he went through initiation with, perhaps an elder or two as well, perhaps a Godparent. Each of these people would have found culture-endorsed ways of representing the early bud of his feelings in a way that affirmed the deepest values and spirit practices of the culture, in ways that showed the kind of inventiveness and love of what preceded them that would challenge the limits of his feelings, stretch them. Both of these are at play in the early days of matrimony, with tradition and individual initiative proving and provoking each other. Unbeknownst to the young man, his culture is alive and well in how it prescribes the elegances of approach and proscribes being too direct in the weighty matters of the heart.

Someway, somehow, a meeting has been proposed, accepted, and planned. There is a private place, perhaps the forecourt of the young woman's family compound. There are three chairs. In one sits the young man, dry-mouthed, clean-kitted, in over his head. In the chair opposite him, a discrete distance away but closer to him than she has been so far, sits the young woman. In the third chair, at an oblique angle to the others, sits her father. At some distance, her family. Nothing has been said between them, but naturally the father knows why they're all sitting there, the tea cooling in cups on the table between them. This being a village some distance from that of the deputies who came on the young man's behalf, the father knows something of the young man's family. He knows what confounds

the boy at this moment, too. He knows the confounding, out-of-his-skin total attraction and the bloodlust that might run through the boy, and he knows this moment for the high-stakes thing that it is better than either of the young people. He knows that this upheaval has made the young man more a boy for now than he's been in years.

And so, according to tradition, he says not a word. The young man must speak to the young woman now, for the first time in this formal way, as if her father and all that he is and all that he means in this moment, including the voice of what might be and what might not ever be, is listening. Because he *is* listening—intently. And if the young man has been coached in this matter for weeks or months beforehand by older, wiser people—and he has—he knows that in this precarious moment he has to find a language that appeals to the young woman and respects her father and his time on this earth, in the same sentence, at the same time.

And because this is the way it is and the way it has been for a long time, everyone there knows. Everyone there knows, as their age allows them to know, what is at stake and what's at play. Everyone's in on it, in other words, although the young man in his barely contained panic may know this the least of them all. The young woman may be wanting him to hit the mark, make all the right sounds at the right time. The father even, maybe quietly and invisibly, is pulling for him, knowing that the clan's fortunes and future will be in the hands of the young man's generation soon enough, knowing that how this meeting goes will lend the young man merit in days to come or demean him in the eyes of his peers and elders in a way that could scarcely be borne.

But none of this shared understanding helps, or seems to help, in the way that none of it makes the moment easier or more assured as to its outcome. Everyone's in on it in their fashion, and yet it is no shadow-puppet play, no going through the motions, no symbol, because the end is not a foregone thing. It is not assured because, in their wisdom, the older people involved in this thing will not allow the feelings these young people have, that galaxy of vagaries and inconstancies, to dictate the proceedings.

We have, in modern English, the word *intermediate*. As an adjective, it carries the tone of "not quite." It could mean "not old enough" or "not skilled enough," "not quite able, not yet." Not entry level, exactly, but

lots of room for improvement. Still a long way to go. And we have the word *immediate*. This adjective enjoys remarkable standing in the modern world. It has the sense of "close at hand." It says, "Right here. Right now." It works the way message-bearing T-shirts work. It also carries the tint of authenticity and trustworthiness, particularly in the realm of emotions and the inner life. On the scale of intimacy, immediate is intimate indeed. It closes the gap between you and your intended, and in the on-demand age, that's very good indeed.

But if you sniff around this word *intermediate*, soon enough the preferences it exercises today begin to betray the intolerances it is ruled by. The word has meant nothing of the kind for many, many centuries. To mediate means simply "to halve," to occupy the place of equidistance between two things. From that position, the intermediary maintains the distance between and establishes a connection or relation thereby. It is a permeable wall, a veil, a conduit. Part chaperone, part ambassador, part arbiter of the crackling clamour and mandate of intimacy, the intermediary is the means by which two people find each other without melting and merging and going under, without collapsing into the romantically gravitational black hole of "It's just you and me, babe. You and me against the world."

Think of the consequences for a culture more and more driven to extremes of summons and accessibility by the tirelessly smart pocket devices that have banished privacy, decorum, discretion, probably forever. These things have prompted someone so summoned by the invisible to raise a finger of temporary delay to the person sitting with him or her. That finger raised is a kind of Esperanto now, and it means "I'll just take this. I gotta take this long enough to tell them that I can't take this right now, that I'll get back to them, and then get back to you who cared enough not to call but to come. Your visit is important to me. Please hold, now that you're here, and I'll will be with you shortly."

It's distressing, at least to me, and it is amazing to me too, that the potential of access and availability is forever trumping the actual presence of another person. The appellant that is six thousand kilometres away weighs more upon the conscience of the owner of the phone than does the willingness of a fellow human to come sit with the owner of that phone, often.

And that is happening in a culture that holds up immediacy as the new gold standard of an authentic, genuine, hands-free kind of life.

It isn't news that our corner of the world treasures immediacy, pants after immediacy, hoards the stuff. Nothing in between. Eyeball to eyeball. Immediacy is crack in a lonely, hypochondriacal crowd. In matters of intimacy, *close* is synonymous with *good*. *Tight* is optimal in matters romantic or fraternal. You might need some space from time to time, but that's only to get you ready for the next round of tight. Nobody, or almost nobody, trusts distance in matters of the heart. If your beloved—if anyone—describes you as distant, well, that's not good. Think of the polyamory aficionados in your circle. My guess is that they are not taking on a new partner or two to have more distance in their emotional lives. Maybe they are closing down a growing distance in a current relationship by making the heart's bone house a more crowded, more immediate place. Maybe not, of course. But maybe.

Privacy is the happy face of immediacy. Privacy makes the fear of isolation—the titanium spine of immediacy—livable. Privacy is hallowed ground in the information age, in the online retail mall of modern life. But it's the defamation age that we're in now, folks, deformation in disguise, where nothing is as it appears to be on that sorry, remorseless little screen, or behind it. They tell you they're concerned about your privacy, want to defend and protect it, have methods and measures and policies in place to safeguard it. And in the very moment of their reassurance, they are taking the pulse of your concern for your privacy. Their sensors are on the tips of your fingers. Every time you touch the keyboard, the touchpad, this is the confessional now. They are taking the measure of your every move, every discernible fiscal and psychic info search, purchase, and hesitation, and selling it back to you as personalized programming, selling it to the highest bidder in the metrics game. They're closing the gap between you and your preferences so that soon enough they'll become the same thing. What you want, who you want, *that* you want—they'll all be at hand before you know you want them. The triumph of idiocy—the solitary self—is at hand.

Imagine, then, how a culture primed for immediacy, primed for the jolt and the frisson of "right now" and "you and me" and "all in," takes to the old version of slow, indirect, and prolonged courtship. It doesn't. It takes umbrage at it. There's a fear of distance and ambivalence banging around in the dark corners of intimacy. Courtship, for the most part, has become assured scoring on the installment plan. From what I hear, young people in their legions are quitting courtship altogether for want of safety,

quitting the dating apps for similar reasons. Courtship is for the most part a symbolic declaration of what's already there. It doesn't create or conjure love. It's a cypher for the self-evident. Chaperones and Godparents and go-betweens having placeholder status in matrimony today are the ceremonial equivalent of greeting card recitations. Their purpose is clear: to affirm, corroborate, collude with, and bestow parental imprimatur upon the Principality of Feelings that the betrothed have taken up residence in during the matrimonial walk-through.

The heart in thrall is tolerance-tested and frayed. The heart in thrall to another is a regent on a throne, yes, and a mercenary for hire, keeping unruly hoodlums from the unsummoned past and the withered pilgrims of old romance and the old programmes for happiness out at the borders of the heart, at the edges of the proceedings, outside the church door, barred from the banquet hall of this new life. A heart in thrall will stand at the narrow gate reserved for the true believer, wait for The One, and turn away others probably at least as worthy or as becoming or meant to be. It's strange business, this One True Love.

The mothers and fathers and their equivalents, the extended families, the friends and neighbours, the disaffected and the disinterested and the distant, the clans and the affinity communities and this bright-blue spinning world, all in fact belong in the ritual as intermediaries between the besotted, the betrothed, the bewildered. It is they who take upon themselves the work of granting space and gradualness to those drawn up into the hormonal sway and the promise of the vanquishing of loneliness and longing. It is they who enforce elegance and eloquence by giving voice in the courtship and ceremony to the ambivalence banished by this fear of distance and subtlety. It is they who speak the language of longing, and when they do, the betrothed get to hear something deep and interior and private appear aloud in the world.

The village, the elders, the world, and all their mediating ministrations and intrusions are the echo of the heart's desire coming back to the heart in lucid, articulate cadence. Like a tuning fork, they are the thrum of all promise, the melancholic end of all promise, all other options of the heart's desire but *this one* being set down. They amplify the bidden and the unbidden, the warranted and the unspoken that hover out there at the edges of "I do."

In matrimony, the heart in thrall flirts from a distance with the radical, assaying hospitality of the ceremonial innkeeper, the one that would bar

no one past or present or to come from the proceedings. The betrothed tend to be temporary true believers, though, and that's why the people and the world are there: to cool the heat of conviction, to give it a place to learn its limits, its severities, to learn what drives it to its romantic extremes, to learn what haunts it and what hunts it down. The heart in thrall already knows what it loves. The people and the world are there so it can learn why, so it can learn how.

The other day, a blog I'd not signed up for came my way. It was from a yoga/meditation fellow offering strategies for obtaining a quieter inner life. He included a normal little domestic vignette from the urban front lines. I know next to nothing about yoga, so that aspect of the story has escaped me completely. I didn't make it past this story to get to the spiritual punchline, so the whole thing may well have been edifying and calming, as I imagine things yoga are meant to be.

In the vignette, his wife was distressed in a low-grade sort of way. He suggested that they go out for a walk with the baby. She didn't want to, but she couldn't say why. And then she had a kind of epiphany about her state of mind.

"If I'm on the street or in a restaurant and he starts crying, I realize I often feel that people are judging me," she said, her voice tight. "It's like this with new mothers. Everyone has an opinion about how things should be done. It makes me want to stay hidden, where I can safely make mistakes." She sighed. "*That's* why I don't want to go outside."

Her breathing was deeper now, more natural. "Fuck those people," she said, laughing. Her shoulders moved back, her face flushed. The whole room felt different.

"I feel better," she smiled. "More space in my chest, lighter." She rolled her shoulders, then put her hand on his leg, suddenly flirtatious. "My love, what do you say we go out for breakfast tomorrow?"

Wow, I thought to myself. *That's harsh yoga, even by my harsh standards.* It isn't easy living in a city. That's true. In a place like that, feeling judged is the sure sign that you are being judged, I suppose. It's solid footing, feeling judged. That's how you know that it's happening. It's one of the signs.

You can feel the couple drawing closer in this story, the magic ring of immediacy closing, shutting out the bad guys. That's the centripetal power of a private nuclear family at work in a place that has long since lost the sense of how villages work, or how they used to work. They worked by eroding the adolescent tilt toward inwardness, toward

preoccupation with the heavy weather of the inner life, in favour of tempered, subtle counsel, not so much from the instruction but from the *example* of others, particularly elders.

Fuck those old mothers too, I guess, the ones who've been there. She didn't mean *that*, I don't imagine. Of course she didn't. He didn't either. But it's there. Read it for yourself. Nobody gets into the centre of modern romance but the romantics. Not the geezers, certainly.

And that detail at the end I couldn't have invented. The temperature of intimacy rises as soon as "those people" are removed from the middle of this encounter between two married people with a child, as soon as there's no intermediary to make unwelcome distance between the stars of the intimate show. Makes me wonder what happens when the child ends up in the middle of the parents' lives, as kids will inevitably and repeatedly do. Makes me wonder how often mistakes made in private register as mistakes.

So when a young man leans into the heavy weather of an elder-free, self-anointing, self-directed matrimony unburdened by tradition, and if he gets it into his head to ask a young woman's father for some kind of permission for or blessing upon his matrimonial labours, he does it alone. It will be vulnerable, it might be touching, it might seem like the kind of "old-fashioned" that clumsily fits occasions like this. Her parents would likely be anxious to get on the other side of the moment if it lasts more than a few minutes, or if the young man falters or misspeaks, or if they've never been in on anything like this before, which is very likely. And if this is not reason enough to wonder deeply and with misgivings about the whole affair, there's this: no one on the young woman's end is likely to be planning to make any such pilgrimage for any such reason to any such purpose to a young man's people. And no one on her end will counsel or oblige her to enter into the holy state of patrimony.

This might not have occurred to you at all. Maybe matrimony's always been this way—the young man seeking and declaring for her and making his meagre and boisterous case, and the woman, well, waiting for it, desired but not desirous of all this pomp and pageant, constrained by tradition to temporary passivity. I point this out to suggest that something about it seems traditional, yes, and dated, yes, but also vaguely amiss. This

lack of reciprocity is something to consider. I reckon that the missing reciprocity is a shard from the broken chalice of matrimony, a shard made unrecognizable by the passing of time, the advent of personal style and the ascent of the inner life over the communal life. It is a tamed aspect of a time when the young woman had become a prize, an object of contending wills, an occasion for the exercise of property rights and title over household and chattel. And maybe it is a tamed aspect of the fetishizing of virginity—in this case, a young woman's virginity.

Well, we're on contentious ground now, to be sure. I should say that I am not one of those who finds the attention given to virginity over the last fifteen or twenty or more centuries, the inclination to consider it a potent thing, a worthy thing, to be objectifying, disagreeable, or disrespectful of any gender. I credit its potency and the place it has occupied in various cultures' public and private life. I'd like to offer something up for consideration that doesn't need to be pro or con. It just isn't useful to have another generational tidal wave of opprobrium giddily divorced from any learning about what virginity may have meant, how it has come to be as it is now in the postmodern West, a strangely neutralized kind of nonevent. As Shakespeare reminded us: in a time of self-made, pop-up culture, eager and constant and unreflective protest of the irrelevance or crude injuriousness of an old practice often carries something like involuntary, unconscious longing for something like an old practice.

Young women's virginity hasn't been ritually fetishized and commodified across all times and cultures. The historical record faithfully reveals plenty of examples of a kind of cultural and familial hypertension over female virginity, it's true, but the exceptions are real and illustrative. Since the fetishizing of virginity isn't universal, it seems likely that it is the consequence of certain conditions that occurred in some places and not in others. Some things have to happen first, or have to stop happening, to make the fetishization of a bit of childhood by adults make any sense at all. I suspect this occurred in places and times when the reciprocal, shared understanding of matrimony was compromised and undone. In other words, the fetishizing of virginity may not have started as a cultural value or a decision. It may have started as a collapse.

When people traded and bartered in times gone by, they most often did so in kind: shoes for bananas, salt for leather, bone handles for obsidian blades. Things didn't "cost" anything because they *were* something. There'd likely not have been what we think of as an abstracted value attributed to

things. Their value arose from the labour necessary to gather what was needed to make the things, from the utility that was manifest in their design and use, from the scarcity of or demand for them, and especially from the shared understanding, the mutually held recognition that the partners in trade had of the cultural patrimony bound up in those things. Everything they traded in was a kind of upheld, animistic mystery gift from the Lords of Life. No surplus, no stuff, no inventory, no discounts. A discount would, in some subtle way, transgress the subtle shared spirit bound up in the thing. Grace, yes. Gift, yes. But discount, no.

You can imagine, then, what kind of psychic calamity it must have been when traded things became "goods." People couldn't see the gifts of the Gods in the things they were trading, couldn't see each other's cultural patrimony on splendid display. The beginnings of inanimism, abstraction, symbolism, and desecration are there. So are the beginnings of currency, loans, principal, interest, banking, and debt. This rupture is there in the fetishizing of gold and, to a lesser extent, silver, copper, bronze, and for a time, iron. Gold became a way of translating ideas of worth, honour, and integrity across the psychic and mythic chasm of strangerhood. And then it replaced them. The fetishizing of gold is a wound in the soul of an animist. It remembers the old ways of a deified world, but it does so through a glass, darkly.

When clans were no longer able to speak the shared language, the subtle and hesitant language of that particular kind of village courtship that was prompted by the possibility of matrimony, it probably meant that one side was no longer assured that their gestures and gifts and sojourns on behalf of their young person carried their honour and their honouring of the other clan as they once did. But the genetic imperative to bring diversity to the clans was still there.

You don't need to bring scores of young men into a tribe or clan to bring that diversity. The genetic circuitry shows us the same thing in the farmyard that it shows us in the family compound: you enhance your chances for genetic health most efficiently, effectively, and enduringly by adding new female presence to the flock and the tribe.

As one clan became strange to another, the mystery and ceremonial devotion aroused by the alchemy of matrimony became estranged from the old, spirited understanding of the mechanics of genetic health, I would guess. The mechanics became dispirited, the understanding became mechanical. Something was pressed into service to carry the semblance

of the old spirited understanding, to stand in its place, to be its cypher. Virginity, and subsequently the virgin, seems to have become a surrogate for that old spirit, that understanding. Like gold, virginity became a dispirited, ghosted symbol, ironically disembodied, fetishized as a thing of inherent, symbolic, abstracted, and universal value in its own right. Something to be traded and traded upon, virginity became a kind of currency, and it was used to compensate for the disappearance of those old, noble understandings of the standing of young womankind in the genetic and spiritual health of the clan she came to through matrimony.

The fetishizing of virginity may be a ghost of the honourable interclan courtship that was once matrimony. It seems to be a phantom limb of dignity. It is what a culture does that is at odds and at a loss regarding how deeply at home it can be in the world. It is what a homeless culture does, what lost people do to what they claim to love, treasure, and hold dear. The modern equivalent, perhaps the final chapter in this sad story of desolation and psychic seclusion, has us proceeding into a secularized version of matrimony with the conviction that, at least in hindsight, our virginity meant nothing at all, that once lost it was something like good riddance to a nuisance, like that's finally out of the way.

This, I should tell you, is me partly imagining the ways of other times, partly trying to remember them. In *Come of Age* I described a kind of intuitive and informed means of inquiry that I imperiously called the Orphan Wisdom Forensic Audit Method. It is a purposeful way I offer of brailing our way through the debris left by the undoing of former times, debris we employ in the modern era as furniture and shelter, precept and distraction. The method understands the foaming white water of the present; all of the breathless, gate-mouthed enchantment with piquant, ephemeral innovation; all of the programmes for globalizing, accessibility, and transparency, and the artifice of intelligence to be responses to the submarine topography of the past. Though we imagine our ways and the scale of them to be unprecedented, in fact we are in an age of recoil, of hyperactive flinching and wincing at meeting ghosts on the way to our future. Our time is rearing up from an unexpected encounter with the psychic ruins of a mad dream, the European fantasy of starting over and leaving the tawdry, medieval hulk of history behind, a fantasy they called America.

If that's too dark, then picture yourself on a beach on a fine day. You are trophy hunting, harrowing the sand for treasure. You find some and wonder how you'll get them past customs. Some are standalone gems:

indigo clam shells, sand dollars, husks of starfish. But occasionally you lift something you can't figure, can't place. It looks like it doesn't belong to the sea. Worn, ground down upon, it bears all the signs of decades in the briny ocean tossed. What hasn't been given over to the waves, though, is the sense that this thing has been made. It is a bit of carapace, maybe, but some aspect of it has too much regularity to be of creation. It is too much loomed over, too much worked by the mind. It strikes you now: it is unrecognizable because it is a piece, a shard of something you would only recognize if it were whole. The one piece won't say very much, but if you keep looking, stay in the petitioner's stance, there might be other pieces. With Job's patience, you may begin to figure where one piece ended and another began. With more patience, something of the story of the thing begins murmuring. The shards, the presence of what is gone, are all you have, that and a willingness to learn disaster. For the sea soon wrecks whatever isn't water, and you have a deposition from the deep, a sign that something happened. Something was undone, and you have the relic of that something in your hand.

Those relics, shards of an old cup, are the modern celebration of strong feelings and the seeking after a place to put them, the suburban church wedding, the common law non-wedding, the fifteen-minute wedding, the notarized union, the self-wrought vows, the poetry quotation, the invitation list, the seating arrangement. The chalice is elder blessed, slow, mediated Old Order Matrimony.

11

Salt and Indigo

The Sacraments of Trade

There was a time—this is not it—when belonging was everything. The work of being human was the work of being a citizen. Whatever inner life you indulged in, its meaning, its existence was granted to you by your peers, your elders, your kin. Autonomy was akin to banishment, and independence was a dangerous, adolescent indulgence. In matrimony, you went from genetic belonging to tribal belonging, from family to clan to culture. Your social responsibilities multiplied, clarified. You travelled the existential, ontological miles from the certainties of your childhood to the mysteries of another's life. In love, you took on something of the stranger's ways and became an intimate stranger yourself. You learned something of the subtly foreign language of your spouse and their clan. Your love brought about the near future of another people. You took your place in the pageant of belonging. "Belonging" is the condition of living out an intense version of longing in the presence of that which you long after. It is the skill of accompaniment.

The necessity of genetic diversity that brought delegations to each other's gates was something they recognized and obeyed. It seems clear that the people of former times found genetic necessity compelling but, in and of itself, a crude or clumsy hand to lay upon love. The elaborations of ritual that churned around matrimony seem to attest to it. Matrimony was, from

early times, cultural self-adornment. People brought their best to bear upon the alchemy of making one from two. There were whole languages of ritual and honourable conduct that guided and gilded the proceedings and were compelling, time-tested, and fragile. They were fragile because they relied on ready, mutual recognition. There is a subtle and hesitant language of gesture that is prompted by matrimony, and one people counted on the other to recognize their gifts, discerning the subtleties of the declarations and petitions they were making with them. At its most alive, most engaged, in its most devoutly practiced heart, matrimony was sacramental trade. Clans were trading an assured near future for the chance of a deepened patrimony. In their pride, still they were bargaining to be changed. They were trading something they held dear for something that held, at most, promise.

The genetic necessity was a kind of tightrope that people had to walk. They had to find partners in barter and matrimonial trade that were far enough away to ensure safe fertility of the blood but close enough that the rudiments were a shared language they could speak together. This meant that, most of the time, one or both of the tribal partners had to travel. And in those times, the land between them had its perils, and travelers were wary. They were obeying a mandate of the Ancients of Days, and in so doing they walked out into the mist and the dust of the road. I imagine it was only business of this kind that could have drawn them out into the great wild world.

So the business of matrimony was taken up into the business of sojourn, pilgrimage perhaps. No one knew the outcome, but they knew they were covering ceremonial and mythic ground, that they were going where others had gone before. They were steeped in tradition, moving as and where their ancestors moved, carrying these old understandings and practices with them. In every way, they were recreating and reenacting stories of their Old Ones. They were making a procession into time, primordial time, vouchsafing the time to come. Their responsibilities were considerable. Many a thing hung in the balance. The higher the stakes, the more reliance upon ritual, upon the old stories. The farther away from home they travelled, the more they employed the sacraments of barter, the more they were governed by the old, radical practices of hospitality.

There were people, let's say, known far and wide as purveyors of fine salt. Not the paltry, iodized table ware we have now but the stuff hazarded

from the desert salt pans or the oceanside salt flats. Cooked by the sun, called up from the depths, salt for ages was synonymous with worth, and traders in salt were trading in its intrinsic, translatable merits: preservation, alchemical culinary wizardry, hard currency. People who knew salt people had real connections. People who were lucky enough to eat every day, honoured enough to serve others from their larder, graced enough to be heirs to the culinary conjuring of fermentation and food preservation—all of them knew and relied upon salt people.

Other people were known as purveyors of cobalt-blue indigo dyestuff. Not the see-through, blue-jean chembath we have now but the lustrous, vault-of-night-heaven blue-black recognizable even from a great distance as the truest of hues. The storied stuff infused the cotton or wool with a redolent tang and musk that came right from its home ground. The workers in indigo were blue themselves, to their elbows, to their knees, signs of their ennobling trade. Wearers of indigo were blue-faced regents from another regal time.

You might not see parity between the two trade stuffs. You may not see nobility and grace in making them, trading them. But the people in this story did. Each enjoyed portability and worth in their time. Each was sought after, particularly by those for whom the vagaries of home ground made one or the other of them scarce. Scarcity was at play, yes, but so was etiquette, style, grace, wizardry, and dalliance with the Other World. In times such as those, etiquette, style, grace, and wizardry were the media and currencies of trade, and of a well-wrought life. To have traded in style with stylish traders would have marked you as noble. To have done so in the name of matrimony, for the sake of your people's health and standing, would have marked you as a true heir of your Old Ones.

So we have here the flux and the fix of spirit alchemy between deep-living peoples, which at its heart is what matrimony is. And we have ground that must be covered in order that the old mandate might hold sway in the world. By ways no longer understood but imitated and envied now from great distances, both of these peoples know there was a young man and a young woman of matrimonial age. By those same ways, both let it be known that they should meet at some sheltered place that could afford shade, maybe water, something like safety for a time. Each makes camp at a good distance from the other, for the meeting place for such trade, this no man's land, belongs to the Gods, just as the old understandings do. The elders on either side have done this before, often, so they are advising their

middle-aged fellows. Who knows how they knew who went first in the old dance, but they knew. Maybe it is the salt people who go first, bringing their bricks of salt bound in burlap and tethered to their mules to the trading ground. There's no one about, but they know somehow that the indigo people have come. They arrange their salt in stacks, as pleasing to the eye as to the palate. They leave it in plain sight, and they are gone. Their salt is their declaration: in matters matrimonial, the salt is what they mean.

The salt is there, many months of work and many days of travel in it. Its value is a known thing to anyone. It is unguarded. Maybe a day or two goes by and the indigo people come to know that there is salt out on the trading ground. They leave it there another day so that its value deepens by the chance that something could happen to it. And then they set out. If you were there, you would know by the dust in the distance that the indigo people were coming, bearing their orbs of dyestuff wrapped in homespun tied to their horses. Arrived now, they sit on the ground together, a dozen strides away, make their tea, take careful note of the quality, the colour, and the purity of the salt before them. One of their number, old in these ways, goes to the salt, wets a finger, draws it the length of one of the blocks, gets the pelagic tang on his tongue, murmurs to his fellows, takes his seat again. They are thinking, *Will this salt compensate and please the people at home who are caring for our families and homes in our absence? Will it bring honour? Can we see our indigo in it?*

The calculus escapes me now, but somehow they come to an understanding of how much of their indigo is there on the trading ground in the shape and taste of salt. This is a delicate calculation. There is the question of "How much?" but also "What is it worth?"—an I-Ching kind of contrivance that employs a legion of details known mainly to makers. Chief among them is neither price nor resale value. Honour, prestige, and the old stories are at play. The spirit parsimony of "How much I can get for how little I have to part with" satisfies survivalism, but everyone here knows the dispiritedness of that. They know it has no place here.

This is where the indigo people have to be able to talk salt. They have to know what is necessary to judge, assay, mine, wait, rake, sweat, wait some more, transport, weigh, and part with salt. They have to know what it means to be salt people, how salt binds them to their ancestors and their heirs. So the greater calculation is given over to speaking salt, and how they part with their indigo is how they speak salt. Learning the trade language of salt is how they speak indigo, on this very day.

The calculation made, second-guessed, discussed, and made again, the indigo people leave their pile close by the salt. Then they make to depart and are gone. The treasures are there for a day, two perhaps, safeguarded by no one but the Gods of Trade and the shared desire of each tribe that things go well. You could go further and say that the honour of the enterprise is there on the trading ground. You could say the Gods of both peoples appear when they leave their treasures for the sake of what they treasure more. Honour, a deal well struck, a place of pride in the eyes of their ancestors, dignity to leave to their young, that sense that for a little while the mistrust of strangers was set aside and something of an ordinary miracle of being human happened, and that matrimony was the occasion for all of it stirring: *that* is what they are trading in. That's what God in the world is to these people.

In the fullness of time dust rises in the distance, and the salt people are coming. They sit a little distance from the two stacks. They take stock of the indigo that's been offered, cock their heads to hear any salt talk there. They murmur indigo talk themselves, as one of their number runs a wet finger across the azure blocks and holds it up in the sun for his fellows to admire. As it dries, it deepens in hue. It will look fine on the people at home.

This time, the deal is struck. The salt people load their mules with indigo in homespun. They leave a blessing for the Old Ones of the indigo people and are gone over the rise. Within the day, the indigo people come, see that the deal has been struck, that the spirits have been called in. They load their horses with salt blocks in burlap, remember the ancestors of the salt people, and go on their way. The story of their meeting is told back home. For a time, there are more indigo people in the world than there were, as the salt people dye their best clothes and stain their arms with that wonder. There are more salt people in the world than there were too, as indigo people feast and rest easy with some of their food salt-curing for the lean times to come, rich for now in the briny mother of cuisine.

You could say that the two peoples remained strangers in the wake of the trade, never having met. Or you could say that their willingness to serve the mystery that lay there between them, what was at stake, was their meeting. They recognized each other across the distance between them and the years since they last traded. For a time, they spoke the sacraments of hospitable trade. They knew then that they could enter into matrimony with each other. They'll trade in their young, in their future, in the best of

themselves. And their young will know that in their matrimony they are, for a time, the best of their people.

And though dim and hard to track, this spirit of soulful trade is there still in our wedding invitations, our choice of attire, our seating arrangement, the speeches we make, the gifts we bring to the event and where we put them. That's where the aisle comes from, and the long walk to the front, the being given away, the "Do you take . . ." The spirit is in eclipse for now, yes, but the crease of it, the outline of what once was, is there still. The indigo and the salt peoples' ways are there still. Modern and confused by freedom as we are, we mistake our amnesia over that which has gone before as a stage set for creativity and personal style. We are heirs to the spirit architecture of matrimony even so. The spirit of trade is in the choreography and mechanics of matrimony. Its tenacity is there in the details, where all the Gods live.

12

The One

Elope is an interesting word. We know what loping is, a kind of casual jaunt. But the *e* gives it purpose and direction. Now it means "to run away from," "to flee"—not toward something; away from something. In eloping there is a clear acknowledgment of an obligation that is being turned away from. In its romantic form it's hasty, truant, barren, and bereft of the sacrament of trade, and it leaves culture behind.

The dictionaries will tell you that *wed* means "pledge," which isn't too helpful given the scarcity of pledge-making and the proliferation of deal-making these days. Or they offer *promise* as a synonym. But you know by now that it's stronger by far than a promise could ever be. There are all kinds of old associations with *wager* and the crafting of security in the face of daunting odds. This tells us that *wed* remembers something of the uncertain business that wedding is. But in a very old time, the Old English *wed(th)* meant "to lead, bring, draw"; and that is a shard of memory of the distance travelled in matrimony from one clan to another, from one time of life to another. In a wedding, things had to move, to change, to pass away.

That's where the tears come from.

In former times, as I've said, there was a gang of people who would appear on a young man's behalf, in his stead, who spoke of many things and of the vagaries of life, who came slowly and imperceptibly to the matter at hand: the heart of a young man and its dappled merits.

He wouldn't be there. He had no business making any declarations of the heart at his age, certainly not with any intention of those declarations prevailing. The tempering presence and voice of older people would soften the self-absorbed desirousness that was bound to surface were he to be there. They met a gang of young women's people appearing in her stead. She wasn't there either. The longing after belonging is a lot for a young heart to manage, and they know it. They spoke the jazz of life. They know what's coming, too.

Things have changed. Now there are age peers who run the show, parents who pay for it, and familial scatterlings who show up at the appointed hour. Now there is a priest, someone duly appointed, a generic celebrant, to emboss the proceedings with the mark of authenticity or legality or outmoded habit. There's the choreographed walk up the centre aisle, the path of least resistance, no traffic to contend with. There's the practiced speech, the dress and decor, the flowers and music, the witnesses, the confetti (where that's still allowed), the ballooning guest list, the seating arrangement, the tyranny of "the perfect wedding."

Are these mere details, bells and whistles draped upon how two people feel about each other? Are feelings really the spine of the thing? The promised ones spinning in a delirium of "yes": What is to become of them? What's to become of the punch-drunk vertigo, the magic? How, for a few grueling hours, does it eclipse the world and its relentless, climate-compromised demands entirely? Why, in our corner of the world, is it in the nature of rapturous love, with all its language of falling and tumbling down, that the world no longer counts, or appears?

In your heart of hearts, in the supramatrimonial part of you, you know that this won't last. And you're pretty sure you know why: the magic can't endure exposure to the everydayness of things. Come the next morning, the world will be too much with you. All its getting and begetting will unspool the weave of wonder you managed to take shelter in. A honeymoon might help it last a bit, but soon enough it's back to the grind, and in time you'll have to work at remembering it all. You'll have to find a trick to help you remember the date. Sometime after that, you'll have moments when you'll wonder what happened to it all, what happened to you, who changed.

This happens in sane places, too. It happens in culturally intact places, I'll bet. But this is why, in those places, the heart in thrall is tolerated without being believed in. It is taken by the hand and instructed and brought to the altars of life and given form, place, direction, reason, and pace. It is

ritualized, sanctified, and made public and overt because in the spiritual fistfight in the back alley of life between the heart in thrall to another and the ordinary, sunup/sundown, care-flayed world, *the world is supposed to win*. The world is supposed to prevail. The world is supposed to emerge the benefactor of the thing. A cultured people proceed accordingly.

I imagine it seems that I'm overstating the tone of conflict a bit. The enduring thing to consider is that in a sane, working culture, the world does not struggle with the heart in thrall, nor does it contest the matrimony and its sway and swoon, nor does it compete for the contracted attention span of the besotted. In a sane, working culture, there aren't leagues of junk-strewn battlegrounds between ritual and everything else, between peak moments and real life. The world waits the heart out, instead. The world waits for the prodigal heart in thrall to return. Love between humans isn't transacted in the heart but in the world. The world is rhyme and reason for that love. The world is its medium. The world gives the human heart in rapture its repertoire, its way of doing its love business. The glory of the world is in its resplendent, ordinary array. That glory is the deeper why and how of human love. And the world soul knows that. The human heart, with enough elder-enforced, culture-employed work imposed upon it, enough love-begotten spirit labour and truing and assaying, learns that. And that learning is the business of culture. It is the business of ritual. It is the business of wisdom and tradition. It is the guild hall of elders in training. Culture employs matrimony to make its wisdom known and manifest in the world.

With all of that at play, the trivialization of ceremony, the recourse to personal preference, personal style, and personality in a time of real peril in the world is not an idle thing. It's not a difference of style or opinion. It is to me a dangerous thing. Platitudes calculated to address and include and offend no one, stripping out "honour" and "cherish" and, of course, "obey" from the proceedings in favour of Desiderata-style soothings that traffic in the spoils and spells of inevitable love, endless love, eternal love: these aren't things we can proudly hand over to our kids, though we do hand them over. No summons or plea for the local Gods' appearance or blessing, no perch in the rafters for the conclave of Worthies, all of them, including the ne'er-do-wells and the malcontents. There's just us, gathered together into this misshapen Celebration of the Union of . . .

They mean well. The people who employ them mean well. Of course they do. For the most part, this strange standardization of alternative rites

of passage counts on personal symbolics and good intent and the exclusion of anything that could trouble anyone present to craft a wedding from. Not offending anyone and staying safe—that's what sacred space is made of today. That's what "Happy Holidays" does. They mean well, but they don't mean much. They mean that the cultural poverty that has been feasting on the underside of immature, homeless democracies is waxing. They mean that our North American corner of the world is starving for ritually conjured humanity, just as other Western peoples are starving for it.

Somewhere in the preliminaries, the celebrant is likely to invoke this tender thread of good intent: "We are gathered here to bear witness, that by the strength and the certainty of their intent, these two will become one."

How are these two to become one? What ceremonial mojo does the celebrant have on hand to make that happen? The odds aren't good. Many people, including the newly divorced and the thrice divorced and the financial planners and the life coaches, would advise *against* the two becoming one. Still, the words do make a kind of claim, particularly upon those who are meaning to exchange their isolation for oneness. They have a physical presence and a mythical, almost alchemical and volatile tone to them. There is something like shapeshifting about, something of the unravelling of threads that bind the mystical body perhaps, something of the getting lost in the deep and the blue of another's gaze and regard, of the Old Conjunction. And there is something of the undoing and the healing of the Great Separation of birth. Like it or not, agree or not, bargain for it or not, there is a lot of existential freight riding on the narrow-gauge rails of two people doing their utmost to flirt with becoming one.

This is where it is good to recall the practice of initiation into adulthood that is cued by puberty. We know there is no such ceremony in the dominant culture of the West, and we know that there are the beginnings of a clamour for such a thing. We know there are people proposing to do so for kids, that the demand and not so much the skillfulness is, for the moment, creating the supply. Without much of a trustworthy track record, we could still linger over the idea for a moment and watch the association with matrimony begin to emerge as we do.

I don't imagine any kid rears up from their screen one day, feels a kind of hormonal seizure come on for the first time, and decides then and there

to resort to containment strategies to see to it that the seizure doesn't intrude on a normal day. The seizure, for most of us, has serotonin going for it and an uncanny familiarity with the hydraulics of the human body. It is—no exaggeration—compelling. Somewhere in the haze of hormones, another human body, or the idea of one, looms up. From then on, the association is unnervingly solid. Think of it as a hormonally endorsed project of reunion with the spiritual and physical mothership, hovering there for the first time since infancy. This time, those stirrings rise not in response to the body and presence of the one from whom you came but in response to the body and presence of a stranger. Somewhere in the urges, surges, and merges is the rumour of Lonesome No More, and The Promise rises: there is someone out there who is your life's missing link, its completion and proper fulfillment, your solitude's rightful slayer.

Now, it's more than possible that you won't agree with the idea that there was ever someone out there who's in this world to make up for the derisive solitude of your budding adolescence and make you whole, or that there should have been. It is as likely that you learned that lesson the hard way, and your measured belief and realistic wisdom about all this came from someone else's failure to comply with your beliefs. Somewhere back there, you may have looked down from the lofty height of dismay and disapproval at a temporary companion who failed to understand life and you enough to complete the job of completing you. Whatever belief I had about the whole thing didn't prevent me from doing that very thing, more than once. It's mysterious and it's melancholy-making, but there is precious little learning that we undertake voluntarily regarding this elusive holy grail of The Special One. Like all the learning that matters, this bit is counterintuitive. And yet we don't have to be dragged to the learning place. We go eagerly and early and more than once to be drawn and quartered on the romantic rack before we begin to wonder if there's something askew in the architecture of desire and expectation we are raised in that drags us across the gravel of repetition compulsion. We'll do it again, maybe again, just to be sure we got it wrong.

Wonder of wonders, I have a band. Together we've travelled a good part of this world. As I write this, we're making a new record and preparing to head into the storm on a four-continent tour. By my benign edict, the

band has no name. They don't seem to mind. But the event has a name: *Nights of Grief and Mystery*, an honest rendering of the undertaking. It's a story-and-music cabaret for grown-ups. Touring this way induces a feeling sometimes that you are a particularly gallant kind of graceful and dangerous motorcycle gang, or Viking horde. It makes a tatters of your daily grind, and it is wildly compelling to be on the inside of. Likely I'll do it until I drop, or until the marketplace counsels me otherwise, or until the band comes to its senses and turns on me, as pirates can do.

During an interview a couple of years ago, I came to see that what we were doing was ritualizing. Ritual, as I've mentioned earlier, is the Godparent and village elder of theatre. Theatre is ritual without sacrament, often. So each and every time we play, we begin with an invocation addressed to dead folks and rough Gods, our likely companions for this unlikely evening, and then we head out through the curtains and onto the dark road of these days. During that invocation I say:

> Welcome to your one true love, wrangled from all the promises and all the betrayals and all of the octane of your younger, wilder days. It's strange, I'll grant you, being welcomed to your past. It isn't gone, though, the past. It needs a place among the living, now, in the debris of your days. Looking back on it tonight, I had a "one true love" in the early days, when I understood so very little. She was part promise, part betrayal, part octane. She'd say the same of me, if she remembers any of it. You can guess how it ended, and you can guess that that flame still burns. It's a wonder any of us make it through.

There is something askew in attraction. It's not a moral failing. It's not a character flaw. It's not wrong. It's just our unvarnished childhood rushing outside to play in the emotional and spiritual rubble of unconscionable, unbidden, unbridled, uninformed arousal at the prospect of Another Person. Though our culture is not one of them, there are working cultures that understand this. They are heirs to a kind of ritual strategy of human making, and they know that no childhood goes quietly into that good night of mature personhood. Like any living thing, childhood is deeply fond of perpetuity. It has no interest or investment in limits, in

maturational stages, in succumbing to wisdom. Childhood doesn't look up from the fray one day and say, "Right then. I suppose I've had a good run. Thanks for the memories. How shall we end this?"

So these cultures craft humans from children, against the child's will, and they do so by a kind of fundamental rewiring of the perceptual, spiritual, and emotional circuitry, an incontrovertible mauling of the childhood take on everything of note, among them: What is justice, what mercy? What can you live with, what without? What is God? What are the reasons for your birth, your life? What does the world expect of you? Why were you born to a time of such savage disarray? Why do you get to know you're going to die when knowing doesn't seem to help? Why don't you get to know when you'll die, when you're sure foreknowledge would help suss out the vital from the vain? And, of course, what is love? And what does it do, and what is it for?

Done well, childhood doesn't survive initiation. The ferocious childhood preoccupation with the self doesn't survive it. The stakes are very high. Rites of passage are risks more than they are affirmations of cultural tradition. The outcomes are uncertain. Personal standing in the community is at risk, but personal development is nowhere to be found. Sanity is at risk. The near future of the community is at risk. You might imagine that the spirit mechanics of the thing are elaborately conceived and not casual and not meant to be cathartic.

If this ritually induced rewiring sticks, young people are hard-pressed to bring every expectation of happiness, fulfillment, purpose in life, and sense of well-being to one person and invest them there for safekeeping. Those expectations are for your dealings with the Gods, and the ancestral caravan going back into the mists, and the world and its thousand unconcealed, uncatacombed mysteries. And initiated people know in their charred heart of hearts that you do not go to the hardware store for bread, and you do not go to another, or to another's body, to find reasons to live or be whole. You go there to find out that you have needs that nobody can possibly satisfy. Shelter from the slurry of slights and wounds to the soul? Yes, sure, for a time. But recovery has its statute of limitations, and this world awaits the return of its humans to the fray, and initiation teaches that one, too.

Imagine the restorative benefits of this amended understanding of love for romance, for the practice of love, for the fine cadenzas of courtship. Seen from the clearing in the psychic jangle that initiation affords

us, seduction finally begins to look like what it's always been: a desperate lonely child soul wheeling and dealing for any companionship that will still for a while the clamour of the gale. Seduction is petty theft and grand larceny, a bruise to the soul perpetuated by the blunt-force trauma of amateurs, a poor impersonation of personhood. Seduction is child's play, with grown-up consequences.

Though we could be forgiven for thinking so, given the examples that we have to draw from and learn from, matrimony is not a public declaration of a preexisting scheme of contentment two people have agreed upon. It is a ritualized rite of passage. This is the good news/bad news part of the story for us. The good news is that matrimony is person-making and citizen-making magic for grown-ups. The bad news is that matrimony stands a poor chance of person-making in a culture where the inner child is regent.

Puberty rites clear a road to matrimony. The architecture and the alchemical calculus of matrimony rests upon those rites, employs them when the time comes. That adolescent passage into personhood is relied upon, remembered and recognizable in matrimony. Otherwise, the absence or failure of that passage into personhood is recognizable in what becomes of matrimony in a secular, demythologized time and place.

Let's return to the proceedings, to that lone person in charge at the front of the hall. Listen to the celebrant issue the formal greeting and welcome, and watch their gaze move back and forth across the seating arrangement, across the family and friends of the bride, the family and friends of the groom, the uncertain or nonaligned people closer to the back. That arrangement is almost all that's left of the old memory of salt traders and indigo people. I don't guess that anyone there in the old trading days thought that the ornate business of salt and indigo made them "one people" or that a later forced conversion to monotheism would make them "one people."

In a twist of irony that resembles a hoax, we in our time are on the far side of that "one people" business. There are binding agreements that most of us make with the social and emotional governing bodies of dominant culture North America to bury our old allegiances in favour of the sleek and the modern and the global. We require an enormous transfiguration, or a street magician sleight of hand of a considerable order, to imagine

ourselves as two peoples, two clans, come wedding day. Two families? No problem. But unless the betrothed are from different races, different recent immigrant groups with different languages (and though it happens, you wouldn't call it common), then there is a sameness that the whole contemporary operation relies upon. Yes, there are those people you won't know, won't recognize, but your way of not knowing them and theirs of not knowing you are the same. Most of us share cultural dislocation, an ancestral amnesia, a patrimonial poverty so entrenched and so authorized and so colluded with now as if it were our particular brand of freedom, that it would be all but impossible to convene a matrimonial ritual in which the memories of the clan and its ways are there. The work cannot be done. It is an exotic fiction now. It is in abeyance to the trouncing realities of mass migration, supracultural identity. It is subsumed in and eclipsed by the feelings of two people for each other.

Still, you could say, the germ of matrimony is in the germ of the village's heart, no matter. With all that I have seen, I haven't been able to give up entirely on the possibility that the human heart in thrall to another, as it seeks its ways of living out that attraction and commitment, is one way the heart of the village still beats. In all its particulars, the human heart in romantic sway could be one of the songs that the village heart sings. So, to redeem matrimony for our time—not fashion it to suit us but to remember it for what it is—structural restoration of some vestige of the two clans seems mandatory. It must be given pride of place. Relying on the shaky status of the nuclear family to do it isn't a well-imagined way. That is akin to tying a cravat around a mummy's neck in hopes that it will rise up, shake off its millennial dust, and dance.

A family, any family, whatever its merits, cannot shoulder the person-making work for its young people, and it cannot coalesce as a multifoliate rose around its betrothed. Only a village, in all its rancour and sway, with all its beggars and thieves and princes and potentates, its sirens and sages and saints and weird aunties living under the stairs, can do that work. Only a village can give one of its young away to matrimony. The village is the mediating translator of young love.

By and large, families in North America are held to ransom when weddings are undertaken. They are effigies of understandings and ways.

Mostly unconsciously, families drag themselves forward as surrogates for village-mindedness. Now, you would think there are moments in this life that are fashioned by fate, tailored by the saints, forged in the blast furnace of the Gods to bring out the best in families. You'd think that there are times when just about everyone involved could and would take the measure of the moment and know in their bones what was needed of them for that moment to be honoured, for it to prevail for a while. You'd think that the coming among them of a newborn life would be one of those times. You'd think that the sheer ordinary miracle and wonder of the thing would stir everyone to tenderness and all rancour would be laid to rest.

You'd think, too, that the utter finality of dying would still all family chain dragging and grievance, that being reminded of the temporary miracle of still being alive, of having lived long enough to see one of their number to their ending, would calm all family mishigas into murmurs of gratitude and prayers for the coming days. You'd think that the wish to be a worthy witness to all of this and remember it and live accordingly would prevail and endure, and people would sub-bloody-mit and, be-bloody-have for once.

And somewhere between those two gateposts, somewhere between the proving ground and the killing ground across which our lives pass in their decades and days, you'd think that the crazy and inconstant and irrefutable love that has come to claim the lucidity and good judgment of one of a family's young would prompt each family member to memories of who has not lived long enough to see another wedding, and to memories of their own wild matrimonial ride. And you'd think that those memories alone, just the unbidden rising up of the recollection of how recklessly, indefensibly certain you can be about such a thing would prompt new wisdom and something more than tolerance, something like a radical willingness to bear witness to the hard-to-carry mysteries of being a human, in all its furious trying and being tried.

All of this would be possible, and is probably practiced in routine fashion, where the village-mindedness and the deep-running constancy of all the skills of being at home, of knowing who lies in the boneyard and who they are to you, prevail upon the living in a fashion that binds people with an understanding that they are needed. But when village-mindedness is a rumour, a fashion, or an occasional conceit, something on offer at the Indigenous lifeways ceremonial department store of the Western soul, then the default stand-in for all this sanity that I've imagined is the beleaguered, bewildered, and bedeviled nuclear family. In all its limits, the

nuclear family tends to close ranks in the time of matrimonial ceremony. Without a village mind to take their young people into safekeeping and forge real-life purpose that their matrimony can serve, the modern nuclear family takes over and tries to supply that village-scaled regard for their young person. It takes over the way a schoolyard bully takes over the sandbox: loud, sometimes churlish, flagrant, flawed, and uncertain.

And here's the thing: not only is that too much to ask of any family, it is particularly so for the go-it-alone nuclear family or the single-parent family most of us know so well. In the days of matrimony, there will be and must be a shortfall between what's needed and what a family can do, and that shortfall is what makes room for the village-mindedness to be called upon and honourably employed. Yet it is the family's job to resist—in ritual fashion; in dramatic, compelling, and public fashion; and in ways that go beyond symbolism, theatrics, or pomp—the departure of their young person from among them. They must in some real way defend their young person against the slings and arrows of the wide world, against the other young person's family's predations, against the village elders who would be colluding with the ritual hierarchy, against matrimony itself. Of course, they are to second-guess the wisdom of this rumored union they've been asked to contribute to and corroborate. And they are to rail against the passing of time itself, the price it exacts from parenthood, and how it marks the passing away of parenthood. They are to confound matrimony's business. Their resistance is part of the trial, the quest that the betrothed are thrown into by matrimony.

And in their souls, they know they are to fail at those tasks.

What? Yes. Part of their ritual duty is to be an obstacle to their young loved one's departure from among them. In this way they are raising the stakes of the ritual, calling its wisdom and necessity into deep question. They are helping to substantiate the iffy nature of the initiatory part of the ritual, the part we unknowingly invoke when we say "the holy state of matrimony." The psychic and spiritual valence of the ritual counts on the centripetal power the family exerts on its members. It is that gravitational pull that makes the transubstantiating power of the ritual real and consequential. It gives matrimonial ritual something to contend with. It helps keep it limber and strong. Matrimony doesn't demean the birth-bound ties that mother and father have to their child. It doesn't pathologize or resolve them. It understands them. It honours and employs and solemnifies them. And then it defeats them.

The immediate family members, in a deeply civilized place and time, know in their souls that to succeed in subverting the departure of their young person, they'd be defeating that young person's chance to feed and sustain the world that has fed and sustained them up until now. And they would be undoing the person-making initiatory power of matrimony, the part that turns the betrothed toward the world. So the parents and their familial allies must fail in the thing they'd be most inclined to achieve. To those of us who've not been in on the ritual substrate of a living place, this probably sounds confounding, disingenuous, unnecessary, oblique, and see-through. The only way we might be able to imagine it is to have the family totally in the dark about it all. That's how they'd play their part, by being unaware of any layer of the matrimonial ritual but the one that claims them most directly. Otherwise it's a kind of juju double bind, is it not? And by our standards, quaint, touching, but inauthentic, in the same way that leaving milk and cookies for Santa is quaint, touching, but inauthentic.

But, of course, in such a place the parents would have been married in some similar way, and all of these obligations would be known to them. Not only that. They would have been the ritually confounding village intruders into other families' privacies when matrimony came to their houses, probably handfuls of times. That means that they are in on the whole thing. They know what's happening.

So, what's the point then? you might think. *It's all a pantomime. How are they supposed to realistically resist something they are not very secretly in league with?* The point is that the ritual doesn't supersede the "real" world, or replace it, or reduce it to a tawdry shadow play imitating the real thing. Ritual employs ordinary life. It punctuates ordinary life, the way accents and commas and zoomorphs punctuate an illumined manuscript, giving voice and breath to the thing. Ritual gives ordinary life edifying work to do—all the training, all the apprenticeship, all the material gathering and assembling, all the growing and butchering and cooking and weaving and sewing—and the ordinariness of days is deepened thereby. Spirit work is the outcome. Ritual doesn't pretend there's no such thing as ordinary life. Ordinary life is a partner to ritual. Together, they are labouring on behalf of the deep-running natural order of the world we have been entrusted with.

The only thing that might make it possible for the family to resist this enormous change in the status, sway, and consequence of their young

person is to have a viable, tangible, and spiritually adroit village around it, a village that will more or less gently but certainly and successfully defeat the family's attempt to close ranks and remain as it has been. This the village does by giving the family something honourable and worthy to be defeated by. That's what matrimony is: the noble defeat of family inertia, family intactness.

Maybe by now it becomes a bit clearer how the life-serving power of matrimony really appears and takes hold when there is that sequence of habit-breaking, human-making ritual at puberty. Children marrying children: even arranged marriages tend to wait for the childhood to be worn off. Children marrying grown-ups: there's nothing sane or sustaining there. "Life-changing" in this regard doesn't mean "great new stuff added to already great stuff." It means the old deal can't hold. It means that the sacred cows you settled on in youth begin looking more like golden calves, that they've wandered out through the broken fence of your old understanding and won't be coming back.

And that's why blessing means what it means: bloodying. Ending.

I've tried to wring matrimonial élan from married people and their friends and families, from parents of people in their late twenties, even midthirties, who wanted me to marry them ceremonially. I've tried teaching these ideas to the wedding party. I've been persuaded over and over that without the loss of self and childhood understandings that a formal initiation can achieve, those old understandings will prevail when the concussing dazzle of matrimony comes on, when convictions about love cobbled together in the rose-strewn, thorn-beset years of childhood engage the stand-ins of the event planners and the caterers and the all-inclusive destination wedding providers. People know what a wedding is. That's what they want to see.

Like several other pivotal ritual moments in life, people look to matrimony in our part of the world to affirm, brighten, and feature sublimely what they hold dear. Most of the weddings you've heard of or attended probably did so. Many people tell me now that they've given up on attending weddings, that they can't bear the brittle walk-throughs that they've become. Many people tell me they've given up on getting married themselves because they've never seen a wedding that wasn't a ceremonial ghost town haunted by the vague and persistent sense that something's been

lost; that the crepe, the lace, the rental ware, and the self-penned declarations are all draped over a junkyard of abandoned ancestral elegance and antique procession. The couples who've asked me to gather them in matrimony tell me that they are ruined now, that they can't bear attending the weddings of their friends, their office associates. They try, but they can't ignore the sense rising in them as the band plays on that something living and life-giving is missing, that the invitation list was too calculated, too short after all, that the event has been shorn of its spiritual depth and charge, that something vital to the prospect of two people making a go of it in this veil of tranquilized tears has gone unattended, unsuspected.

Matrimony is there to call down something from the crags and up from the ossuary depths, something that is life-sustaining. When it doesn't happen, these people tell me that it isn't only weddings they do without. They're ruined for birthday parties, graduation parties, first communions, bar and bat mitzvahs, retirement parties, memorial services—the works. That's what they tell me. They used to be bored—obligated, glad to oblige, but bored by attending. Now they're tormented, and they sit there with a sense that there are riches unguarded, that thieves are making off with someone's mandatory dreams for a better day, that their corner of the world slumbers with bad wine in the head while the youngest among them lose heart and swear never to do such a thing to themselves.

There is no grievance in this, or next to none. There is grief, though, all the way through. I'm reporting to you from the matrimonial front lines here.

There's no pride for me, no sense of a job well done to know that this grief is stalking its way down the chemtrails and the fracking lines to nose the few rituals that we have left, the few that haven't succumbed to the vagaries of the lifestyle marketplace. It's painful to put it into words. The ritually bereft among us are mournful and confused about what love looks like now or who their kin are.

So we live in a grief-illiterate place. Mistaking grief for feeling glum or wallowing, mistaking sadness for having a bad day, grief-illiterate people turn and go the other way, generally. Scowling at those few of their peers brought to stillness by the phantom gravitas of our rituals, dismissing their elders, those of them left, as tiresome and depressing and past it, the grief-free people are heading for the bright side of the street, or heading for the hills. They're going it alone, mainlining positive vibes, intention, and

mindfulness. They gather like-minded folks around themselves to share the kinship of aversion, the affiliation not of a generation but of a decade, and they craft their own events.

So yes, the crunch-time, big-ticket ceremonies of our age do indeed constellate what the culture holds dear and holds tight. Like mate selection for individuals, rituals are a culture's fundamental authorized autobiography. They are our seismometer and our whispered take on things, one hand on our holy book, the other behind our back, fingers crossed, snorting bumps of hope as required. Want a glimpse into the shaded hold of the free-floating, nonaligned North American soul? Go to the next wedding you're invited to. Crash the next one you're not invited to. Sit up in the choir stall or in the back row with the ghosts. The holy writ of the age will be there. Read it and consider.

13

Tribes

In the early days, I did everything I could think of to bring that old memory of salt and indigo traders, the genetic imperative, and the courtyard courtship to the surface of contemporary wedding practice. I did so especially to bring to mind the memory of the two clans, brought together in vague, uneasy, honourable truce, willing for the sake of the besotted young person among them to talk the other's language for a while.

The problem with translation is that the ritual has been deconsecrated and demystified. The seats face the front of the hall or sanctuary, and the betrothed file down the central aisle to a rendezvous with the master of ceremonies. This is not ritual congress, as you know by now. This is a seating plan for a performance. There are principal players and the maestro, and back here is the audience, and there comes the supporting cast, and here come the nervous laughs, and here come the tears, and here comes the climax, and there goes the applause, and there is the exit, and there go the stars, and here comes the after-party.

The old memory of the two clans drawn together in their regalia and lofty speech doesn't tend to surface because in this seating arrangement they never see each other. They never look across the valley of life and customs and memories and pride and prejudice and see the other clan, looking at them across that same valley, wanting something like the same things for their young. The seating arrangement forbids it.

The rumour of the old ways is that aisle up the middle of everything. That aisle was where the old patrimony, the salt and the indigo, was laid down. That's where the clans met. But with the memory gone, there's one audience where there once were two clans. Once there's a script, and the outcome is never in doubt, never even wondered about, the spell of inevitability comes on.

And once the performance becomes an Aesop-style affirmation of what prevails, the Gods, the titular spirits, the Lords of Chance, the Old Ones, are unmissed, unsought, unimagined, and uninvited. What you have is the epic aloneness of an event that is only for and about the living. What you have is a party prompted by some pomp. And a lot of modern people know how to party like it's, well, whatever ominous number you'd like.

Ritual is not playing spin the bottle with the great beyond. It isn't the housebroken you in league with the running-with-the-wolves you to forge a better, fun-loving, risk-taking you (although that'd be a fine outcome). Ritual is barely regulated congress with the psychic wilderness, with the silent, telluric shudder of life's makings. It leaves you bewildered probably, and bedeviled perhaps, and unignorant surely. For a domesticated person, the encounter is undoing, very likely. Safety and assuredness are the undoing of ritual. There is no safe place in ritual undertakings. This is not because you've been a bad person and you will be found out by the spirits. It is because the spirits are ungoverned by what you'd have of them, unresponsive even, ungoverned by your ego boundaries, by the deal you've struck with your days. The Makers of Life have other business.

You meet in ritual for the same reason you play the game: on paper, the outcomes might be predictable, and you might put your money down accordingly. But you never know who and what is going to appear when things finally get underway, and as bees are drawn to the open flower, the Lords of Chance—the same ones that attend your dying—are drawn in by iffiness, which, along with beauty, is their food. Ritual is the proving ground, the chalice, the crucible of fate. In these particularly overshadowed times, with the weather warming and pestilence once prompting curfew and martial law, it is crucial that we remember again the etymology of *fate*. It has never meant "the fix is in" or "the die is cast."

Fate comes from the Latin word *fari*, meaning "to speak," "to call into being." In an animistic/theistic time, the Gods made the world by

speaking it into existence, and this word comes to us from those times. The world is what they said ages ago. That's fate: not what the Gods will make happen, no matter what we do. Fate is the world, the way things tend to go, the physics and chemistry, the gravitas and the rising up and waning of life. The rest of the story is what we'll do, given all that. Fate comes to this, fatefully: What will you and I do, now that the Gods have spoken? Ritual is where the Gods are audible, where we answer their question, where the present gets made.

If I'm in the redemption business, as I imagine myself to be sometimes, then perhaps I can do something about that "audience" problem. So, I reasoned with myself: if you change the seating arrangement, you change the charge of the thing. You can—and we did, often—change things, recreating the possibility of remembering the salt and the indigo days. We asked guests to sit separately and then face each other. They looked down and looked away often in the early going when they could, but the incontrovertible presence of the other people across the way had its consequence. It made frisson there in the space between. It wasn't an aisle anymore, a place for people to transit through. There was no front of the room, no proscenium arch, no theatrical fourth wall. There was an altar, but not the one most people would recognize. The altar was the place between the people, where the aisle used to be. They looked to the centre of the proceedings (not in front of them), and they found the other clan there. The uncommon moment, the mystery of what might yet be, of fate, was seated there. Magic time.

My calculations were poor, though. Or my belief in the power of the point of view, the choreography, wasn't well tested. I thought that after some time to adjust to the oddness of the thing, the old spirit or some nascent memory would carry along the willing, and the fence sitters too, leaving those dyed-in-the-wool to stew if they insisted. What I did not figure on was how tenacious was the claim of the familiar and the common upon the mythic imaginations of those present. No matter how it played out, how much of a shell game the current matrimonial practice clearly was, still the vexing authority of the thing held sway. Craft a real, viable alternative before their very eyes as I might, the customary thing had its way, had its say, held its sway.

When habit flexes, it is a considerable thing. You might imagine there was vague interest in the strange spectacle before it, even still, or at most vague disinterest. You might imagine something like curiosity. That's not

what happened. What happened was a keenness among the few, a not very subtle disconcertedness among the polite and the restrained, and a clearly hostile silence and unwavering unwillingness to grant the day its due and participate in some nominal way among the rest. You might think that this response follows generational lines, that the older folks were hostile and the younger folks were at least willing to see the thing through. No, the age kin of the betrothed were as disconcerted as anyone. Most often, though, it tended to be the parents whose indignation overcame whatever curiosity they might have had when they came, overcame whatever early childhood training they might have had to wonder after what they didn't understand.

During the prolonged rounds of declaration and challenge that made up the ritual prayer, a bride's mother came up to me and, seething, asked, "Is this a real wedding?" Bear in mind that the proceedings were something her daughter held dear, sought out, dreamed of despite the odds and customs, pleaded with me to do, pleaded with her parents to understand or indulge or at least attend. You'd think—I used to think—that there were times crafted by the Gods to induce the best in people, and yet . . .

I might have responded in the most affable tone I could manage with something like, "Well, were the other weddings you're thinking of 'real weddings'? If they were, what made them real? And why are you asking? Is there anything you or I can do now to make this more real for you?" I should have done that. It sounds combative, I know, but considering what I did say, I should have said that. Instead, I said to her, "Right now, are you a real mother?"

I meant, "Listen. *Real* is not my word. I'm using it because you did, because you are in earnest, because that's exactly what you mean. What does a real mother do on her daughter's 'maybe it's a real wedding' wedding day? Does she call out and take down what she doesn't understand? Does mother-love learn as it goes? Does father-love? Or is it a one-size-fits-all, once-and-forever kind of thing? In a culture so thin on time-tested tradition, should parents even be asked to learn and unlearn and relearn the limits of parenthood? Should they be asked to trade in omniscience and omnipotence over their children for a weathered elder companionship with everyone else's kids?"

To be clear, I was not saying then or now that she was not a "real" mother. By the standards that she and I know very well, she was every bit the mother she believed her daughter deserved. That question of hers,

and the grievance and involuntary reflex behind it, is very much in the parental repertoire of our time.

We rotated the seating until the two groups faced each other. And we got the same audience anyway. Why? Because how you see will trump what you see, every time, that's why. Because the spirit habits of our time are in our eyes, and because they determine how we come to our conclusions and our senses. Barring catastrophe, they are not up for review or reconsideration, certainly not in matters of the heart. This is what prejudice means: to have a judgment about something before the something even takes place. It means that you lead with what you're accustomed to and you second anything unfamiliar to what you know until it becomes another version of something that you know.

The ragged truth of the thing is that my miscalculation concerned a mystery that was hiding in plain view. Both sets of friends and allies, both families, were of the same clan, existentially. One might be Baptist, the other Jewish. One might be second-generation Italian Catholic, the other Lebanese Christian, one Swiss Protestant, and the other lapsed Born-Again, one Caribbean Black, and the other Swedish Seventh-Day Adventist. On the face of it, they're as varied in clan affiliation as it is possible to get. But they are all *here*, have probably been here for a while, for generations. They've all taken shelter in the cool bosom of "the new world," or their parents or grandparents did. And that has done something to them, to their self-understanding, to the memories of the old country and the old country ways.

If they are card-carrying, dues-paying members in good standing of the dominant culture of North America, no matter the vagaries of their ancestral origins now in eclipse or in wane, they are of the same clan now, in a way no one may have counted on when they immigrated. They traded tradition for opportunity. It more often than not turns out to be a permanent trade. Their kids have a hyphenated kind of self-understanding, and their grandchildren are as new-world as anyone's been. They are global citizens, aligned with the internet and its ways more than with any culture. And they are strangely conservative. Like the Fentanyl Folks come downtown from the suburbs, they have a hard time telling the difference between being useful in a troubled time and being used by the troubles of the times.

They will as likely as not close ranks in the face of the strange or the unexpected at wedding time. "Normal" and "real" are the fallback religions on tap at wedding time in our part of the world, and those are the traditions that will be remembered and the beliefs that will be served. Few come to the New World to see their kids caught up in an old-world wedding, particularly one that they don't recall from the grandparents' stories. Ask anyone what a wedding is. You may get recrimination, condemnation, dismissiveness. You may get sepia-toned longing, chuckles of remembrance. But it's unlikely that anyone will blank on you. Without thinking about it much, everyone knows what a wedding is. When confronted with challenging matrimonial novelty, just about everyone knows what a wedding isn't, too.

I learned quite clearly that blood ties and declarations of enduring affection and "I'll always be there for you" sentiments pass through some conduit, some medium, on their way from one heart to another. That medium is language. And only the most gifted and practiced and skilled of us, our poets and skalds and praise singers, can bend almost to breaking the rules and habits of our language to coax the soul-searing, heartrending, mind-mystifying, Gods-imploring, ancestor-awakening, world-loving power of it into our midst in times of trouble, testing and attesting, times when something of our soul's life and times hang in the balance, when the best of us can ride the power and the pleading of the poet and bolster ordinary love against its ordinary adversaries and the poverties of the day. Matrimony is one such time. Matrimony depends on wellspokenness.

The rest of us—and that is, for better and worse, most of us—employ language the way we do a walking stick from the kindling pile. We lean on it, we push it and pull it in ways we've done before, many times before. In our speech, we tend to be at our most habit ridden. Perhaps this is too grim, ungenerous, and ungiving, too much foreclosure on the unconquerable inventiveness and nobility of the human spirit to appear when needed. It may be that.

Try saying a word aloud, right now, that you haven't used in twenty years. Okay, ten years. Five. One. Try thinking a thought you've never thought before, right now. Then say it aloud, in its completeness. It'll be difficult, largely because the chances are good that you do not come to the

language entrusted to you as an infant the way you come to your body for your morning yoga session, needing a good stretch, flexing out those habits assembled during a night of slumber and inactivity. More likely, you come to your language as you come to those jeans draped over the bedroom chair that you've worn the last couple of days: if urgency, utility, or sloth prevails, if a dearth of options close at hand prevails, then you'll pull them on again, more or less without thinking about it, first one leg, then the other, as you've done for as long as you remember, one more time. Because comfort and familiarity tend to be the marching orders of speech.

How you speak is how you think and see. If you can't say it, there is every chance that you can't think it or see it, either. There's no crime in it, no terrible transgression. But you've heard the stats on this, just as I have. The English language has about a million words. The usual citizen uses—which is to say, really *knows*—about twenty thousand. Not in a day. *In a lifetime*. You could try Scrabble. But daily life won't employ too many of those one- and two-letter words beginning with an *X*.

But that's not the dilemma. That's just a sign. The dilemma is that our speech leads our thinking, and it does so routinely because it precedes our thinking. If I were to ask you what comes first, thinking of something or assembling the words to think of something, you might answer that thought comes first. *Of course it does*, you'd think. You ponder or you mull or you're excited or alarmed, and then the words come out of you that express the state of affairs inside you. But consider the possibility that you often only realize you are thinking in a particular way about a particular something when a few words or a phrase nudge you toward that realization. It is more than possible that language is the narrow-gauge railway that our sentient selves ride into the imaginal and social world upon. Our language is the way by which our inner life appears to us and to others.

Now this is tremendous news if you live in a culture that knows language to be a gift from the Ancients of Days and an order of divinity we share with the Makers of Life. It would be breathtaking news indeed if oratory were so highly esteemed that it was taught in the schools and safeguarded from abuse or violation in the marketplace or political arena. It would be something if eloquence was prayer, and prayer eloquence. The English language can bear all of this burden of expectation, evocation, elocution, and conjuring. The English language is full of reasons to live.

If you've sat through speeches at a wedding reception, an occasion begging for prayer, eloquence, and something uncommon and beautiful,

you may have had to settle for something else. Perhaps you waited it out. There may have been a lot of inside gags. When all was said and done, a lot of things were said and maybe nothing happened. That's all. Nothing happened. All those people gathered together, all of that carbon in the footprint of the thing. All that life experience in one place. All those hopes and wishes and dreams gathered into the great alchemy, the great summing up, the great transubstantiation of the two into one . . . and nothing happened. Minus something ribald or scurrilous being said—even with it being said—nothing happened. Almost all of it will lay there on the dance floor, unremembered, to be swept up by the maintenance man when all is said and done.

There is not enough diversity, enough elasticity in most families to help them set aside their habits in a time when one of their number is courted to join another family. The dilemma is compounded many times over when both families represented by the betrothed are so similar in habit, expectation, prejudice, and performance of social role that together they constitute an extended doppelgänger of narrowed understanding. When that happens, the genetic diversity is served, yes, but the spirit diversity withers. Spiritually speaking, most of the weddings in our corner of the world are endogamous affairs, inward looking. What is, to me, most unnerving is that they can be spiritually incestuous.

The withering of psychic difference between people is the programme of globalization. It is in the architecture of most things partaking of the internet. And it is in the homogeneity of our matrimony. It is this very incestuousness that matrimony was once crafted and entered into to avoid and subvert. Now it grinds upon our differences until they are details.

I changed the seating arrangement, and there was still only one tribe of understanding, custom, and habit there looking across a confused aisle at another version of what they already knew and expected and were in favour of. That was my miscalculation. The old memory was there, in the way an old wound is there in a faint scar only you can see, a scar you never remember but are occasionally reminded of when that part of the body doesn't work quite right. The old lines were there, as it turned out, but the magnet that mobilized the iron filings of allegiance was hidden from me for a time. With so little practice at recognizing them and living them out, there was precious little spirit skill brought to bear upon them by me.

One clan was all the invited family members and guests, wondering privately or among themselves if this was a real wedding. The other clan turned out to be all the people I'd worked with in the months prior,

the ones we dubbed "the wedding party," which included the bride and groom's posse, the older people who'd undertaken the spirit Godparenting of the ceremony, any guest who was enchanted enough to cross the line, the emotional and social no-man's-land that had opened between the clans, and me. The allegiance of the first group was not to any years together, not to the life to come, not to the wedding nor the matrimony that struggled to rise from it. It was to what they knew and to what they'd come to take for proper and right. Everybody on that side knew what a "real wedding" looked like and felt like and did. They knew this wasn't it. For the most part, I couldn't change that.

Feminism in the West has historically been hard on marriage, for many good reasons. Feminists prompted the investigations of a historical and institutionalized subjugation of women by men, the regard of women as something in the order of chattel—codified in the wedding contract (formal, legal, and existential), in the social norms that ensued from it, and in the laws governing rights of possession and inheritance. Young people are wont to dismiss marriage out of hand either as an institution of chronic iniquity or irrelevant to the current proceedings and the troubles of the day. You could say that the institution of marriage has never really stood a chance of being taken seriously and taken to heart by educated young people for several generations now.

Young people in anarchist circles I've been acquainted with might risk credal opprobrium or outright excommunication if they go over to the dark side to consider marriage. It can be an exercise in deep compromise for them, a matter of giving up, giving in, and going opaque. There are people for whom staying true to themselves by staying single is a matter of philosophical consistency, a point of moral pride. For them, matrimony is weakness, a compromise of the kind of existential discipline needed to weather the storms of solitude. Perhaps they've never seen a sane, working marriage. And there are legions of cohabitants who, when in the lee of romantic weather, are drawn to the excitement and the pageant of matrimony and rely upon friends to ask, "You've been together for years, and it's worked out great. Why ruin a good thing?"

And still there is this nagging problem of the human heart in stir. There is its longing for concerted companionship and for the appearance

of companionship, the social standing of deliberate companionship. There are the various structures available for its moderated appearance among us. There are the biometrics to consider, the glandular imperative and its programme, the hormonal claim upon discernment and good judgment, the time of life one is in when that claim is made. There is a question about how voluntarily we enter into the sanctum of romantic commerce and communion, whether there really is any deciding to be done. We call it "falling in love," not "doing love."

Matrimony's detractors and proponents probably agree on this: matrimony is not on a continuum of compulsion set into motion by physical attraction. There are too many details, there's too much work involved for matrimony to be sudden. It is not a given or a necessity that physical attraction leads to matrimony as its goal or purpose, nor is physical attraction required for matrimony to be undertaken. In the matter of lust, the chemistry is most compelling. There is the issue of shelf life, of course, and here lust follows faithfully the laws of physics, specifically those governing entropy. Those laws say it plainly: the more volatile the compound, the more likely it is to spend itself by consuming itself. Given the rank confusion of plan and discipline and the order of the soul that it brings, lust could seem to be the essence of adversity, like a demon sent from Demon Central Casting to waylay the unsuspecting. There are faith communities and anti-faith communities that agree. Lust is clearly not a friend to deliberation, and for all the power it exerts upon the proceedings, when it holds sway, it is obviously porous, unenduring, and transient.

Lust is the natural order's way of utterly, temporarily subverting a sense of responsibility and grace cultivated over years of practice and study with a wave of blood necessity, just long enough that the primal plan and its procreative repertoire get a seat at the table. Once the hasty banquet is done with, once the best wine is spilled and the best crystal broken, the tally can be taken, and various fictions to account for why or what—as in, "What have we done?"—can be traded upon.

There are those whose ways in these matters have successfully set apart any procreative mandate from the minuet of mad love, those for whom procreativity was never an option. Understood. But I do not mean by "procreativity" the literal spawning and scattering of the gene pool. This is one iteration. I mean, instead, that there is, lingering in the architecture, the spirit of coming together for the sake of some third thing, be it child or future unseen world or the final solution to loneliness. And it may be that it

is in the nature of lust to be the horse that the "could be" of human affairs and the human heart rides into this world upon. Lust, you might say, is Old Stormy, the grog there to serve the Rough Gods and their undomesticated, consecrating plans for life. It's one way we know they're there.

So, all in all, matrimony is neither the victory nor the defeat of lust and chemistry, though there are witnesses abounding to the titrating effects of matrimony upon lust. Lust is matrimony's houseguest, perhaps the unvarnished relative from the country who is underpersuaded by decorum and the fine furniture in the parlor, who enjoys the odd sniff and the accoutrement of deliberate life but has no plans to stay once the requisite thrill is gone.

Now, it may be the goneness of that thrill that prompts it, and it may be there in the rising of it again, or it may be an elegant and serviceable take on human love or primate love, but we are in an era when many people entertain the possibilities and the pull of polyamory. Here and now, I grant the real possibility that they, or their master practitioners, have much of this, or enough of it, figured out, and that polyamory is life's best idea yet. No doubt, there are upsides galore, and no doubt those who flirt with the possibility are drawn by those upsides. Being a human undertaking, I imagine there are downsides, too. Polyamory may require a certain discipline of the heart that monogamy, ironically, has given up on, for example. There are books out there to whet or wither your appetite for the thing. I have little to add that you'd find encouraging.

I gather, though, that there have been places and times that have come to polyamory with deliberation and something like a plan, peoples who have inherited rather than invented it. Likely there still are. In addition to the various coping strategies for the outbreak of episodes of jealousy and the like, they seem to be animated by a concern for caring for the souls of the participants, and for the souls of the young who can come about from the proceedings. From what little I know, the right to polygamy is exercised with the stringent, honour-bound caveat that the material needs and social standing of all are seen to. To use the language of rights again: anyone exercising the right to live the life of multiple coincidental life partners in the full glare of the culture's attention must attend to the well-being of those partners in something like equal measure. You have to be able to afford it, materially, emotionally, and resourcefully. Ideally, no one should be impoverished because someone decides to go for broke, polyamorously.

It seems clear enough that cultures that practice the elaborations of polygamy do so as a way of acting upon their understanding that the village has a stake—a majority stake—in the matrimony and soul health of its members. The village is both underwriter and beneficiary of matrimony in all its forms, and the village exercises its elder-endorsed, elder-informed, time-tested cultural repertoire of human-making in matrimony. The village says, "You may consider and obey the jangle of your human heart, but you must see to it that as you do so, we are there, that the village heart is there. After all, you are speaking the words of love and spirit that we have given you. We are the intermediaries through whom your love for another passes and through whom it passes when it cools or withers or goes elsewhere. It is our child who proposes to love like this, and it is our child you are proposing to love like this."

You know that the English language has the word *bigamy*, and the word *polygamy*, and the more contemporary word *polyamory*—a word only recently appearing in dictionaries. We don't, so far as I know, have the word *polimony* or anything similar. Why, do you suppose? Could it be that the Greeks didn't get around to coming up with such a word, such an idea? It isn't likely. The Greeks were frisky in these matters, by their own accounts, and would no doubt have made the word had they made the arrangement. Perhaps they had no such arrangement.

Though the dictionary will tell you *polygamy* (Greek) means "having multiple wives at the same time," the root, *gam*, signifies "marriage," not "wife." So women and men can and have been polygamous. The Greek word *polyandry* means "having multiple husbands," since the root, *andros*, means "human man," not "humankind." So these words are not quite opposites. One emphasizes the condition of marriage, and the other emphasizes gender. Polyamory, on the other hand, is a very modern confluence of Greek words that means something like "much loving" or "much loved." There is no reference to matrimony or marriage or gender in the word at all.

There is something in the work of matrimony, in its architecture and its way, that is deeply faithful to village-mindedness, to the web of associations and obligations that constitute a village. That fidelity has its full exercise not in explorations of lifestyle options or in strategies for personal

satisfaction but in world-serving labours of mothering and fathering our little human lives into the life-unto-death-unto-life of the caravan of mystery that is our daily bread. That bread is taken up in the presence of those from whom our life comes and those to whom it goes, our company of ancestors and deities of place and those not yet come among us.

You can't tell that we know any of this, though, any more than you can tell we know that we're going to die. We swear off marriage, we deride the vows, discredit monogamy, and drift toward any other sexual and cultural and spiritual arrangement in its stead. We're modern, and we're homeless, and we are confused by freedom. There is occlusion in the soul, a psychoneuro compromise in the land, an oracular degeneration of the village mind in our time and place.

"All my friends are depressed," young people tell me. "They're on SSRIs, on steroids, on 'anywhere but here' wellness programmes. The whole thing seems unfixable. Can you tell me why?" The terrible swoon of matrimony and patrimony, the remorseless slander levied upon mater and pater, the atrophy of elderhood, the near total soul amnesia over the place ma and pa once held in the renegade marketplace of our mutual life—clearly all of that is on. There's brittle, habit-ridden rancour in place of public discourse. There are fits of unrepentant nostalgia for the rumored good old days, and ill-considered pleas for the reestablishment of the traditional nuclear family and its values. The traditional nuclear family and its values are as much a child of discredited matrimony and patrimony as are the alternatives on offer today. It reads like a catalogue of mayhem from a book of revelations.

The current variations of the standard family unit—gay families, surrogacy families, intentional and inadvertent single-parent families—seem likely to become the default nuclear families of the near future. Along with their more traditional, straight-ahead, ma/pa/kids and neighbours, they could become the Potemkin village, the default village for reconfigured, AI-abetted, culturally despondent, and spiritually discomforted people.

Sounds grim, I know. It *is* grim. The shuffle of misanthropic attributes sounds familiar, I know. Because it is familiar. It is what has claimed your children while you were elsewhere, folks. Or it will. Unchallenged and unchanged, it is coming for your children not yet born. When "family is everything," the next step is the fetishizing of the marital partner as the romantic and sexual and existential "meaning of life." Anyone who has been here knows that this is a fixation that is born in puberty, not in

adulthood, not in civility. And anyone who has been there knows what a ghost ship is a marriage set sail from the safe harbour called "you're my everything." It begins taking on water once run up on the shoals of "you've changed" and founders in the dark and rolling seas of life.

There are scores of reasons why, chief among them being that you and I have needs no one can possibly satisfy. Not needs that require multiple partners, not needs that come from not having found the "right person" yet. Just needs that no combination of partners could possibly satisfy. And matrimony is not a need-gratification machine. It's an education (*educo*, Latin, "to lead out"), not so much about your needs and their unvanquishable, looming presence but about the world's quiet, steady, clear-running need of you. The fetishizing of romance and the romantic partner comes round when the unvarnished rumours of personal inadequacy go on unabated, when the dark suspicions of personal insignificance and anonymity start having their way, as they do, when the reasons and purpose of your birth and persistence here among us go silent like fog, when your soul goes feral, baying off into the bush at the first rustle in the leaves that could be food, half-maddened by the ghosted, spellbound, and restless thought that you'll never find the meaning of life in the embrace of another person, at least not before *What's the point?* finds you.

All of this—all of it—doesn't begin in puberty. That's when somebody notices it and mistakes it for hormones. No, it begins to stir when the honourable ancestor-endorsed tether that binds you to what has come before, to the village mind, to the Gods of place and to this vast, turning world, goes slack. It seems for the most part to be untreated, undiagnosed, and unsuspected. Elderlessness, culturelessness, and loneliness tend to fetishize companionship. They deify immediate sensation. They worship the buzz. And they demean slow-cooked matrimony, hankering after it in secret.

What to do? Nihilism, or panic, or personal truth, or our version of the Roaring Twenties seem called for, inevitable, conscientious.

I was asked to join a call with Israelis that took place on the heels of the Hamas attack from Gaza in October 2023. For those few weeks, things seemed clear, the moral high ground plain for most to see. I had no more clairvoyance on the matter than anyone, but in readying myself for the call, I felt it likely that demand for retribution was soon likely to swamp any kind of a balanced perspective in the country. The group that invited me were people with meditation, Buddhism, pacifist devotions. By the time we began, there were perhaps fifteen hundred that had signed up, some

Palestinians included. We were going to open things up for questions, which means that anything could have happened. If there were strident ideologues on the call, they didn't ask questions. One woman, clearly in the throes of heartache and torn allegiance, asked me how anyone in such a moment could nurse an open heart.

I didn't know how then, and I don't know now. Instead of instructing, I said, "Trying and failing to keep an open heart is the human heart open." That's what I had at that moment, a heartache that seemed too much for a human heart to stand or understand. That's what I had each time a young couple asked me for something like a real matrimony to be visited upon them while there was still time. That's what I have now. That, and a feel for some other way for all of this. That and a few shards hinting that it could be otherwise. That "otherwise" is where we go next.

14

Into the Woods

Someone's seen someone across a crowded room. The love is instant. It's derailed, though, or delayed. Someone peripheral but important, like a blacksmith or a queen, intervenes uninvited—a crucial bit of business—and gives the suitor more work than is doable, or so it seems. There's a cool well, say. There's a dark, dark wood, a hut off the path. There are little people there. There are monsters, or trouble of a recognizable but vaguely unearthly kind. The suitor needs help. There's love, and there's a problem to solve, and there are life lessons, the chief of which is: you can't get there from here. You'll have to take the long way, if you mean to love.

Run-of-the-mill folktale stuff, it seems. Tired, dated business. A part of you is likely to say to the rest of you, "Ah, okay. I know how this goes. Young love, the pure thing, dimmed by cranky tradition. Overbearing, intrusive queen, maybe. Gets her due in the end, her comeuppance, hopefully. A wooden king. Trolls in the weeds. 'Monsters' is overdoing it. Quaint, transparent fable to keep the rabble in line. Standard piece of moral hardware. Archetypes and all. Not much there for the learned and the modern."

But this is how it is with stories, good ones: that moral-standard thing is an early and perpetual casualty of the proceedings. That's because ordinary good stories make a home for the Other World—and are a home for it—and because the moral architecture of the Other World is strange and

hard to recognize as what we usually mean by "moral." It's hard to be comforted by, all but impossible to govern your life's decisions by. The Other World is hidden in plain view in a good story well told. It favours stories over rants and ideology, just as the human heart seems to. That means that when you have young love and some kind of trial or travail, you're getting some kind of news that doesn't comply with the current regime, that doesn't knuckle under to what the protagonists have in mind for themselves. It employs their strategies for love, then subverts them. And that means that the story might have you, its hearer, in mind.

Anthropology is as psychology is: a young, would-be science in search of an old root upon which to be grafted. Anthropology's origins are more recent than it'd prefer. Colonization's excesses in the hinterlands seem to have prompted a late-to-the-party regret in academia. From that regret a fieldwork then ensued, to catalogue the shards of what remained of Indigenous lifeways before the whole thing died away. Formal folklore studies arose in the same places around the same time—late in the nineteenth century—to collect and catalogue the remains of pre-Christian paganry in oral form, the only form that was left while the young nation-states completed their work of standardizing the vernaculars within their borders. Two projects of victory shot through with misgiving and regret: one facing outward, the other inward.

So, here's a caveat of a kind, or a rant. Myths, fairy stories, fables, and folktales all have suffered, and continue to suffer, the most egregious and enervating reductions, redactions, and reframings, the most addled exegetical exorcisms, exhumations, and outright interpretive assassinations at the hands of purists, sectarian apologists, psychological adulators, demythologizing mythologists, and academic fifth-column saboteurs. Not from bad intent, not usually. It's more from ideological habit and enduring misapprehension of the fabled thing in their hands. But I have no theoretical axe to grind here, none that I know of. Just wondering. I'm not a self-identifying member of any professional or amateur storytelling outfit or life-coaching fraternity or rites-of-passage company.

I like stories, though, many of them, and the older ones in particular are to me as those azure bits of shell on the beach are to beachcombers: their beauty, their unlikely endurance through the storm surge of time,

make me want to wear them, or give them to people I think well of, or turn them over and over between my thumb and forefinger in place of fretting. They murmur to me of things I cannot, should not, know directly; and they are ample evidence that I come from elegance and noble stock. They are spirit patrimony.

And so, out of respect for stories and their tellers, I won't be performing psychic surgery upon this one upcoming story I've designated as vital to matrimony. I won't be wringing its neck for new meanings for the modern age, or interpreting anything, or making anagrams or cat's cradles out of the details. I'll just be reading it aloud and asking what it'd like us to know, what we might bear in mind in this frayed beginning of a momentous, dangersome century.

The first thing it'd like us to know is that there's something very wild—unnervingly wild, indeed—about old Europe, the Europe I come from, the Europe before and alongside its Enlightenment, its Reformation and Counterreformation and Crusades, the time before Christ and before Rome. If you have ancestral kin there, you might have been forced as a child to listen to cranky family mythologies about hardship and calamity and zany relatives during interminable Friday or Sunday dinners. Or you may have been forced to go to Saturday-morning language classes and learn the old religion, the old tongue, and hokey folk dances from the old country.

The chances are very good that what you were learning instead is what became of those old ways, old Gods, old things as they coped with and succumbed to forced conversion to monotheism, nation-state status, linguistic standardization, industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. They are shards of what once was. *Shards* doesn't mean "junk," though, and it certainly doesn't mean "gone." It means the old things went to ground, took on camouflage, became ephemeral, took on the guise of "dispirited, discredited, unsophisticated, and backward." Those are good hiding spots.

The veneration of the old Gods turned into stories about old people. Old holy places became hovels in the woods. Old Gods turned into monsters in those woods. Initiation ceremonies for young people became brothers and sisters lost in those woods, coming upon those hovels, haunted or hunted or hounded toward their spiritual education by those monsters, those old people. Pretty good stuff. Good shape-shifting.

The chances are better than good, though, that in school you didn't learn anything at all about where your people's people's people came from, or what they did, or what they knew. Or what their names were. Or what

you might owe them for your life, for the sheer fact of you living a life that includes them in no way at all in the early years of a century most harrowing and unassured. You just fit yourself into these days, these ways, as if our kind of life has always been there. And that's another shard. And that's why there are folktales still, with precious few folks to tell them or carry them along. They are waiting out our amnesia and globalization, waiting for us to come to their senses. They are proof of a zany ancestry, a noble ancestry, an ordinarily mysterious one.

At first blush, folktales don't seem to be about anything, or anything that matters, never mind being seething or dangerous. They seem meant for antiquarians and misfits and cranks. In fact, they are one place where the old things went to hide, biding their time, waiting on better days. Folktales, you might say, seem to have taken their old canines out and left them in a glass by the bed so they can find them in the dim of twilight, the grim twilight they seem forever to have inhabited as they grope their way toward another anarchic, postmodern, climate-compromised day.

Good camouflage.

One beautiful detail of their way of carrying on is that they don't argue. They don't contend. They're not like me, for example. They remember, instead. Like those frogs that go deep beneath the frost line, go morbid and inert until the first murmur of spring stirs them to dig themselves up into the light, folktales are good at waiting—waiting for an auditor without tin ears or ear buds; waiting for a respectful, vaguely capable hearing; waiting for people who aren't myth miners.

Think of how folktales are read today. Generally they aren't read. More rarely are they told. When they are told, there can be a feeling of them being revived, pulled from the ground like overripe potatoes—dusty, musty, better suited to an earlier time. They're for kids, mostly, to put them to sleep. They're for those looking for a quick fable by which to subvert the confoundments of an ordinary life, by which to lend them some lineage, some spiritual class. Otherwise, they are studied. To further that task, first they are condemned to paper, to save them from . . . well, from what exactly? The apologists will say "from disappearing." But why would they disappear? The usual answer hearkens back to understanding folktales as explanations of the heretofore unexplained, or as psychodynamic constructs, or as archetypes.

If you are of the psychodynamic sector, you might think that folktales disappear because the psychological needs answered by them are now

achieved by watching film, for example, or because we have the concept of the archetype or an AI avatar to help us relate despite the centuries. Psychology is monotheism, this time without God. Psychology is fond of paving over the particulars of place with personal truth, or with psychic, mythic globalization. In practice, in the hands of the ill-tutored, psychology tends to be a tyrannous evangelist for the inner life.

Maybe folktales disappear because there's been an effective war waged against them, and it's been waged for centuries. The missionaries who oversaw conversion to monotheism understood folktales as well as anyone of the time did. They understood that's where the old Gods lived, that's where the ancestors lived, that's where the spirit of a time lived. Turning folktales into functions, inner constructs, that is the conversion project continuing. And maybe the telling, the speaking of a folktale, is the old Gods, the old ancestors, appearing again. Writing them down and preserving them that way is like building a climate-controlled museum and cajoling them to move in. Studying and interpreting them instead of telling them can be something like storing unearthed bones in a filing cabinet in that museum.

Folktales that have would-be brides and grooms, that have true love being derailed by quests for golden hair, that have a devil and a deep blue well, these stories have the strange tang of the time-tested and the trued about them. They want us to know that there are human wiles that will not succumb to being life coached. They want us to know that all is not what it seems, that human-making, not human being, is the chief vocation of humans.

15

A Hellbound Tale

People often count on their weddings being a user-friendly version of "otherworldly." It's likely I wanted that when I wed the first time. We want it to be recognizable as a wedding, of course, and have it recognized as a wedding by our friends and families. We might want it to resemble in a good way the weddings we've attended in the past. But it has to be special, and special means unusual, standing apart from every ordinary thing. It has to be borne above the tedium by the helium of good intent and the valium of costly details. It has to be laboured over until it looks effortless. In the trade, they will often use the term *fairy-tale wedding* to summarize this cluster of expectations. By the end of this chapter, you might wonder what fairy tale they're thinking of.

Otherworldly isn't "like this world, with some other cool things thrown in." Very possibly it means "the overturning of everything that governs this world." There are reasons that otherworldly things don't often appear in this world, why they're called what they're called. They don't work here. They don't belong. The membrane keeping this world and the other apart is thin to begin with, and wears porous sometimes. And then we find ourselves in the sway of what seems to belong elsewhere, elsewhen. The human part of this world tends to suffer when something otherworldly comes around. It suffers by comparison sometimes, and it suffers its intransigence.

Fairy tales are a kind of folktale, and folktales are earthy. They are conservative, in a way that political parties or idealogues could never manage, in the way farmers can be. They retain a kind of ancestral memory of a time before sophistication and urbanism, before conversion to one-God religions or no-God religions, when the world was improbable and charged with consequence and, in every sense of the word, alive. Fairy tales are full of people, and beings who look like people but aren't, who don't play by the rules, for whom solemnity is a playground for profanation. And that's not what most people have in mind for their Big Day.

So folktales are not an obvious place to go to for matrimonial guidance or example or tuition. Understood. That's why I'm going there. If you poked around in them, you'd be surprised how often matrimony comes up in folktales. For what follows, it's good to remember that folktales were told to people who knew them, by people who lived them, for the sake of their common life, their communion with each other, and with the saints and sages they called upon. Folktales come from a time before theological consolidation, before the grip of urban religious orthodoxy seized the mythic imagination of ordinary people. They come to us from a time when each household had an altar or a shrine, when the relics of the dead were in the dirt under the floorboards. The tale, in some ways, was an altar, and the telling of it was, in some ways, how they prayed.

That means that everything is not explained, that there are no symbols or allegories, that there are no solutions or easy exemplars to glom onto. There are unnerving mysteries instead. Their Gods dwell in the details. And so it will serve us well to attend to the details that follow, to the beckoning, and especially to the antiphonies, the things that don't go willingly.

I could put it this way: You already know what you know. Now you're reading this. Follow that thread, the one that meanders from what of the ordinary world you know to what of it you thought you knew.

I'll acquiesce and use the title the Grimm brothers gave to it: "The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs." But it doesn't seem likely to me that in the heyday of folktale telling, folktales had titles. Titles make a claim to represent what something's about, and the best advice I can give you here is to consider that folktales aren't about anything. They *are* something instead. Folktales are actions. They are making something happen in the telling, as

parables do, as art does. They are, in a useful and disarming sense, spells. I chose this one because it has a surprising willingness to draw matrimony into hell. It wonders about their kinship. It's confident that the gravitas of matrimony, its own steam and storm, will get you there. It's confident and then some about who you'll meet there. There's no theology at play, so there's no argument or apology about hell, about the moral turpitude that might land you in the place, or the moral course correction that might cut you loose. And so, alas, the tale is probably confusing to the instruction reliant, to those pilgrims for whom ambivalence is a stop sign instead of a fork in the road.

The story is folk-wise. There isn't a spectacle of systematic philosophy. There probably isn't an idea in the thing. Like most well-told tales, there's one thing, and then there's another, but there are no reasons jammed into the cracks between the scenes. The disbelief of the listener, the reader, just doesn't matter to the story. It doesn't try to convince or persuade you, to prevail upon you or reassure you that if you're reading this as a part of your self-imposed marriage readiness regime, you'll be rewarded and all will be revealed. It'll go ahead with or without you. One disarming detail: there's nothing in the story that suggests that you shouldn't end up in hell. It's not warning you away from hell. It's blessedly free of platitude and road maps to personal fulfillment. It's a story in which the intent to draw close to matrimony draws the betrothed close to the devil and his wife.

It doesn't say, "Don't go!" It says, "You'll go."

The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs

A woodcutter was chopping wood in front of the king's house while the princess was standing at a window above and observing him. When noon arrived, he sat down in the shadows and wanted to rest. Now the princess was able to see that he was very handsome and she fell in love with him. So she had him summoned to her, and as soon as he caught sight of her and saw how beautiful she was, he fell in love with her. The king learned that the princess was in love with a woodcutter, and as soon as he knew this, he went to her and said, "You know that you may only wed the man who brings me the three golden hairs from the devil's head, whether he be a prince or a woodcutter."

The king knew that there had never been a prince courageous enough to accomplish this task, and therefore, an inferior man like the woodcutter would certainly not succeed. The princess was distressed because many

princes who had tried to fetch the devil's three golden hairs had died. Since there was nothing else she could do, she told the woodcutter what her father had said. However, the woodcutter was not at all depressed by this and said, "I'll certainly succeed. Stay true to me until I return. Early tomorrow I shall set out."

Indeed, the woodcutter began his journey to the devil the next day and soon came to a big city. In front of the gate, a guard asked him what kind of craft he practiced and what he knew.

"I know everything," answered the woodcutter.

"If you know everything," the gatekeeper said, "then make our princess healthy again. No doctor in the world has been able to cure her."

"When I return."

In the second city, he was also asked what he knew.

"I know everything."

"Then tell us why our beautiful marketplace well has become dry."

"When I return," said the woodcutter, and he refused to be detained.

After a while, he came to a fig tree that was rotting, and nearby stood a man who asked him what he knew.

"I know everything."

"Then tell me why the fig tree is rotting and no longer bearing any fruit."

"When I return."

The woodcutter travelled on and encountered a ferryman who had to transport him across a river, and he asked him what he knew.

"I know everything."

"So tell me, when will I be finally relieved and when will someone else transport people across the river?"

"When I return."

After the woodcutter was on the other side, he entered hell. Everything appeared black and sooty. However, the devil was not home. Only his wife was sitting there. The woodcutter said to her, "Good day, Mrs. Devil. I've come here to take three golden hairs that your husband has on his head, and I'd like to know why a princess cannot be cured, why a deep well at a marketplace doesn't have any water, why a fig tree doesn't bear any fruit, and why a ferryman has not been relieved from his work."

The wife was horrified and said, "When the devil comes and finds you here, he'll eat you right away, and you'll never be able to get the three golden hairs. But since you are so young, I feel sorry for you, and I'll see if I can save you."

The woodcutter had to lie down beneath the bed, and no sooner did he do this than the devil came home.

"Good evening, wife," he said and proceeded to take off his clothes.

Then he burst out saying, "What's going on in this room? I smell, I smell the flesh of a man. I've got to look around."

"What are you going to smell?" his wife asked. "You've got the sniffles, and the smell of human flesh is still stuffed up in your nose. Don't mess up everything. I've just cleaned the house."

"I won't make any noise. I'm tired this evening, and you won't even begrudge me some little thing to eat."

Upon saying that, the devil lay himself down in the bed, and his wife had to lie down beside him. Soon he fell asleep. First he blew, then he snored. At the beginning, he did this softly, and then he was so loud that the windows trembled. When his wife saw that he was sound asleep, she grabbed hold of one of the three golden hairs, ripped it out, and threw it to the woodcutter beneath the bed. The devil jumped up.

"What are you doing, wife! Why are you tearing out my hair?"

"Oh, I had a nightmare! I must have done it because I was afraid."

"What did you dream about?"

"I dreamed about a princess who was deathly sick, and no doctor in the world could cure her."

"Well, why don't they get rid of the white toad that's sitting under her bed?"

After saying that, the devil turned to his other side and fell asleep again. When his wife heard him snoring, she grabbed hold of a second hair, ripped it out, and threw it under the bed. The devil jumped up.

"Hey, what are you doing! Have you gone mad? You've been terrible ripping my hair!"

"Oh, listen, dear husband! I was standing before a large well at a marketplace, and people were yammering because there was no longer any water in it. They asked me if I knew if there was any way to help them. Well, I looked down the well, but it was so deep that I became dizzy. I wanted to stop myself, and then I got entangled in your hair."

"You should have told them that they had to pull out the white stone lying at the bottom of the well, and now leave me in peace with all your dreams!"

He lay down once more and soon began snoring as before. His wife thought, *I've got to dare once more*, and sure enough, she ripped the third

golden hair out and threw it down to the woodcutter. The devil leapt into the air and wanted to teach her a nasty lesson, but his wife calmed him down, kissed him, and said, "What horrible dreams! A man showed me a fig tree that was wilting, and he complained that it was no longer bearing any fruit. Then I wanted to shake the tree to see if something would fall off it, and the next thing I knew, I was shaking your hair."

"That would have been in vain. There is a white mouse gnawing at the roots of the tree. If it's not killed, then the tree will be lost. Once the mouse is dead, the tree will be fresh, regain its health, and bear fresh fruit. So, now stop plaguing me with all your dreams. I want to sleep, and if you wake me one more time, I'll give you a good slap in your face!"

His wife was very much afraid of the devil's anger, but the poor woodcutter had to know one more thing that only the devil knew. So the wife pulled his nose and lifted him into the air. The devil jumped up as though he were out of his mind and gave her a smack in the face that resounded all over the place.

His wife began to weep and said, "Do you want me to fall into the water and drown? The ferryman brought me across the river, and as the barge approached the other side, it bumped into the bank, and I was afraid that I might fall and wanted to grab hold of the anchor, which was attached to a chain. That's why I grabbed hold of your nose."

"How come you didn't pay attention? The barge does this all the time."

"The ferryman complained to me that nobody has come to relieve him, and there's no end to his work."

"All he has to do is get the first man who comes to take over the ferrying from him until a third man comes who relieves him. This is the way that he can help himself. But your dreams are really strange. Everything you've told me about the ferryman is true, and everything else as well. Now, don't wake me again. Soon it will be morning, and I want to sleep a little more. Otherwise, I'll make you pay if you disturb me."

After the woodcutter was on the other side, he said to the ferryman, "The next person who comes and wants to be taken across the river, keep him there until he takes over your job and continues your work until another man comes to relieve him."

Soon thereafter, the woodcutter came to the man with the wilted fig tree, and he said to him, "All you have to do is kill the white mouse that's gnawing on the roots. Then your tree will bear fruit again just as it did in the past."

"What do you demand for a reward?" asked the man.

"I want a troop of soldiers," and no sooner did he say this than a troop began marching behind him.

The woodcutter thought that things were going well and arrived in the city where the well at the marketplace had run dry.

"Fetch the white stone that's lying at the bottom of the well."

So someone climbed down and fetched the stone, and no sooner was he above than the well was once again filled with the clearest water.

"How should we reward you?" the mayor asked.

"Give me a regiment of cavalry officers."

And as the woodcutter went through the city gate, a regiment of cavalry officers rode behind him. This was how he entered the other city where the princess whom no doctor could cure was lying on her sick bed.

"All you have to do is kill the white toad that's hiding beneath the princess's bed."

And when that was done, the princess began to recuperate and became healthy and rosy.

"What do you want for a reward?" asked the king.

"Four wagons loaded with gold," said the woodcutter.

Finally, the woodcutter reached home, and behind him were a troop of infantrymen, a regiment of cavalry officers, and four wagons loaded entirely with gold. The three golden hairs of the devil, however, were carried by himself. He ordered his regiments to wait in front of the royal gate. They were to enter quickly if he gave them a signal from a castle. Then he went to the father of his beloved princess and handed him the devil's three golden hairs and asked him to give him the princess for his bride in keeping with the promise he made. The king was astonished and said that the woodcutter had done quite right with regard to the devil's three golden hairs. Nevertheless, the king stated he would have to think about whether he would give him the princess for his bride. As soon as the woodcutter heard this, he moved to the window and whistled to his companions. All of a sudden, the troops of infantrymen and regiments of cavalry officers and four heavily loaded wagons marched and rolled through the gate.

"My king," said the woodcutter, "take a look at my people whom I have brought along with me, and over there is all my wealth in those wagons full of gold. Don't you want to give me the princess?"

The king was terrified and said, "Yes, with all my heart."

Then the woodcutter and the princess were married and lived in bliss.

This is why whoever is not afraid of the devil can tear out his hair and win the entire world.*

At first pass, the thudding repetition in this story could make anyone's eyes glaze over. There's a man vying for a woman's hand, an older man of privilege standing in the way, another man (albeit the devil) with the keys to the matrimonial kingdom, and a hoop-jumping quest to tie the thing together. There are what seem to be a couple of marginal females there on the periphery. We have all the makings of a hero's journey, a masculine one. But the collision of matrimony with hell is a little surprising, even in a folktale, and in a book about matrimony, maybe that's worth a glance. Often, background in life is foreground in folktales, so subtle details are important.

Here we have a woodcutter—someone probably coming to the bush as something of a predator, an opportunist, an adversary. How so? A woodsman once cared for the woods. But this young man isn't called woodward, which comes from *ward*, meaning "watchman, guard, keeper." We might say "woodcutter" today with back-to-the-land nostalgia, but in medieval northern Europe, with five hundred or more years of conversion-fueled shaming of ancestral ways and beliefs and a full programme of inanimation going on, a woodcutter might be someone who is maintaining a path or clearing or field. A field is what happened to a forest, after all, when the Iron Age made it possible and profitable to fell trees like wheat. Keeping the forest at bay, enforcing the separation of heath from hearth, heathenism from orthodoxy, a slaughter man doing someone else's killing he was, a kind of liminal character.

He's flailing away in front of the king's house. This tells us that the bush might be encroaching on the king's house, that the old clearings have grown in, that the kingdom is in some kind of disarray that has permitted the wild or the feral to come closer than usual to the royal house. So this is when the princess falls in love, and this is with whom. Maybe she's had enough of court life.

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* Wilhelm Grimm and Jacob Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, ed. and trans. Jack Zipes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

As often happens in these tales, the king—father of the bride and of the kingdom—stands between them. He's in charge, and in some way, both the woodcutter and the story must pass through him. Now, chances are some part of most modern readers—the politically or socially just part, the part that is on the lookout for privilege and gender inequality and historical violation of universal statutes of human rights and so forth—will find evidence lurking of all those privileges and iniquities and violations. The "good" has gravitational pull, it's true. But the good isn't a universal constant across culture and time. Moral wisdom is local, specific, and indigenous. The vagaries of real, ornate, authentic, and time-tested culture forbid globalization, even in matters of justice, privilege, and the like. The moral imperatives in folktales tend to be of the reversing kind, the upending kind, and the moral compass draws you to some other true north out beyond the sway of your convictions. In stories where another world seeps into this one, the good guys are upended, too. They are parables, the best of them, and to paraphrase Kafka, when you win in town, you lose in parable.

For some of us, having a king in the story is a problem because royalty of any kind quantifies and qualifies privilege. But this isn't history, nor a case study of class structure of medieval Europe (though you can glean insight into these things here). This is a folktale, for crying out loud. That means you have to have something like a proneness for things folkish to even begin to hear the thing. And that means crediting the folk that the folktales come from with something more than knuckle-dragging submission to intergenerational injustice and bloody, brutish, and short lives. It means crediting them with curiosity about what passes for daily life, with a mythic and poetic sophistication and an ear that information-addled site surfers today can't easily manage.

People told these stories to each other not because they couldn't do any better in their few leisure hours per month, couldn't find something more enlightening or uplifting. They didn't tell them and preserve them out of numbing habit. They told them, I'm guessing, because they recognized their lives there. They recognized their lives in the injustices and the twists of fate and fortune they found in the tales. And they saw something of the subtle power of some other psychic or poetic or mythic presence that was in the world, too. They saw it in the fantastic turns of plot these stories take, in the reversing of prevailing morality, in the subversive presence of something otherworldly. Some minor, liminal character seems to understand the whole story before it happens and knows where to stand in it. I

think it likely that these stories survived because they were told and retold, because they worked. They told them because the oddments of matrimony were lurking there. The stories took ordinary life and shifted it a few degrees to reveal the family oddities, the moral anomalies, the unnerving consequence of fate, the old Gods who, they were reminded by the stories, were probably not gone, who, even given the centuries of monotheistic torment, were not so very far away.

So, the king stands between the woodcutter and the princess. The king could seem to be more like a chaperone, a morbid bit of crusted tradition that stands in the way of something that could become real love, given half a father-free chance. It could be that way. Or it could be that the father is the way by which the young man and the young woman approach each other. There could be something in the mediating presence of the father that fashions an encounter of the heart that might serve the longing for companionship while it serves this world, the one it's taking place in. And it serves another world, too, the one that enforces the choreography.

It seems to be the Father King's job to prohibit, inhibit, or delay such a union, either by forbidding it, locking the princess away, or as in this story, by prescribing a particular approach the suitor must adopt. He isn't a cardboard manque, nor the kind that appears in moralizing fables crafted to tell you what's right and wrong. The obligatory etiquette here involves the suitor in mostly cunning and sometimes courtly encounters with some other order of reality. That order includes demeaned old deities that prevailed before conversion, masquerading as creeps or geezers or monstrous vectors of pestilence and hellfire. There is the longing after love here, and it is the occasion for something happening that the longing doesn't plan on. It's a longing provoked and given shape and reason not by loneliness and pining but by the mysterious appearance of an ordinary suitor. His appearance is the cue for something more harrowing, more shadowy, more contentious, more undoing to appear, *something that seems older than love*.

The princess bride-in-waiting in such stories is often keen for the relationship to proceed. And it's rarely clear why she is keen. The attributes of the suitor are vague, not often attested to by the story. This can confound modern readers because the inner life of the people in the stories, their seething psychological needs, their childhood traumas and the like, just don't break the surface of the story. That is partly because the people of the time appear not to have lived the myth of psychology, of the inner life. It is also because the story doesn't need those things. The inner life

of the individual is not where the story happens. It happens in a place of distinct and subtle danger, where something of the world's very survival hangs in the balance. At the fundament of this folk wisdom, human companionship and love are strange places to go to for safety of the mythic, world-restoring kind.

The king's position between the young people is a kind of *ur* presence, a hierarch's presence, a presence with consequence and necessity. The Father King reminds his daughter that protocol matters, that tradition is vital to the proceedings: "You know," he tells her, "there's a way to these things. You know that your royal responsibility is to maintain a kind of natural order. Matters of the heart are not exempt. They are where our obligations must prevail." Very royal.

It isn't clear that he disapproves of the match. There's something else. His real job is to be father to the kingdom. Because he's a king, he's married to the kingdom. Its health is his responsibility. His coronation was his matrimony. His matrimony turned him toward service. That's what his power is for. That's what patriarchs do in a place that understands, employs, and honours patriarchy.

> An aside: Even the sound of the word *patriarchy* brings trouble now. It's become a meme, a synonym for all the history of wrong that beleaguers us still. The word has two parts: *patros*, "all things fatherly" and those things which make fatherhood credible; and *arche*, "the no-longer-visible foundation that stands under and understands the visible world." So, patriarchy means something like "the first work of fathering." It isn't an identity, a coalesced or ossified essence. It is a function. It is culture work, work on behalf of a culture. It doesn't need children around to commence. It needs culture, especially the frailties of culture, to commence or coalesce. That means it isn't gender-specific or gender-exclusive work. It means it is needed work undertaken by many different people during the course of a culture's life.

The king's presence imposes and enforces a kind of indirectness in the glandular imperative that frequents fascination and attraction. That presence prompts hesitation in the suitor and what seems like a delay in the

plot. It would be a delay, that is, if the story were headed toward happily ever after. But it isn't. It is a murmur, that presence. It would have us know that the woodcutter's attraction to the princess and her approval of that attraction are not vital to the proceedings. They are simply how the story might begin making its way in the world, having its way with the hearers.

We know what the king knows: When romantic love stirs, the world is as big as the other person, and no bigger. The world beyond the love is a distraction from the love. The world is on its own when people are in love that way. That kind of intensity needs disturbance to make of it a world-sustaining thing. That disturbance is the patriarchal function here. What is vital is how the suitor's courtship and longing for that kind of companionship is turned toward this world and another world. They, the story tells us, are the proper places for the appearance of matrimonial intent to gather and appear. The architecture shows us that humans receive both regal and divine corroboration for their union when this world and another world are recognized and formally approached. That recognition and approach doesn't happen in the clouds, the psyche, or some barrow of dread. There are no symbols or cyphers in folktales. That recognition and approach is entirely taken up in how these people come to each other. The quality of their approach to each other, especially the mediated indirectness of it, the interruption of it, is how the world makes its way into the romance.

Before we continue: an interlude. The thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi told a story that has its nose in this very pollen trail. It begins at a raucous, wine-prompted feast. During the festivities, the noble sponsoring the merriment spies a prim clergyman passing on the street. The noble sends a hireling to fetch him. Hearing the gaiety, and being a proper Muslim, he righteously declines. The spurned host bristles, doubles down on his invitation, and underscores the advisability of corruption by obliging the cleric to down a tankard or two, or more. You can hear already how there is a kind of otherworldly etiquette at work here, an etiquette that ridicules no one's religion, an etiquette that bends to breaking the usual sense of propriety long enough to let another world into the proceedings. And that other world, no questions asked, no VIP invitation vetted, gets a seat at the groaning board in the banquet hall of life.

The cleric is unaccustomed to the drink and its effects—an almost silent but very important detail in the story. This is another way of showing that, in his moral severity and learnedness on behalf of another Godlier place,

he is a stranger to the place that sustains him. It doesn't mean that God is wine or ecstasy, or God is kicking out the jambs. Instead, God is the whole thing, including the part that excludes God. That's the party that you, the story hearer, are being invited to.

And so the cleric is drunk by now in a way he has probably never been. And in mid-flight he has to pee. So he takes himself to some back courtyard, where the water pump is, where the servants come and go, to make his water. This location is another detail that carries the reversing spirit of the whole story. The necessities of a corporeal life drive the cleric from the august chamber to the service entrance, where the facts of life are learned.

And learn them he does. He meets there, as you might have guessed, a servant woman, and his prior good judgment is smote and left in a ruinous state of disrepair. He finds his tongue, long enough at least to make his clumsy ardour known to her. "And she," as the story says—potent magic to many a man's ears, and some women's, too—"was not unwilling." And they enter into the clutch right there, in the servant's workplace.

If the story stopped there, it'd be a psalm of satisfaction, an ode to "if it feels good, do it." But it isn't, so it doesn't. It changes gear, drastically, because it changes voice. At that point, the storyteller says, "You know how it is with bread making." As if you clearly do. As if any sophisticated auditor with even a gloss of education and life upon them knows how it is with bread making. Instead of telling a story to an invisible audience, the storyteller turns to you the hearer and invites you into the story in precisely the same way that the nobleman did the cleric. This should put you on notice. There are two choices when exposed to the reversing power of a real story about another world: you refuse and stay just the way you are, your understandings indistinguishable from your prejudices and convictions. Or you let yourself be dragged across the threshold of this world. And you drink.

The story goes on to describe in glowing and sometimes lurid detail the tactile business of rolling and kneading and pounding and cajoling dough, and you begin to get the idea: Ah, I see. Bread making is like lovemaking. Not just the motions. The verve. The devotions and persistence when it seems that nothing's happening. Just when you may be becoming fond of the double entendre, just when it seems to be becoming an inside dirty joke, *then* it shows. The storyteller lowers their voice, leans in close to your ear, so there's no mistaking what comes next, and says, "And remember this: the way you make love is the way that God will be with you."

Whoa. Who heard that coming? It doesn't say, "Hey, get your mind out of the sordid ditch. Elevate yourself. This is spiritual stuff, masquerading as a roll in the hay." It says something closer to "The ceiling of this world is the floor of another world." It says something like, "In the ordinary steps of a love waltz is the wayfaring peregrination across holy ground. Your body, that body of another, that's your pilgrimage, too." It says something like what the Gnostic Sextus is credited with saying in the Nag Hammadi library, written somewhere around the dawn of the Common Era: "Join yourself to a woman accustomed to struggle, and be not thereby separated from the Kingdom of God."*

How the woodcutter and the princess are with each other is how they are with some other, parallel world, a world that whispers through the cracks, that uses the strange, mute ways of our world as a voice, a world that is a kind of Somewhere Else that our world is umbilically bound to. And their willingness to be thwarted in their automatic ardour and love, and to go along with the old practice of being obliged to do something dangerous, to wait until it is done, and to obey the lessons given by the medium that is there between them, unbeknownst to them, is how they love this world.

The young people don't know this, though. That's part of being young. This Father King knows that the woodcutter isn't a fitting would-be husband, not as he is.

"Let the world be nourished by your desire to be together," he counsels.

That's another thing the young people don't know. Neither of them seems particularly able or inclined to take up the old wisdom. So it is imposed upon them, in the form of forced separation, in the form of a quest. The Father King becomes fatherly and kingly for the sake of who and what he loves and is charged to care for. That is patriarchy.

Listen carefully to the interruption of the momentum, the givenness, the automatic pelvic imperative of consolidation. That's the embodied presence of another world in this one, the way by which some other world

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* Adapted from Jalal al-Din Rumi. *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks, et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

beckons to this one for witness and testimony and this-worldly action. This Other World is a powerful, reversing, undoing kind of place, it seems. And it seems to require human participation in ways that are more pleaded for, bargained for, than they are explained. It seems to employ, of all things, courtship and matrimony in its ministrations of this world. And I don't know why. But folktales, some of them at least, seem to know why. Their architecture is telling us that they do.

The Father King's presence (ask any wood-be suitor: even the most benign of soon-to-be fathers-in-law seem like forbidding, foreboding kings) is an adversary only to those crazed by young love. To the rest of us, it could look more like royal fathering. The Father King's job in times of trouble is to feed the world. In a hundred ways born of cunning and traditional knowledge, he does so. By feeding the adversary who's starving the world—a withering, demonic force of some kind—he fathers the world, and the adversary, too. He sends the suitor across uneven holy ground, across the face of a troubled world, and so to hell, knowing that likely that suitor in his naïveté ("I know everything," he says four fateful times) will be food for the devil reigning there. The king is doing his work, drawn by his daughter's seeking after love to do it. That's the crazy wisdom of the old Gods, in its human increment.

There is a kind of primordial moral order that is murmuring behind all this. It's animistic. It's incarnational. Creation *is* the creators made manifest. Humans are a part of that, an errant part it turns out. Once bound to creation and its makers by a covenant of mutual sustenance, something has happened by the time this story comes round, and humans have lost their way, and the world is suffering. The breakdown of the old covenant is the root cause of psychic, mythic, and bodily suffering in this world. The principle redemptive work is to *restore the covenant*. You don't do it by defeating and punishing what brought the rupture. That punitive impulse is born of the rupture. It's more of the same.

No, you restore the covenant by sustaining the adversary of your health. You feed what's starving you. The world's health is compromised—or worse—when this wisdom is neglected or goes fallow. The kids are on their own when their young love prevails over the burden the world places upon them.

If I could nominate one bit of cultural flotsam to carry the broadband unwillingness of contemporary people to play by the otherworldly rules of matrimony, to track how so many banish this world from the

manic magic of their love, it would be a song called "I Think We're Alone Now." It's a catchy tune. You could sing it to yourself all day long at the office. And it is, in a strangely mournful way, an unconscious lament, an involuntary one, as so many of our laments are. In it, you can hear what happens when young people get their amorous, clumsy way, when they are abandoned to their own uninitiated devices by cool parents. You can see how the privacy they seek and find morphs in a quietly tragic instant to privation, isolation. The kids are lonely, together. That's the refrain. They only sound requited.

And so to the stymying. The woodcutter is sent out on a wildly perilous project. He is to seize or procure or spirit away three of the hairs that the devil himself has managed to keep on his pate. You have a nose for detail by now. So you notice the numinous number three, the recurring folkloric trinity employed by so many quest stories, so many pieties and rites. And you'll notice that the book from which I drew this story has "devil" with a lowercase *d*. You'd notice, too, that there is no articulation of what constitutes "devil," no teaching about it. And you'd have noticed the word *the* in front of *devil*.

I've a nose for what isn't mentioned, typically, and so I'm drawn up quick when something is said that wields the seemingly self-evident. In the world of this story there's probably only one devil. We're going to have to go pretty deeply into the history of the conversion of northern Europe to monotheistic Nicene Christianity for this one. Beginning about 400 CE and continuing for another six hundred years or so, papally sanctioned missionaries fanned out over the dying roots of the western Roman Empire. From their written testimonies we know they encountered hosts of local deities in the course of their work and a marked absence of one overarching presidial deity.

Here we are standing in the workshop that built the West as we know it. These are some of the pillars that uphold it:

- Across the world, polytheism tends to predate monotheism, typically by eons.

- Monotheism is a latecomer to the pantheon.

- Almost every culture came to polytheism on its own. Almost no culture came to monotheism that way.

- In the sordid history of forced conversions, monotheistic cultures tend to do the converting. It just doesn't often go the other way.

- Across the harsh and harrowed acreage of that history, monotheism and inanimism tend to be coincidental.

The places that this story and its ilk come from endured the full weather of conversion history. That history is *in* the story. When someone says "the devil," they're confessing at least two things: They've been obliged over time to forgo the old deities, the old Gods, in favour of the One. And the advent of the One God turned the old Gods into old demons.

And monotheism has the way of a collapsed umbrella about it. All the radiant arms that once gave shelter coalesce into a pillar of psychic solidarity that, though useful as a kind of crutch, has questionable ability to give shelter in a storm in the old way. Monotheistic missionaries seem always to have taken pride in the apparent sophistication and fittingness of the One God idea. It's efficient, orderly, sleek, user-friendly, demonstrable, self-evident, and it is very handy in the door-to-door proselytizing business.

So in those days, there couldn't be many devils, any more than there could be many Gods. There was only one. And no scribe could capitalize the name, the epithet. That was reserved for, well, you know who. And the people who had this story among them would have shorthanded this whole diorama, and some of them would have known the history gathered into the story, buried in the prose. Hence: the devil.

A devil is, we could probably agree, some kind of malevolent spirit, maybe on occasion taking on a this-worldly form. Is "malevolent" just how devils are, though? If not, how did they get that way? Folk people in places converted to monotheism have notoriously been known to covertly cling to elements of the old understandings of life. Over the monotheistic centuries, those understandings have devolved to, or taken shelter in, "folk remedies," "folk dances," "old wives' tales," cranky midnight seed-planting practices. Backwoods folk, those who've lived far enough away from orthodoxy's enforcement branch, are Old Order Pagans. Whether they mean to be or not, they tend to be.

And Old Order Pagans know how the devil got malevolent. Biblical monotheists know it, too. The devil got that way from being banished, abandoned, turned out of the sacred grove, the watery glen, the hilltop. The devil got that way from lack of companionship, from having no redemptive work to do. Just the way you'd do, or I'd do. And so Old Order Pagans do what they can in their covert and odd ways to more or less befriend the devil, include the devil, and give him and the other devils their due, too. They remember them, they nod to them, they plant and weed and thresh and harvest and glean, they give thanks, they part with the lord's portion, they give their children to matrimony, and they tell stories with them in mind. It probably gives new order inanimists the creeps to hear it, but I figure those pagans come to the world as a living thing, as something desirous of and prone to and worthy of the accord, grace, and deep-running regard usually reserved these days for anything with eyelashes and a mother. That's how animism and devilry were twinned in the old days. The Old Order Pagans were not able to give up on a living world (still can't), and the persistence was there in the etiquette of the human hand and human tongue, and in the human spirit that a living world needed and deserved.

So if you go back to the story with these things in mind, you'll find that the devil is given oddly even treatment, and something like fair airtime. You might be tempted to say, "Not so bad, considering that he's the devil and all."

You find out that the devil's a "he," which these days shouldn't be left unspoken. And you find out that he lives at the end of the proverbial road, beyond the proverbial crossroads. And you find out, mystery of mysteries, that he's married. Which is to say that he is no stranger to matrimony. Which is to say that someone thought that was a good story—with a married devil in it—to tell betrothed people.

In an old story about the harrowing road to matrimony, the devil's at the end of that road. It leads right to him. And he's married.

Whoa.

If you yourself are considering matrimony, these couple of details are a Very Big Deal. The story would have you know that the journey is prolonged, and it's not a "one foot in front of the other until you're done" sort of thing. It has nothing but detours. It is animated by what seem like digressions, and preambles galore, and almost purposeless trials.

Well, they *are* errors. That much is true.

Most of the earliest written sources link *to err* with "to sin" or "to engage in heresy." Those sources would come from the time when church preaching was contending with doctrinal outliers, Old Order Pagans and the like. It is a harsh appropriation of a word that originally had no indictment at all, it seems. More recently, it is taken to mean something like "to be mistaken," kinder, gentler opprobrium. But for the longest time, it meant simply "to wander," particularly "to wander out beyond the furrow worn into the holy earth of your ordinary days by unconsidered, habitual living." By that measure, to err is not inevitably human, but it is most necessarily, most emphatically, human-making.

The road to matrimony leads the groom errant to three cities (of course, three). And each of these cities is an afflicted, blighted place. That's how he finds out that there's something out there beyond his confidence, his posture of omniscience. Love shows him kindness and desire; matrimony shows him the world. The cities are plague beset: a sick princess, a well gone dry, a fig tree gone barren. The woodcutter must find the cause of each of these afflictions, only then to reach a river, a river that divides the kingdom and its blighted cities from hell, a river over which he must pass in order to carry off those golden hairs. And therein lies the fourth task to be done: there is a ferryman, the one who carries people to hell, who cannot assist the woodcutter because he is too busy, can't get a day off, can't find a replacement, because there are too many people to ferry over to hell, it seems.

There is a guard posted on the road to matrimony, the road into the first city. He asks the woodcutter about his craft, about his knowledge, his *praxis* and *gnosis*: two separate inquiries into two separate things. And that is the crux of human skillfulness: the ability to understand the difference and proceed accordingly. The woodcutter is young, though, and the guard's questions don't rouse his discernment. Without circumspection or hesitation (and you've heard by now that hesitation in matters matrimonial carries something telluric about it, something God-given and mandatory and unlikely), the woodcutter gives a brief account of his omniscience and responds not at all to the question about his craft. That is a fair, even-handed rendering of a young person filled with conviction and addled by a self-confidence that has no trace of the emendations of at-hand failure. This kind of confidence gets the story moving. It gets life moving, too. So it's useful. In the young, it is to be tolerated for that reason. But, as we'll see, it isn't to be believed in. Especially on the road to matrimony or hell.

This narrow gate of the guard's inquiry sets the mythic tone for the woodcutter's journey toward matrimony. It's an odd thing. Being a woodcutter, the suitor's likely to have field-tested connivance and practice wisdom at hand. But nothing of it is spoken of, and nothing of it appears. The claim he's made isn't supported by how he handles himself. He seems to know how to get to hell—nothing to brag about, unless your plans are on the line—and he knows how to get there directly. He's not altogether without guile though. He plays for time. That's what his curt responses seem to add up to. He's poker-faced. That might betray a poor hand. The guard calls his bluff. Our woodcutter will prove his claim when he returns. Grooms-to-be—probably all but a few of the younger ones, those of them left, and probably many of the older, second-time-around ones, too—are playing for time. The road they're on leads to unthinkable, unsustainable vows, vows that nothing in their life experience substantiate or justifies them making. So they are, and they should be, nervous.

It's a mysterious triumvirate:

1. An intrusive father, also a king, whose interference sets the story into motion.

2. A princess who is a minor presence, who knows the ominous history of every prior suitor who undertook the work of matrimony dying but doesn't tell the man she claims to love.

3. An omniscient woodcutting would-be groom who presents as a blithe and untroubled suitor, ready to test the certainty of his demise.

And there are the tasks. Nobody knows how to treat with the devil, the king says, be he prince or woodcutter. Why three hairs, and why they're gold, nobody says. But golden hair, or fleece, isn't unknown in a world made by myth. Hair is known in some traditional cultures as one of the few things that humans have to make gifts with, to treat with another world with, that don't plunder the world in so doing. In the same category

are nails, songs, elaborate speechmaking, cantos of praise and gratitude and supplication. It is a mixed collection of mystery possessions we have, not seeming to be very useful until an otherworldly time is at hand. All of them are said to be there, and endure and grow, after death. Well-chosen, timely words—like our hair—will last longer than we do.

The devil's hairs are gold. Gold carries the calumny usually heaped upon mammon by the faithful, being the proto-currency that it's been, being the flirtation with debauch and dispiritedness that it's often taken to be in the puritanical life. But gold itself is part of the firmament, naturally occurring, part of the plan. If you're a staunch monotheist, and you've dabbled in inanimacy, you can dismiss it as the root of all evil, as another of the lifeless, fallen things in a lifeless, fallen world. The goring detail is that gold is in the architecture of life. So it bears the maker's mark. It is of the Gods. Of God, if you prefer. For some, it is a tease, a temptation, a torment. For some, it is another kind of manna, not at all at odds with the life of the spirit. God made the world, and the world has gold in it, and God made that gold. And until we are told otherwise by the story, God made the gold that brightens the devil's aspect. It might be troubling and it might not be, but the devil has God-made gold coming out of his head.

So there's some kind of moral mystery that hovers over this detail. You recall stories that have heroes or antiheroes stealing fire from the Gods, stealing lucidity and sanity and culture from the underworld. In this one, stealing the devil's golden hair is the sole condition for the king parting with the one he holds most dear. There's nothing here about the king being persuaded by the woodcutter's prior accomplishments, the nobility of his intent, his ability to hold down a steady job and provide for a princess. He has only to dance with the devil.

And so there is a cost to matrimony, a cost to doing business of this kind, with this princess. What you have here is the mythic and moral murmur of "the bride price." The very idea of bride price today has many drawing back in dismissal. It goes with dark veils and the bad old days of chattel and obeying, and arranged marriages and the men deciding everything. It's a detail that today makes the whole story expendable.

Nothing mythically and poetically intact, and nothing that is worth the moral trouble, is that simple or that easy to dismiss. If it were, all we'd need in this world to make it a better place is to believe things, have convictions, convert others to them. All the dismissed beliefs and trinkets of

days-of-yore superstition could be sent to cold storage where they belong. But we already have all that, more of it than one world can hold. And we don't have the better world it's supposed to bring. We have a lot of knowing, a lot of certainty. But enduring folktales don't make for certainty. They're not the breeding ground for religion, the proving ground for politics. They have the musk of learning about them, cantankerous, unhousebroken, ribald, very expensive learning. And that seems always to have meant a losing of the way; an errant pilgrimage; undoings of the raucous, numbing kind; suspension of belief that is lysergic more than it is inspiring.

Folktales are not moral plans, moral maps, or moral traps. They are what we probably had before we had morals. You could say that folktales are footprints the Makers of Life left when they went for higher ground, and morals are the self-lacerating meanings we have made of their absence, the Penitence of Should Have Done that we faithfully perform. And telling the tale is calling the roll of another time, a time not entirely gone, a time sewn into the hem of this time. The jittery magnetic north of the folktale puts fog and solar storms between you and the polestar of unimpeachable conduct by which you'd rather proceed. And it is shuffling in that fog, your mythic GPS all askew, that in times of great portent gives birth and girth to grown-ups.

The postmodern alternative to contending with what seem to be the crudities of bride price and danger quest and denizens of the fathoms is to internalize, personalize, and psychologize the whole business. Do that and there are no brides, never mind bride prices. There are no grooms-errant anymore, no intermediate kings, no quests, no gold, no hell, and no devil—certainly no Mrs. Devil. There are strivings, there are hydraulics and pelvic mandates, there are mewling needs and raging needs and never-to-be-met needs. There are projects and introjects from an inert world, from the looming crises and cringing marginalia of childhood, what you got too much of and never got at all and what you spend your remaining years in search of. The attraction of such an understanding escapes me, as you can tell. Who would prefer an inner devil over a devil you can see and treat with and, maybe, steal from? Who wants an inner bride, an inner groom, one shard of you rubbing up against another shard of you in hopes that the travail bears forth a whole and better you? It's crowded in the inner world these days, and by most accounts it's lonely, a pageant of stumbling selves vying for a prize while the world turns.

For the moment, then, let's proceed in the presence of monsters and kings, guiles and gullibilities, fortunes and maidens fair, of quests and dangers and ordinary magic and Mrs. Devil. At worst, we've wasted pages, ink, and time better spent on climate-crisis realism. We can recant and return to our anxieties later.

Bride price, and a powerful number of oddments, belong to this story. The devil has something that the king and the woodcutter, perhaps the princess, certainly the devil and the story, need. That something grows sparsely, and it's something that is to be found in hell. The danger quest, the flirt with mortality at this young age, is assigned by a king, but it is enforced by the primordial guardian of a treasured thing. There's no hue of impurity or trespass in the treasure. The gold is reward of a kind, yes, but more so it is the occasion for catastrophe, a practiced, nuanced, learned, elegant, and eloquent way down into the mysteries of the joining of two people by matrimony. The ordeal of courting matrimony isn't a plummet into personal, idiosyncratic depths. Feelings of any kind are hard to find in the story. Motivations aren't articulate, aren't clear, aren't important.

Instead, the ordeal prompts the suitor outward, into the world. It is a prolonged encounter with what beleaguers the human attempt to make a go of it in this world: pestilence, dry wells, withered trees, an inexorable plod toward endings of all kinds. In this story, if you seek out this Revelator God, the devil, you'll find that the immature feminine is ailing mysteriously, with no known cause or cure. You'll find that the font of sustenance, the old sacred spring yoked to a fountain, no longer runs. There in the marketplace of the town, where the old Gods of gold and water once were found together, there is now only aridity and commerce without sustenance. There is very likely here an old memory of the presence of particular Gods of place that predated conversion to Christianity and of the consequences of the old people turning from them. Something similar seems to have inflicted the fig tree, the orchard. And you'll find the ferryman, whose traffic in the hellbound knows no pause and affords him no rest.

Now, who knew that the devil was married, had weathered the matrimonial storm and stayed married? This detail has gravel in it. A tale ostensibly about the cost of love unto matrimony brings the seeker to the hellbound

of evil himself and finds the sulphureous one married, a citizen (the majordomo?) of the very mystery village the suitor is seeking admission to. It makes me wonder: Was the devil obliged to undertake some similar harrowing pilgrimage to win his betrothed? Was his betrothed in on this arrangement? Was there a Father King to oblige the arrangement forward? Were there tasks of untying the knot of unknowing? Was there a devil waiting for the devil there?

Answering to this wonder isn't all guesswork. There's a detail, a kind of kaleidoscopic detail, by which we can see that somebody's in on this quest, this descent, and this danger. But it isn't the devil who knows all, because this isn't monotheism. The devil shows no awareness at all about the woodcutter's quest, even though it is clear that other suitors have gone the way of all flesh in pursuit of matrimonial gold at the hands of this same devil. No, subtly but certainly, it is the devil's wife who knows how this all goes. The woodcutter tells her of his purpose, his encounters along the way, and this prompts something like empathy and entirely unexpected subterfuge. She says, "You are so young, I feel sorry for you, and I'll see if I can save you."

This is amazing. She knows what the woodcutter is up against. And though she doesn't appear to know the answers to the questions he's come to hell with, she has a pretty good idea how to find out. She resorts, as many do, to dreams. Not her husband's. Hers. As it so often is in folktales, the sequence here is telling. She hides the woodcutter. She waits until her husband is in REM sleep. She yanks a golden hair. Then she connives and finesses and teases out answers from her groggy husband that could save the world.

Though the woodcutter is ostensibly after a wife, his sojourn prompts his encounters with genuine suffering and signs of ecological carnage. The mysteries of matrimony, properly courted with courtesies of the tongue and heart, bring the seeker to the travails of the living world. In other words, the world must appear when deep human romance submits to matrimony. This mandate is built into courtship between initiated, village-minded humans. The world's suffering must appear in and be spoken to there. It isn't a whirlwind romance. It isn't speed dating. It takes time for the world to appear in your love life. It isn't easy for the world to endure there in the heavy weather of "just the two of us."

But you could say that the architecture of matrimony sees to it that the world appears as the medium of love between the betrothed. That's what

matrimony is for. And in some unannounced and inchoate fashion, the devil's wife appears to know all of this. It appears that she is the only one in the story who does. At least she proceeds as if it is true, as if she has some part to play in the world being informed by the matrimonial quest, even restored by it. Consider the devil's ordinary day. He leaves home, he returns tired and hungry from some kind of work, his wife reminds him that he is a stranger in a strange land in his house and that he ought to obey the eco-nomia of the place ("I've just cleaned the house"). His wife accompanies him to bed. And then, as he sleeps, she fashions dreams, each of which is crafted to uncoil the answers to the world's travail and its causes, answers that only the devil himself seems to know. And the devil, without hesitation or interpretation, assuages his wife's nightmare about the afflictions of the world by articulating their causes.

As to the white toad: I know nothing about toads and mythology or folk wisdom or remedy. There is some association of toads with illness or uncleanness or conjuring, I've heard. Whatever it is, to the devil it is clear that the white toad under the bed is the root of illness in the immature feminine aspect of the kingdom, upon which the kingdom's health depends.

As to the dry well: The devil's wife reports a dream in which she approaches the deep dryness and at once is seized by vertigo, and she fears that she will fall in. It was certainly so that across the homeland of this and similar stories, springs dried up, were abandoned after conversion to Christianity, and were plumbed for use in Christian churches and seminaries. Even awake, the devil's wife dreads being drawn down into the arid, inanimate pit that conversion made of grottos, wells, springs. There's a white stone at the bottom. This doesn't collude with the usual "dark is bad" prejudice post-conversion Europe has entrusted to us in North America. My guess: whatever is down there, it is something like a vestigial memory of the revelatory power of a homeless, alien, monotheistic, mystery-dispelling, essentialist religion, of the withering consequences for whatever preceded it.

As to the fig tree: This might be an echo of the old northern European Tree of Life, the World Tree, the Spiritus Mundi. And the mouse, gnawing not the fruit but the root of that old tree? I don't know what mammal favours roots over fruits. I'm content to let that go. Or, maybe, that's what a living thing no longer assured of its aliveness does to a living thing: fearing starvation, it gnaws away on the one thing that, cared for instead,

could sustain it. Starving people don't plant trees. They're more likely to cut them down.

As to the ferryman's plight: At its most obvious, it is a lament about the endless stream of people making their way to hell, combined with his apparently nonnegotiable obligation to bring them across so they can finish the journey. You find out that the devil's wife is afraid to fall into the river dividing hell from the world, and she tells her husband so. There is something here perhaps of the Greek story about the river that runs through the underworld, Lethe (from which we get *lethargic* and *lethal*; from which comes *alethea*, a Greek word for "truth"), about its capacity to rob any human who touches or drinks from it of his or her capacity to remember how to be human.

The Gods of this story live in its details. Here's another: the storyteller tells us that "the poor woodcutter had to know one more thing that only the devil knew."

So the devil's wife knew that the woodcutter didn't know this and needed to. It emerges that she isn't betraying her husband, isn't in league with the human against him (though the "man under the bed" has something of that tone). The devil isn't coveting this particular knowledge. He's guarding it, in the way that many tales have something primordial and subterranean guarding a treasure against thugs, miscreants, petty thieves, and missionaries of all stripes. In those stories (*Beowulf* is a good example), crude invasion of the hiding place prompts plague, punishment, and death, and not only for the trespasser. Whole kingdoms are laid waste by the violation of primordial etiquette, by the obdurate refusal to allow mystery its due. The woodcutter isn't one of those. He's there for something more than himself, something more than love. So he's not forbidden to learn it. The story tells us that the woodcutter "had to know." That likely means that the world had to be served, saved even, by the devil's knowledge. This knowledge is beyond the scope of the king's charge to the would-be groom, not part of the original quest. It arose instead not as a consequence of what the woodcutter sought but *because* he set out.

Cunning and discernment and unlikely accomplices who unwittingly are seconded to the project of nursing the world to health: that's what's in this tale's hell. The woodcutter isn't told a thing about what he might expect to find, how he might succeed or survive, what is at stake. In the crazy wisdom of the story, him having that information would probably

have short-circuited the whole business. He was, it seems, too young to carry all that information, all that responsibility.

This story survived in oral form into the nineteenth century in rural Germany before it was transcribed by the Grimm brothers. I'd guess that one of the reasons for that survival is that there is scant morality to be had. You can't launch crusades with a story like this. You can't get people to the ramparts. Nor is it a moral train wreck of a story, serving licentiousness with every scene. There's no immorality, either. People in various times and places seem to have liked such stories. I'd guess that's because they feel respected by them. The right thing isn't clear, isn't easy, isn't a still point in a twisting world. The story doesn't tell you what to do. It isn't hortatory. It does hover over the ordinary mystery of mutual attraction, though. It knows that your love for another is practice for loving the world. It seems to know that matrimony belongs to the world, that it gives people a way of belonging to the world, of leaning into life, of loving as if something more than self-esteem is at stake.

That might be the most compelling, mysterious, and extraordinary layer of the story. There is a hell, yes, but entry is not restricted. Hell is not the opposite of heaven. Hell is not the grim warehouse for bad people. Hell isn't the world's undoing. It is the world's companion, separated by something porous, something that allows traffic in only one direction: people can enter hell, and in a troubled time, they must; but the devil cannot enter the world, or doesn't. Hell isn't a kind of anti-meritocracy. The clumsy, those who might have loved the princess at all costs, seem to perish in hell, yes, but not because it is hell. Otherwise, the woodcutter would perish there, too. They perish because their approach was untutored, perhaps self-serving. Because of this, it seems, they had no allies. They were going it alone. Matrimony is in the redemption business, and in the redemption business you can't go it alone. This is a redemptive story about redemption.

Death and courtship are bedmates in the story. They are its alchemy. Death here is the inability or the unwillingness to pay the real cost that the Gods affix to life—the bride price of life, you could call it. The disfiguring alchemy of matrimony is what is being hinted at through these details, this sequence, this timing. Matrimony isn't an expression of love in this

story, nor is it a culmination or an affirmation or a celebration of love—all of the things it is taken for now. Matrimony is love rerouted and tutored by time, set aside for a time for the sake of life. The knowledge of how to sustain a world in swoon is kept in hell. Matrimony compels you there. *Matrimony is in league with hell to save a suffering world.*

So the Father King used the woodcutter's love for his daughter to help him father the world. And Mrs. Devil used the woodcutter's quest to help her mother the world, as any matriarch would. And that's why this folktale and this discussion is in a book about contemporary matrimony. The king is father to the world. His work appears in the story first: derail the young people's love and point them toward tradition and work and the world. The devil's wife is mother to the world, and her work appears now that the patriarch's work has set the story in motion: employ young love to craft a better day. That's why it's called *matrimony*. It's the mother work of restoring the world one swooning, riotous, hell-bound, dream-besotted, love-borne wedding at a time.

16

Patrimony

We have, as is said in the movies, a situation. Two full decades into an age made fully, completely, and madly in the human image are we, with human appetite snapping at its heels. Young people in particular dream dreaded dreams that we may have gone too far this time, and they're banging on the walls in the hours before another grey dawn. To name an age: that is hubris enough for one age. No age would answer to an outsider's description, I wouldn't think, and we surely have become outsiders to this place we intemperately call home. But to name an age after yourself—the Anthropocene—is hubris gone wild, as wild as housebroken humans know how to go. It's scandal, and it's sorrow, and it's unbecoming. And it's there among us, that penchant for haunted self-congratulation. That's what makes it the Anthropocene, I suppose: us thinking we've been granted the power and glory to christen and nominate and tax the domain and the genus and the phylum of every made thing.

What becomes of matrimony when patrimony's in disarray? You've heard of the follies that rich Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would build in the forested corners of their estates? Marbled remakes of the blasted and broken Parthenon, the Coliseum, the Delphic ruin. The betrothed in our time might walk the aisle of desire and uprooted tradition and mystery and set themselves trance dancing round two roofless pillars upon which they will drape the venture of their mutual life, and

their child-rearing if there is any, and their jittery and clamorous hopes for love. That is patrimony and matrimony now.

Patrimony's become a dowsing rod for hard feelings. Can a time become so psychically brittle manage evenhanded scholarship on behalf of the words it can't speak? Patrimony makes matrimony. These two words are joined at the hip, and deserve each other, and belong together. And matrimony is suffering because patrimony is suffering. They are going the route of hierarchy.

The change in the meaning of *hierarchy* over the last few hundred years is a good example of the worth of etymology. *Hier* is a Greek word, an old one. Its meaning is to be found in the realm of the Gods, a promising, hair-raising beginning. It has something of the aura of mystery that does not give itself away readily. The imprecision of our way of talking about the unseen world, the portion of the life story we don't know well, shows itself here.

You could say that *hier* means "holy" or "sacred," and you wouldn't be wrong. But it is only when a people lose the companionship with the Gods that they begin evoking the apartheid of above and below, of sacred and profane, of human and divine when they talk about these things. That semantic apartheid tells you that something has happened, something historical and existential and phenomenological. Semantic apartheid is a traumatized culture's coping strategy for a trauma it can't recall.

So let's say that *hier* has had the tone of "pertaining to the mystery that spares us somehow, sometimes, for a while, by not bearing down too heavily upon us." It has only recently meant "superior." And *arche* is a similarly old noun, which for most of its semantic life has meant "the sustaining presence that precedes and undergirds this 'now' of ours."

Hierarchy hasn't signified "the wretched excesses of privilege" or "the arbiters and beneficiaries of the iniquities that plague us still," not until recently. The vilification of the vertical distribution of power and consequence often begins softly, with an abandonment of precedent, of older ways. There's not much memory of a time when the wisdom of those who preceded us understood us, sustained us, anticipated us, lived as if we would one day live, nor is there much memory stirring or sought of a time in which we were one of the Makers' dreams for this world, when mystery was one of the ways we were protected from the deranging power and consequence of too direct an encounter with the Gods.

The autonomic slander of hierarchy now betrays a mistrust of and an inability to be borne by all the mysterious sources of wisdom that have gone

before. With the collapse in any willingness to credit any human system of adjudication or governance or spiritual direction, you can find a strange alternative rising: the traumatized heroism that bids us to go it alone.

The shift in meaning of *patriarchy* carries the scoring and scouring that is so often the mark of old wisdom gone to the catacombs for safekeeping. The root word *arche* we now have some feel for: "that which sustains you from beneath and before, with you unaware more often than not." And the prefix, the Latin version, is itself one iteration of a much older and enduring linguistic, existential, and ontological presence of the Indo-European worldview: *patri/pater/pakos/pa*. "Father" is an accurate translation, but not a full one.

When you are deep into a language's early stirrings, you've slipped into the time before the alchemy of life began to solidify—maybe atrophy—into fixed incarnations and iterations, into what we rely upon today as nouns. You're in the land of becoming, when every spoken thing was an action, probably a mimesis of action. And so it is more fitting and faithful to translate this old word root as something like "fathering," meaning something like "to partake of a masculine repertoire, mandatory and dignified, by which some of life's possibilities can be conjured."

And here's an important element in the understanding: fathering is not the exclusive right or repertoire of a procreating, male, adult human. That's one iteration, probably the most common one. If it is a verb, a function, then it is not a fixed identity. Nor is it a tangential or peripheral or tertiary function. It is vital to the procreative and the creative proceedings, psychically and metabolically and mythically, but it is not sufficient. It is not a power unto itself. Its power appears when woven into concert with that other generative power, designated by the old tongue as *matri/mater/mat/ma*.

In a working culture, pater or patron is not a symbol, not a person. Pater is the informed, disciplined, initiated, and apprenticed willingness to lend soul and substance to the raising up of living into life, which is a considerable force in this world. Pater does its work by recourse to the elegant repertoire entrusted to just under half of us by genetics, yes. But the work is not genetic. It is cultural, traditional. Men are wardens of the patrilineal procreative mojo, but we do not own the gamut of cultural treasure

and mystical ministrations you could call fathering or paternity. Paternity is the domain of deeply achieved, time-tested human beings, put into motion for the sake of a better day for this world we are entrusted with. It is mandatory that the repertoire of paternity be understood, learned, and engaged in by each disciplined, initiated, and apprenticed adult human in this world. It is in the repertoire of initiation into personhood and adulthood and citizenship that each initiate understands what he or she is not, has not, cannot be or do, as part of learning what he or she is, has, can be, and can do. Knowing and respecting those limits is where respect for all that is not you is born. Defying those limits is no more "natural" than defying the limits of population density, human lifespan, energy resource exploitation.

Discrediting masculinity as inherently aggressive and power-made, power-mad, castigating masculine sexuality as blindly vascular and pneumatic, demeaning men as inherently rapists-in-waiting in need of regulation and control—all of it participates in a grim semantic collapse and atrophy of the ancestral repertoire of life-serving ways granted to *pater*. What might seem politically or morally attuned and informed is more a ruination. In the span of a few generations, masculinity has become a hormonally determined, preconscious, and fairly fixed personal identity, amenable to surgical removal or enhancement. Paternity is subject to genetic verification, and not highly esteemed among us. In working culture, the ways and means of paternity's practice are as varied and necessary as are the faces in a town square on market day. These are wrinkles on the face of human culture, signs of well-earned wisdom, fingerprints of the local Gods in cahoots with the ancestral caravan that makes familiarity so mysterious.

A man calls me two days into his fatherhood, his firstborn safely home from the hospital. He has a programme for his fatherhood, and he tells me about it: to be benign in all the right places, all the limits that this age has clapped upon paternity in place. He'll be there to facilitate, to guide without appearing to guide, the best attributes of a life coach and a best friend. He goes down the list of dark attributes that paternity has acquired over the last while, shucks them all, strikes each one down. It's a crazy-making time. Everybody around him assumes without saying so that procreative

ability makes parenting agility, that he'll just fall into the work. These are the days, as it's said now, when you have to put your big boy pants on, not an easy thing when paternity's become more a chromosomal reality than a cultural necessity. And who wants to be caught learning on the job when you're a new parent, a *parentling*?

But if you've not done it before, where are these skills to come from?

Most of us would agree, I think, that we should be made into viable people before we start making babies. Well before. That gives the babies and us a fair chance. Made into people how, though? Where are the initiations? These days, we are working against the old wisdoms of person-making. We trust little that predates us. We have the pheromone of ancestral misanthropy wafting through the Anthropocene era. And we have deliberate anarchy. We've abandoned tradition for the most part. Utter automatism is thrown up the old Western pop chart of heroic, valorous self-expression. It's true of paternity and maternity, which have become vectors for personal style.

There's no shelf life to this stuff. It's the Twinkies and the Cheerios, the nuts and bolts of the inner child's inner world. The fiction of a sovereign self is not going to fade with the advent of puberty, or marriage, or the coming of a baby, or the passing of time, nor will it honourably give ground to the slings and arrows of what prevails, nor even permit a scrutiny that can come with the benefit of hindsight. That inner-child stuff will still be there after the ordinary life settles in. It has the endurance that any inanimate idea has. It has no lord, no master. It is the great insurance policy we take out against the vagaries. It's what we make of matrimony, never having married; what we take for parenting, having only been parented, with patrimony left by the roadside. These are the tempest and the tarot of Act 1 of our allotment, our young days, the days where our middle age begins.

Ideally, you'd want the gnarly spirit mechanics of mate selection to have been worked out before biomechanics of procreation change things for keeps. But procreation is undertaken independent of mates of any kind now.

I told the young man that the harrowing wizardry that brought the two of them together comes down to this sometimes: he is drawn rather urgently to something in another that he cannot be himself. This is the heterogeneity of the thing. What you cannot do, you will marry—or try to. You will partner up to make a better person of yourself than you can

manage on your own. It's a kind of one-from-two alchemy. You marry what you aren't. Nothing wrong with that. It's a kind of characterological second chance.

So far, so good. Now put the adventure into motion and see how it goes. There may be twenty, even thirty, utterly unprecedented and untested decisions he'll make every day about this tiny creature that has come into his house. They'll be tested by ordinary life. He'll run out of his best stuff fairly early on in the endeavour. He'll need help thereafter. The star chart he'll rely upon in this unfixed maritime confoundment that is the early days of parenting? That would be the uneven parenting strategies of his parenting partner. The ways and means, the looming needs of the infant? They'll be counted, yes, but they'll come a distant third in the steeplechase of parenting a newborn. The ostensible needs of this little stranger in his midst, those are the jungle gym where the convictions about parenting acquire their muscle mass and dexterity. But they'll rank behind the kind of parenting repertoire that made him, his best recollection of how he was raised. And that will rank behind the fine reactivity that is likely to develop to how his partner in life is parenting that little stranger.

He'll notice, let's say, a bit of a trend in his partner's decision-making. There's a theme of . . . let's call it "preemptive no." It surprises him a little. He hadn't noticed it in the courtship days. His partner was always a little firm, true, but he appreciated the clarity, the sense that they knew what they wanted, what they were doing. His partner came by it easily, it seemed, in a way it didn't for him. He was relieved by that. But there it is now, clear and consistent, and coming up with no a lot of the time. It doesn't seem to be a passing thing. It is getting firmer as the months go by. The baby wants on-demand feeding. No, you the parent have to be in charge. The baby wants to be picked up all the time. No, the baby needs to learn some self-soothing. Maybe the baby could sleep in your bed tonight? No, that sets a bad precedent.

The father-in-training has no real principled alternative to the programme, and so he goes along with it in the name of consistency, which he's read or heard or guessed is the north star in the firmament of parenting in the developed world. But somewhere along the way he'll grow vaguely uneasy with all the limitations appearing in the name of crafting a proper world citizen. Part of the uneasiness comes from the fact that he's not really a "no" kind of person. He's not a fan of conflict or confrontation. He's not that good at it, frankly, but he's raising a child with someone who

is. So he sees himself more or less involuntarily occupying the yes chair, just for the sake of balance. It doesn't come easily at first, but by the time the child is talking, by the time Dad's beginning to teach him or her, he's become the yes parent. And the child has figured this out some time ago, so when he or she is looking for yes, Dad's the one they come to. Dad knows it. Sooner or later this will become "an issue."

Moral of the story? Be aware of who you procreate and parent with, obviously. But there's this one, too: marriage business, making the romantic love give way to the work of marriage, is the weather system of the household. However it's doing, you're doing. Marriage isn't matrimony, though. Nor is it patrimony. No one's likely said so, but your parenting will probably need some marriage along the way. And your marriage might need some matrimony and patrimony. And they don't inevitably rise from romance any more than parenting skills arise from romance or procreation.

Discrediting patriarchy is often an exercise of memory collapse. It is often ancestor betrayal recast as morale discernment. The demonization of patriarchy is a parable of loneliness. Its morale is solitude and segregation. And though it is a trauma for the moment nailed to the male of everything among us, including fathers and fathering and patrimony, in truth it is a deep-running slander of the *arche* of human life, that human and suprahuman web of ancestral sustenance that grants us our days, our cultures, our sanities, our devotions and disciplines, our wisdoms and loves. It is often a retroactive slander by cultural orphans of the parenting they never had, never lived with, and never knew. The cultural continuity that fortune and mass migration parted them from is missing but not missed.

I write this slowly and distinctly, with grief: if in traumatized sorrow and loneliness we shame and discredit patriarchy, paternity's *arche*, we have probably already begun to shame and discredit matriarchy, maternity's *arche*, unawares. It doesn't change things to point out the historical and contemporary transgressions that explain and justify the disowning of the sustaining cultural inheritance that paternity and masculinity carry. The disowning of the archaic inheritance isn't likely to obey the soft borders of gender and personal grievance, and generic grievance. It is likely to spill over them. Orphans forsaking their *arche* gird themselves with the questionable emotional and spiritual skill of learning to live without it.

And there's the troublesome aspect of what becomes of you in the wake of your intensely principled, self-propelled choices after your peak income-generating, peak grievance-generating years have waned, after you die. Soon enough, you'll be part of the *arche* of a time to come. Soon enough, you'll be someone's ancestor. Depending upon a few things, including how the prevailing rhetoric proceeds and how unilaterally it demonizes what preceded it, you'll be part of the historical dialectic and so part of the problem. And the round dance of disowning will exclude you, you unintending and unawares, and the dance will locate and leave and lose you in the ancestral slag, and you'll then be of that ghost tribe of the unclaimed, shuffling toward an endless grey horizon.

My guess is that it is matriarchy and maternity that are next in line for this treatment. For the right reasons—bringing conscience and justice to bear upon systematic and chronic wrong—the cultural orphan can do the wrong thing. The wrong thing in this case might be crafting personal and tribal identity from grievance, swearing off being fathered at all, swearing off fathering, too, trading it all in for being self-made, autonomous. Matriarchy, or no *arche* at all: that's the wounded programme of healing now. The deification of autonomy, of self-mothering, is the end of maternity, the end of matriarchy. The end of matriarchy? Anarchy.

So, now to the *mony* of patrimony. The standard dictionaries will tell you that patrimony is "what is inherited from the father." In contemporary use, the word has already been reified into a masculinized, isolating silo. But the Latin root of the suffix comes to something like "in the manner of" or "in the nature of." This suffix has the old story of *pa* in it, when paternity was a verb, when it was something people did, not something people were. In that semantic era I'm imagining, there was no practice of setting the fathering function solely in the hands of men. The function, the abilities, the repertoire, the obligations and responsibilities, the burdens and status of the thing were fluid, to some extent democratically distributed among initiated, cultured people. In some fashion like chieftainship, it was taken up when it was needed. That's not to say that in this time paternity was whatever anyone wanted it to be, whatever suited them. Instead, the mantle of patrimony, like that of matrimony, rested upon the learned, the deeply capable, and the practiced. It would

have been a culture skill. A more faithful and fulsome definition might include "what is inherited from the fathering."

Mony as a suffix signifies "inheritance" in the form of style, and a nose for portent, consequence, and merit. Patrimony is a tangle of etiquette, lifeways, and devotional practices that help to inform and sustain culture, handed down from dusty Worthies, entrusted to the present generations. You could say that patrimony is the masculine iteration, the unidentical twin, the proper echo and partner in life of matrimony.

In anticipation of where we head next, another etymology. It will be good to have this one in hand. You know that *domestic* is used as an adjective to describe the internal state of affairs, and as a noun, it is an uncool description of someone who maintains household hygiene and order and stays in the background. If you bring the word to its old verb form, things just seem to get worse: *To break* is one synonym, as in "to break the spirit of." *Control* and *stymie* are others. *Subvert the genetic signature of* is another, *undo the wild nature of* another. The word doesn't flood its contemporary user with good feelings. Nor does it promise redemption of the current moral order. In the modern world, it *is* the moral order.

But the Latin root *domus* means "house," secondarily as a noun but archaically as a verb, as in "to protect, to shelter." The function is there in our Old English word *household*. So *domesticate* as a verb means "to bring into the house," to "include into or to extend the protective sway of the house to." Apply some semantic generosity and you get something like: "Gathered into the shared understanding of this place; beneficiary of and benefactor to its ways and its fortunes to come; included in its protection."

In a word, you could say that in the old practice, domesticating was an act of making belonging out of solitude, separation, and vulnerability. For a long time, in many places, herders brought their animals into their houses for safekeeping and body heat at night. They domesticated them.

The Greek cognate to *domus* is *oikos*. And the Greek equivalent of *domesticate* is something very close to *economy*, made from *oikos*, "house," and *nomos*, "law." In its older form, *economy* didn't have much to do with banking, international trade, and the like. It meant something like "the laws of the house" or "the manners and customs of this household, by which it is known by its members and by others." The fundament of the thing is this: "a shared understanding of what humanity and what civility means to us and asks of us in ordinary times." In other words, the particulars of your economy—the spirit of your trade—were once the stuff of

your culture, or the compromise of your culture. In subtle ways, it still means that.

I've very seldom heard the word *patrimony* used in any context, for any purpose. My Quebecoise wife tells me that her people use it when speaking of cultural inheritance, particularly that aspect of cultural history they identify strongly with and have pride in. But patrimony has no currency in contemporary Anglo–North American life, not as a word, not as something worthy of attention or concern, let alone pride.

What, then, has domestication and household and economy to do with patrimony? With matrimony? You could say that domestication and economy are, first and foremost, moral orders, cultural orders, orders of the spirit. They are governed by the choreography of inclusion, and they are governed by the spirit of radical hospitality, by the Order of the Open Door and the Warmed Hearth. Patrimony, you could say, is the inheritance entrusted to any given generation by which the house of culture is built and furnished, the knowledge of those ways and means. It is the spirit architecture of the culture house, manifest in tangible signs that signify belonging to that culture. Patrimony is where the living culture sees itself in structure. It is the bricks and mortar of living culture. It's how culture employs the "provider gene" attributed to the masculine DNA array. The building of the culture house is patrimony. The way the house is moved into and lived in, and all the knowledge necessary to make the life therein work is how the "homemaking gene" attributed to the feminine DNA array is employed. Etymologically, that is the realm of matrimony.

I would wage good currency that you have never heard anyone stand at the front of any church or sanctified place, any generic event hall, any alternative lifestyle natural space, and welcome wedding guests to witness the entrance and inclusion of the betrothed into the bonds of holy patrimony.

I'll wage further that you didn't miss the mention of patrimony in any way, that you felt no pang for its exclusion, that you rose up not at all to stand for patrimony there at the nuptial declaration of what is, typically, a man and a woman. In the early going, I didn't either. Even in the same-sex nuptial moment, where the definitions of man and woman, bride and groom, marriage and family bend, I will bet that patrimony never makes the cut.

Is it a pendulum thing? Is it the inevitable consequence of too much man stuff for too long? Isn't this something we should expect as the old wrongs get righted?

When I was quite young, I remember hearing that Japan had something called Children's Day to go along with Father's Day and Mother's Day. Brilliant, I thought, and overdue on our shores. I brought this discovery to my mother's attention and began to make the case for the natural inclusion of kids into special-day status. She listened for a moment and then said, "Every day is Children's Day." End of discussion. Maybe the absence of patrimony in matrimony is something like that. Maybe every day is patrimony day.

In the whole, long marital sojourn, patrimony isn't likely to come in for a mention, not a nod, not a thought. And yet the man, or his equivalent, is invited into the state, the terms and conditions, the binding minuet and ministrations of matrimony with no qualifications, no out clause, no statute of limitations, no dispensation to compensate him for this glaring lack of inclusivity and gender sensitivity. Patrimony does not come up for anything like parity of focus during the course of matrimony.

And that is entirely proper. It is in keeping with what patrimony is and does and obliges us to that it does not accompany matrimony down the aisle. It makes the aisle. Ceremonially and mythically and poetically and politically and sequentially, patrimony precedes matrimony.

What follows is a delicate business, given the times, given the conscience-bedeviled, liberal democratic preoccupation with employing a tortured language of inclusivity that has been stretched and pried open and flayed almost beyond recognition. But let's try to make our good-faith way.

It has come to pass that the norm into which heretofore exiled or marginalized people have petitioned and sued for access has begun to lose its shape, its purpose, and its understanding of itself. We have the narrow definition of marriage before us, the definition that identifies people as married for purposes of taxation and the law. There is a general consensus about what that entails, how to enter it. Beyond that legal entanglement, which these days tends to invite its participants into as much regret as it does certainty, there is less for marginalized people to be included in. The entire landscape of social orders and institutions has been altered and distorted. That's how it seems. Challenging the *idea* of tradition is fast becoming tradition. Any idea or institution not newly minted for the oncoming generation is the first casualty of the coming on of that

generation, as it has been since the Second World War. I am, for example, the product of another age and relegated to that wheezy and spent congregation, though I am very much alive and taking my place in this one. My age is used as the benchmark for vintage in the pricey stores, where "vintage" means decorative and nostalgic now, not necessary (*nostalgia*, "the homecoming of pain" or "the pain of homecoming"). Such is the consequence of the rate of change that has seized this age by its scruff.

There are, to my knowledge, no vows of patrimony. There's no sanctified state of patrimony. Even the phrase feels odd on the tongue, looks peculiar and old on the page. This isn't a gap in our gender sensitivities. This is an ancestral wisdom about the nature of wedding, coming to call, having its say. That's a bit of what's left of that ancestral wisdom. There is a remnant understanding of the proper valence and employment and invocation of patrimony in the confines of wedding, and the understanding, mute as it is, inhabits that place where you might guess vows of patrimony may once have been spoken.

The phrase *cultural patrimony* is easily found in the professional journals of archaeology and sociology. It refers to the range of artifacts a given culture relies upon in its daily doings. It refers to the nuts and bolts of material culture: pottery, weaving, saddlery, houseware, house design, and the like. It also refers to the regalia and ceremonial gear employed in its rituals. It refers to those myriad skills of tracking and hunting and gathering, the ingenuities of transubstantiation of hides into leather clothing, ore into tools, copper and silver into adornment that appear in daily life. Nowhere is it understood that the use of the word *patrimony* means only fathers make these things, or know how to make them, or use them or wear them. It doesn't mean that to do so makes you a father, even though fathers and other men engage in this work probably every day. Cultural patrimony includes the crafting of women's ceremonial gear, the procuring of the materials necessary for the craft, the building of women's ceremonial lodges, and the like. It includes the likelihood that men participate in these activities, in the knowledge of how to perform them. All of this is an elaboration of fathering, culturally employed. Culture-scaled fathering goes far beyond what the nuclear family would make of it, far beyond helping change the diapers, administering corrective disciplines,

and sternly procuring the daily bread by hated work. It goes far beyond even the rewired, sensitized, course-corrected new age take on fathering.

Is patrimony a misnomer in these latter examples, a holdover from the academic bad old days of gross insensitivity? I doubt it. Patrimony gathers the things of this world in such a way that the means are there for the Gods to be honoured, the ancestors remembered, the young gathered in and claimed and burdened, the old seated and treasured, and this life of ours prayed over, that grace and gratitude can come in again.

Whoever is *patronizing* is deputized to do that culture work.

So, this is the realm of patrimony. The bones are gathered, the ways of assembling are learned, the cultural knee bone is connected to the spiritual shinbone, the work is worked. Patrimony is the thousand ways that initiated humans build the spirit house for their yearning after a better day and their gratitude for this one to live in.

Whoa. Really? Yes, really. All of this, the shards, are in the lineage of the word. And everyone gets to do it? No, everyone doesn't get to do it. It isn't a merit-free, automated, all-inclusive, inevitably occurring democracy. Children don't get to do it, though they live their lives in the presence of it being done by other, older people, if they're lucky. If so, there's a chance their time of patrimony will come. They're too young, and they have important children things to do. Adolescent people are mostly still too young, volatile, untested, and untempered yet by initiation into personhood, but they get included in the work, and they get to see how it is done, and they begin to be implored by example. Women get to do it. Must do it. Men must do it, too. Gay people and trans people must do it. The betrothed must do it. Old men and old women must, must do it.

But these declarations rely upon a particular understanding of what makes a woman, what makes a man. These are not the guarantees of gender. People are not born with these skills, these savvies, in place. This is culturally derived, culturally mandated work that people are initiated into, and they are made into women and men and two-spirited people thereby. Of course, this means that patrimony and matrimony are social constructs. But this is a term of derision only when you have no world-loving culture to give your work to. When you have such culture, you inherit the rudiments of tradition. Then you undertake the spirit work of your generation, the work that the troubles and the travails of the times entrust you with, and that work becomes the why of your life. And that work and those

whys are taken up into tradition and become part of what you entrust to those who come after you, who will labour with the travails of their times for the sake of a better day with your example crowding them, daring them, imploring them, assuring them.

Your work, their patrimony: that's the spirit algebra of the thing.

Now, given the vice, venom, and vitriol lathered upon the word, the idea and the gender that has laid claim to it, is it all too far gone to retrieve and redeem and restore? Shall we leave grudge to its devices, throw patrimony into the pit for the grievances to fight over? Leave those tired old divisions behind? Come up with a new word for it all, a new world that is post-gender once and for all? All those differences come down to problems to solve? Parturition comes down to apartheid?

If we do, we are daring the betrothed to make their way through discredited territory. We are daring them to self-regulate, self-initiate, self-medicate, and throw tradition to the hounds in the name of inclusivity and personal style. We are leaving them, mostly, just at the time when they are trying to find out who matrimony includes, what it's for, never themselves having done it, with ragged examples to pick through for inspiration.

In John Berger's novel *Once in Europa*, there is a peasant woman sitting in her stone kitchen on her farm in the French Pyrenees, late in the twentieth century. Given the obligations to innovation for its own sake that progress binds us to, she is probably among the last generations of her kind. She is giving life advice to her young daughter, advice she knows isn't likely to survive the girl's formal education in town. It is matrimonial wisdom, tradition-bound and life-affirmed, trained upon patrimony.

She says, "I will tell you which men deserve our respect. Men who give themselves to hard labour so that those close to them can eat. Men who are generous with everything they own. And men who spend their lives looking for God. The rest are pig shit."

Generosity, labour, a life spent in thrall to the divinity of the world. It's a severe standard, a severe test. It is also affirming, exceedingly candid, deeply alert to the truth and travails and mandate of patrimony. There are men aching in their souls to do this work and have it recognized for what it is. The providing, the pilgrimage—those are the blessings patrimony has to bestow. Recognition and a willingness to live in the house patrimony builds is a blessing for matrimony.

In the patrimonial part of an old wedding's story, you can see the cameo of matrimony appear. In the early days and months of conjuring a wedding, the invocation of matrimony is yet to be heard. But the tree needed for carpentry is harvested in prayerful fashion, the tools are gathered and sharpened, the wood is planed and carved, the table is made, the foodstuffs are gathered, the roof is repaired, the room and board are set, the warming fire is kindled, the guests are invited and seated now. All of that is patrimonial work, making a place for matrimony to come, to abide. For the purposes of betrothal in a working culture, patrimony precedes matrimony every time. It enables matrimony. And matrimony knows it.

The doings are there, but they haven't been done. On its own, patrimony is an empty house with nothing to serve. The food hasn't been cooked and brought out, and the portion for the Spirits of Place hasn't been set aside, and the ancestor's seat has not been apportioned, and the old people haven't been served yet. Culturally and ritually speaking, the house has been raised and the rudiments of life are there, but home is yet to be made. All has been made ready, but that is all. The quixotic leap across the holy ground that makes spirit kin of strangers through table fellowship hasn't been made. All on the guest list, and all who didn't live long enough to attend, and all not yet born who may one day attend something similar, they are yet to be called into the fellowship.

Our companionship, its tone and cadence and hue and timbre, is how our humanity appears, employing in some noble fashion the stuff of this world. That is the spark that leaps across the holy ground between each other, between us and the world, us and another world. That spark is the anima binding. That spark is the calling of human labour up into life again. That spark is the matrimonial moment come again into human life, into the world.

And that's once how it was, patrimony and matrimony and domestication and economy in their kinship. When they are gathered together in culturally employed, deep utility for the sake of their world, that is when the spirit of radical hospitality—the sign and signal of human culture—is among us again. Matrimony gives the spark of animate life to human work, and patrimony offers the stuff of human work up as the place for that spark to appear. Together, they are the best of human culture, redemptive and manifest in this world.

That is what is at stake in the ritual of matrimony each time it is undertaken. Who among us goes to a wedding to redeem discarded tradition, disowned phrases? Who goes to a wedding to have our corner of the world somehow made right? Who dresses and appears and conducts themselves as if something of the world depends upon it, as if the Ancients of Days and the Worthies and the Makers are looking on?

I don't know. But we could, though. We could risk it.

17

Matrimony

There is a term, a phrase, in such deep disrepair and disrepute that I don't imagine it will be revived or redeemed for common use during the lifetime of anyone reading this now. The slander of the word is in a way understandable, since the sway of the attitudinal marketplace, all of its siren song and glitter and glitz, has overturned so many people's expectations of themselves, their lives, their partners in life. The term I'm thinking of, you may have guessed, is *homemaker*.

Homemaking, as I hope to show, belongs. It's a cornerstone of belonging. And belonging is a cornerstone of matrimony. Give me ten minutes to see what I can do.

In my hearing, no one has called themselves a homemaker—not in thirty or forty years. It has a broken sound. It is the root condition for foreclosure on personal initiative, spunk, self-respect. At best, it is the temporary activity that employs the robotic self while the higher self plots and plans its rise to the top of some pile of ambition, to wear some corona of real dignity and worth. The homemaker now is that smart bot that warms the hearth, lights the lights, and opens the garage door for you while you wend your way home through traffic from work.

To me, that's a deeply lamentable turning of the tide, because "homemaker" is a good candidate for being a faithful and resonant living translation of the old meaning of matrimony. It might surprise no one

that in an age where all adults in the house are under debt pressure to earn their keep working outside the home, both matrimony and homemaking seem for now to have gone the way of the pet rock, the hula hoop, the corset, and the horse-drawn delivery wagon: into eclipse, into lifestyle oblivion.

Remember that the *mony* part of this word signals cultural inheritance, the taking up of old practices come round again, of traditional understandings entrusted to the present generations. *Mony* tells us of the living performance of these practices, understandings, and skills. The suffix describes the aliveness, the vitality and valence, the three-dimensional fingerprint of the maker in the act of making.

So, matrimony describes specific, culturally endorsed, and informed ways by which a given corner of the world and its human citizens are mothered. Freud in his fashion, and the heirs of suffragettes of a hundred years past in theirs, have cast some aspersions on this clutch of activities known as mothering. A cauldron of seething, soothing mixed messages, saddled with the developmental figuring and disfiguring of the nascent psyche, mothering has come in for heavy weather in the last hundred years. Charged with all the moral, ethical, and phenomenological burden and responsibility of person-making by this psychologizing culture, stand-in for the "absent father," replacement for the village mind and soul and body gone utterly symbolic and virtual in a digital age, mothering is taken for a suspect, sometimes a fool's errand, a botch of strident impulses, smothered and smothering instincts, and second guesses. Mothers share a certain status with physicians: deified, front-line-sanctified first responders; entirely, singularly liable; utterly exposed; and the first to be pinioned when anything goes sideways.

Worse, I would say, is the devolution of our understanding of mothering to the procreative, anatomy-bound, exclusive domain of women. What this means for women unable or unwilling to conceive, I leave for others to say. There is a de facto synonym in the psychological marketplace: *primary care provider*. Anyone who's run afoul of, or run amok in, the rancourous custody/access coliseum knows that "primary care provider" is not a description of menial care-and-feeding activities. It has become a moral order unto itself. It is an instinct-endorsing, inalienable repertoire of nurturance, as naturally occurring and unfettered as the weather once was. And it is virtually the exclusive domain of the mother, the woman, the proprietrix of procreation and its marshalling yard, the womb.

The exclusivity of this identity is being chipped away by alternative lifestyle practitioners and their legal and moral advocates, and I expect there are or soon will be some peripheral adjustments to legalities pertaining to parenthood and its exercise and entitlements. The notion of a surgically enabled, surgically endorsed right to procreativity for any two people or any one person has begun gaining traction, in part because it has gained the attention of the med-tech high priests of reproductive rights.

But as we sit and contemplate the things of matrimony today, and for the foreseeable, women own mothering. Mother is code for "that's the way God planned it." Even though the psychological fundamentalism that prioritizes mother in the human-making process seems to forever be sniping away at the mothering practices of women, things have to go terribly wrong for a woman's mothering to be openly called into moral or legal question. It isn't an easy job, being primary, the preemptive paragon. Imagine the disfiguring burden that this idea of the inevitability of maternity as a personal possession and a moral force exerts upon its bearers. Catch the tone of the overt mantra: You *can't* fuck this up. Not possible. Then catch the tone of the covert mantra: *Don't* fuck this up.

And what of that other person, the one in the supporting role, the one whose presence and participation put the inevitability of maternity into procreative motion? Whoever that person is, in times of domestic disintegration and juridical Solomonesque division of the spoils, he or she is officially secondary or supplementary or nonessential.

Don't make the state choose, folks, because that apartheid of priority and necessity is in the architecture, no matter how affably you attend to the undoing of your marriage or your child-producing non-marriage. Though biology is out of fashion as a marker of merit and status in the marketplace of ideas, it is still a deity in the parenting game and parenting wars. I wrote something close to this more than twenty years ago in *Money and the Soul's Desires*, and it still seems so: Maternity among us is mandatory and inevitable and naturally occurring. Paternity among us is negotiable and happenstantial and conventional.

But for all of that, out there swimming in the secret sea of biology is this old understanding of *ma* and *pa*, of *mater* and *pater*, a remarkably consistent division of emotional, existential, social, and ritual labour, where one honours by an articulate confession of its incompleteness what it cannot do: the other's work. It is a division that mysteriously binds the

repertoires of person-making and culture-making together in persons, in clans, in cultures. It is a confused division of labour nowadays, but instinctually it endures.

Homemaking is as comprehensive and deep-running a rendering of the matrix and conjuring power of matrimony as there seems to be. The bricks-and-mortar and financing aspects of house-making are all necessary and fine things, and most of us would freeze, starve, and die without them. Taken altogether, that is the patrimony of house. And then there's the alchemy of making home from patrimony: matrimony's work.

These days, "home" has become a feeling, primarily. Feeling at home is a prized skill and state of affairs, and making people feel at home when they're not is a proper, bright star in the constellation of hospitality, to be sure. In *Die Wise* I worked at length on the idea that home was not a feeling but a place-based or place-derived skillfulness of rooted humanity, the want of which rose up to haunt people in the time of their dying. But home remains to me a repertoire of re/cognition. It is an ability to recognize in one's habits of speech and thought and cultural life the ripples, eddies, and topographical wrinkles of one's place in the order of things. Home, you could say, is the human participation in the creaturely capacity for place literacy. Home is a way of living as humans wrought in accordance with and faithful to their home place, as children of a given place and time, whose reasons for being alive are to be found in the spirit projects entrusted to them by their place and time.

Mothering, I should say, does not seem to have been exclusively, and perhaps not even essentially, the domain of people who give birth to small humans. It includes that, of course, when it happens, if it happens, and that might seem to be its most common function. But the capacity to mother is fundamentally the capacity to put oneself in the way of calling the stuff of human life together, that strange mix of willingness and fate-feeling that inclines a person to say yes to something larger than themselves, into which the personal and particular parts of them are likely to evanesce. Mothering, you could say, takes the biography of the mother for nourishment, for sustenance. Not creator, exactly, not autonomous conjurer, a mother is as much on the receiving end of the power of life called to rise as on the doing end. And even more so, mothering is the repertoire of a

particular way of being human, the exercise of which is the occasion for life to live. Not the reason. Not the cause. The occasion.

And this is why I extend the understanding of mothering into the architecture of matrimony and call that proper visitation of the former upon the latter "homemaking." Home is the amniotic sea of human, it seems to me. And the living out the clutch of articulations of home in a human allotment of days is a life. And the presence of enough humans doing the homework of being together is culture. And so culture-making is patrimonial work, and it is matrimonial work. Not separated. Bound.

One detail yet to be heard from: Out of what is this home made? If none of these things are metaphors or similes but living, giving-and-taking presences of vast consequence in the world, then homemaking has obligation in its architecture, and in obligation it is made.

Normally, *obligation* is used to connote something like the drudgery of "have to," "the grinding away of foreign others upon the sovereign and self-directed self," "the severe limitation of autonomy imposed by social mores," or "the unenforceable aspect, the inactionable component, of debt." But etymology, left to do its work, gives us more. The prefix *ob* gives us a sense of "the occasion of or the visitation of" or "the coming to bear upon the present moment by." The *lig* root—which it shares with *ligament*, *ligature*, *religion*, *alignment*—signifies a kind of event. It is the bringing into order or into some kind of temporary arrangement disparate things that work together to foment further movement, advent, or tensile strength, with the separateness of those things preserved and eventually restored. That's what the ligament does for femur, kneecap, and shin: it fashions the nest of miraculous articulation we call a knee, and we shimmy and shake out into the world by that articulation. It doesn't make a single bone of them. That wouldn't be alignment or obligation. That, literally, would be con-fusion, the melding of the parts into an indistinct, rigid, inarticulate oneness.

The antonym of *obligation*, then, isn't *freedom* or *autonomy*. It is *con-fusion*, a fixed state of boundedness. Confusion doesn't trust anything temporary, anything like obligation, anything where the rumor of undoing lingers. Its rigidity is its anxiety. It tries to solve itself with certainty. You could call *lig* "a brood of separatenesses given over to choreography for a purpose not achievable while they are separate."

So it is the spirit of obligation that gathers the stuff of life toward the conjuring of life, the *pater* toward the *mater*. It is not that one is incomplete, as the love songs say, without the other, and needs the other to

achieve something like wholeness. Each is forever incomplete. But in that obligation that incompleteness has a use. It is open for companionship's business. It makes room for the different incompleteness of the other person. Think of table fellowship's hospitality: your family is there, entire in its constellation and habits, on familiar family ground for the umpteenth time around the supper table, speaking its shorthand. Add a guest and the family's workings become vivid and prone to conversational shifts unheard of at the usual dinner. The obligation to treat the stranger and the stranger's incompleteness—his or her hunger—turns the family, with its own newly rediscovered incompleteness, toward the world. Not inadequate. Incomplete.

As uncool and unevolved as it may make me out to be, I was in the early going drawn to my wife first and deepest because of her capacity for home. She didn't know me at all, but still she knew how to make a home my incompleteness could appear something like whole and entire in. Not sovereign. Not complete. Whole.

The condition and spirit of their alignment, the obligation that shimmers when *pater* and *mater* catch the scent of each other, the workings out of obligation, you could call matrimony. That is the making of home for the world-serving soul striving toward life, rising up in the raiment of romance, overwhelming autonomy for a time so that human culture might prevail upon it, bringing tuition to bear upon it, employing the limits of the self, its incompleteness, making use of it, giving it meaning and purpose and culture work to do.

18

Poverty

I am quite frequently asked to succumb to an interview. Usually it's about the dying thing. Much less frequently I'm asked for career advice. Typically it's about whether the questioner should get into the dying thing. Once in a while I'm asked about the meaning of it all, including the dying thing. I agree to do just about all the interviews, and I do my best to make the answers cut a wider swath than the dying thing. I've not been too successful at having a career, including a career in the death trade, so I keep those career answers short. As to the meaning of it all: we've got a lot of work to do. That's what it all seems to mean, at the moment. Death is there, yes, eventually or soon, and there's a lot of work to do first.

For every time I've been asked how things got to be as they are, I've been asked five hundred times what to do about it. I've been asked what to do about it all—how not to be where we are anymore—*instead*, instead of being asked how we got here. The "How do you . . . ?" questions come thick and fast in these exchanges because fixes, understandably, are the order of the day. I won't answer any of these directly, not in the terms in which they are asked. That's because the idea of preemptive fixes, fixes that subvert a serious reckoning of the state of things, comes near as I can tell from the trouble it's proposing to solve. Most of my answers include this suggestion: "You'll have to begin with your poverty."

"Yeah, okay," they'll say, "but what do you do after that?"

"There is no 'after that,'" I'll say. "You ask because you haven't done it yet."

"But after I do it? Then what?"

"You begin with your poverty. You won't ask for ways out if you do."

"Do you expect to draw people to that kind of thing?"

"I don't really, no."

I'm not talking here about an acknowledgment of personal inadequacy or economic shortcoming. I'm talking about whole-person education in the epic history of how our corner of the world has come to be as it is. Now, this is not many people's idea of a good answer or a good idea or a good time. The whole purpose of the question is to get out from under the poverty, to be rid of it, and to rise. I understand. I stand by the suggestion, though. Here's why, matrimonially speaking.

Let's say you've gone the matrimony route. Let's say you did so voluntarily, for the most part. Given all the necessary, responsible doubts and yeah-buts, still you went ahead with it. It was, properly understood, the next thing for you to do in the sequence of requited love, and you honourably did that next thing. And let's say it's gone pretty well, all things considered. You compromised with the ceremony, though. You shaved off the wild edges you probably preferred so as not to have issues with one family or another. You let some principles slide, for good and understandable reason. There were things you know now that didn't get said, didn't appear. It was supposed to be some kind of big deal. Not a spectacle, but more of an inner big deal, a "meaning of life" big deal. It rankled you at the time, but time has gone ahead. Still, there are days when the whole thing seems, in hindsight, to have been a bit, well, not what it could have been, and that haunts you a little. You don't talk about it, to avoid hurt feelings, but every once in a while it rises.

Let's say you've moved on to have a child. Something's begun to stir in you with the coming of that wee stranger among you, some feeling that wasn't there before, a feeling that you want things to be better for that child than they've been, than they were for you. In every way that you can think of, better. You want to mark the advent of their appearance with some kind of event that does justice to the little burst of life that's come. You're not cutting corners this time. But you don't know what something like a baby blessing might look like. You ask around, you hear about somebody who does that kind of thing.

Let's say that you end up in a field at nightfall, fifteen of your friends at hand, the babe in your arms, feeling awkward, not knowing what to do or how to feel. In a freezer bag, the placenta of your baby. Rolled in a piece of home-tanned buckskin in your pocket, the bit of withered stump you were asked to keep, the umbilical remnant. The men present are asked to kneel and keep vigil, assuming a wide circle facing outward, while things are made ready. The older women present are asked to dig something the size and depth of a good posthole in the ground with sharpened, fire-hardened sticks and their hands. That takes longer than anyone expected, and some are weeping as they work. When done, the rest of the women are asked to take their places around the hole. And they do. The placenta and the umbilical stump are passed from woman's hand to woman's hand in the dark, bits of prayer and plea are murmured, men in the outer circle around them, looking out into the dark. You see what's coming. These things you've been asked to care for over the last few weeks are already taken from you. They're going into the ground, like seeds. The whole thing is passing your little life by, on its way to something like a "meaning of life" big deal. And you're in a supporting role, watching. That saddens you in a way you hardly notice and can't put words to. You're in on something vast and real seeming, finally, something more substantial than your feelings and beliefs, and you're sad.

And it's in that moment when the person more or less in charge of the proceedings begins to talk about how awkward this is, how hard, because none of this is a memory coming back to anyone there. It's invention instead. The person in charge says, "Yes. Taste all of that. You've nothing of this to remember. What's coming back to you is the goneness of it all. Nobody did this for you. You don't know where your placenta is. Chances are it ended up in a steroid supplement somewhere. Nobody loved you this way. And now you're trying to love this way, with nothing to remember."

That's the poverty I mean. That's the one that rises when we try to mock up a ceremony, when we know something is called for but we don't know what it is. That's what makes it strangely trustworthy. Because this is how it all starts up again. If you're an older person, out beyond your wilder days, then you'll probably start your ritual learning in sadness. You don't get a clean slate. If you are willing to gather for someone else's sake, someone younger than you, that sadness and poverty will gather, too. No more leaving that behind. But that willingness will make

something happen, and *that's* the younger person's beginning. Minus a village-mindedness, your ragged willingness to start with your poverty, the threadbareness of your cultural patrimony, *is* you beginning to build the house of a better day.

And in doing so, you're a thief. You've stolen something from that younger person that you yourself won't be able to shake or live without. You've stolen that goneness from them. They'll not be able any longer to slouch at the threshold of unvanquished adolescence and condemn out of hand all those who came before them as self-absorbed climate assassins and moral miscreants. In its stead, you've left something there for them to remember. They'll have other poverties, but they won't have the poverty of no living example to remember, to emulate. That's what you've taken away, and that's what you've given.

So, start with your poverty. Let the kids see you doing it. Your example will be the post and beam of the ritual house they'll be able to live in when it's their turn to be grown-ups. This book started with that poverty, for that reason. This book is a visiting and a visitation of that poverty. That's one of the things you've been feeling as you've read along: Once it was otherwise. It could be otherwise again.

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Clay

Matrimony's little mansion can be built from many things. There are hopes and fears, dreams and waking nightmares. There's the aftermath of youth and youth itself. There are the planed, strident timbers of conviction that leave you convicted for years, tarpaper takes on love, foundation stones upheaved in the winters of mythic discontent, the tin roofing of parental example. With all this, how to keep the worldly weather out, the heart's weather in? Part salvation/part salvage, part restoration/part rescue, we build a house for our love. We forget about the doors, struggle with getting in, stagger when getting out. Wandering through the village of old loves, the young wonder if there is such a house. "There is," tell them.

My part of the world is made of sand, with a bit of top tilth in some places to seduce you into farming. The sand is the last Ice Age's salt and pepper, the grindings of all that weight, borne here by the torrents of meltwater. The top dressing is the cowl of those pines that somehow made their way up and out of the scant promise of this soil. We've no clay to dig and pick our way through, no clay to curse, no clay to build and lather up a wall with, but for one exception: a half hour's drive away is a pocket, a small pit of the grey/white stuff maybe a kilometre or two

across. My guess is that there was a slew of huge boulders bowled into place by the deluge that dammed the silt and strained the dross from it somehow as the ice melted. Melt done, it was left there to dry. Millennia later, somebody found it. Pottery ensued. Later still, clay ovens, and later, in hard times, walls for a house.

Young people who are politically and morally charged to rise and change the world, whether they know it or not, ask much of their romances. Of course the world does the same. But they can pile on the burden by obliging their ordinary days, their partner passing through the kitchen on the way to the fridge without saying hello, to carry the principled disappointments of a world gone clearly awry. My guess is that anything less than moral and philosophical unanimity in the house would be a desperate challenge to manage sometimes. There are the politics, yes, but there is a romantic correlative too that bears heavily upon matrimony: Are they obliged to be reading from the same page as they argue and problem-solve and love and spat their way through their conjugal day? Is there room for fighting in a house built of moral conviction? When does difference of opinion become apostasy or violence? When you see the world for what it is, when you glimpse what Leonard Cohen glimpsed in his song "Everybody Knows"—the dice being loaded, the good guys losing—what then?

Is matrimony the domestic version of selling out? Can matrimony young or old, practiced or pretended, politically attuned or plodding through a crisis-fueled, stock-up trip through Walmart survive a five-minute mambo with the real world?

A young couple who'd have answered to the description "ecoanarchist" approached me years ago for some kind of counsel. Technically, the young woman did. I didn't know the man at all, never did meet him. They were living in a self-designed home of salvaged and scavenged building materials, logs from the bush, hand slathered, cracking clay for its skin—a remarkable thing—on lapsed, stoney, regenerating farm acreage maybe a kilometre in off a gravel road. Off the grid. Out of sight. Hell and nothing less in the spring with the bugs. Not many visitors,

or any. The occasional bear in the yard. No kids. Unmarried, unbetrothed. Principled and fiercely committed to crafting a better day from the debris of their psychic and mythic inheritance: that's what seemed to drive them. It may have been what drove them together. Maybe a kind of handshake deal of the heart is what sustained them, out there in the woods, alone together.

There aren't many ideal circumstances in which to have relationship troubles, but this was a particularly rough one. Their firm politics (he refused to obtain a birth certificate, let alone a driver's license or a credit card), their strident isolation, their slender material underpinnings, and an almost puritanical self-reliance—none of it favoured conflict or ready reconciliation. It seemed to me that it probably wasn't going to last, no matter what I said. It didn't. Maybe it wasn't supposed to. In time she left, made a domestic go of it with another anarchist. He stayed on the land, tried his hand at solitude. For a while, the silent house was his new religion. They entered their thirties that way.

A few years went by. The heart somehow doesn't stop. The give-a-shit doesn't always dry up and blow away, not entirely, not for long. I don't recall how, but he made his way out of the bush, made some kind of peace with this frightful world, found his way to my farm, quietly joined the cadre of young people working the place. She joined too, with her new guy. Those two asked me to marry them, and I did, with her old bush-bound ex in attendance. A child ensued. It shouldn't have worked out by the standards of the day, but for a while it did. Their activism had some sinew, it turned out, to lend filament and flex to its boney beliefs.

The solitary man met someone, a woman who seemed to have no more thought that she'd ever marry than he did. *What do we know about ourselves?* you have to wonder sometimes. What do we know of the heart's business or its work? In relief, and with new promise raising their unsuspected hopes, they fell together, without ceremony. Unnerved after a while, they fell apart without ceremony, feeling the whole thing hasty, undignified, to their enduring credit. In the last while they've come to me: Would I marry them? I would. But we had to craft this one from the jittery certainties of the onset of their early middle age. They were frankly too old for the sleepwalking errors of beginners in love.

And more challenging still, their parents had no interest in their lives on the farm or in this kind of matrimony. Without a village, they still needed village-style help. And they'd lived outside the cash

economy for years. They needed people to come witness, some kind of congress they'd not believed in much until now. The ritual needed things that this couple's cash-free life challenged them to come up with. If there was to be matrimony, then there needed to be communion. If there was to be communion, there had to be company. And if there was to be company, then there was feasting to be outfitted. We already had the place. The hand-hewn feast hall (the one described in *Come of Age*) already had a cookstove and a copper-lined hearth. It had trestle tables, made by the groom-in-waiting, and sheepskins and fine woven blanketry and carving on the beams. It had oak flagons. But it hadn't tableware. We weren't barbarians. Pagans, perhaps, but not barbarians. We needed tableware. No bridal registry, not for this one. Proper pagan tableware. Without much money, they could still do that. That's the task I entrusted them with.

A few days ago, five of us ventured out into the bush, thick this time of year with mosquitos, to that homestead far off the road where he'd once made a go of it. Four men, a couple of bad backs between them, a two-year-old boy to witness the thing, a truck and shovels, a smudge pot to ward off the worst of the devourers, we stood in the still morning beside a pile of grey/white clay. It'd been there for a decade, and now had a tuft of fern and scrub, ash seedlings in leaf, a snag of wild raspberry cane across the top. It was the only clay for scores of kilometres in any direction. We were there to lay claim to some, to make tableware for matrimony, and to leave some. Before any digging, we said a few words to make prayers and blessings and gratitude. I spoke a memory about how this morning came to be.

Years ago, the hardscrabble couple had hired an old man to truck in the clay so they could finish the inside of their house as they'd dreamt it, troweled to earthy smoothness. They made as if to live in a cooking pot. The dream was untempered, as it turned out, the flame too hot or too tepid, though as the hurts began to gather, they couldn't see it then. The clay of their days together didn't vitrify, couldn't hold water. The balance of the clay was left on the verge. Until that morning. The clay and the dream needed time, and it needed life, and both had come to take their portion. Now we were there, about to take ours. Matrimony needs witnesses, and it had them this morning. We'd grind into the mix some of the old, broken bits of the pottery of former times, vitrified shards of more capable days, days that didn't last a lifetime either, people

and dreams that didn't. Come feast time, if we all made it there, we'd eat from the fired clay of old sorrows and faithful remembering. And we'd speak again something of the old understanding that the beginnings of love are in love lost sometimes. And ofttimes that is lost on us. And the kids would be there, listening.

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The Bone House of Love

The house of matrimony is built stone by stone, timber by timber, blessing by blessing. It is built by the weather of love, sudden storm by stilling moment. Mostly it is built by old people, old in their diminishment and depth. It is built in their witness and memory. Old people are in league with matrimony when they oversee and underwrite the feelings young people have for each other.

Like anything built by humans that's meant to stand and withstand, the sequence of its assembly is everything. Shelter is there eventually, but not at first. At first, the weather gets in. At first, there are no windows, no door, no inside. The plan is lines drawn in the air. Each detail of the bone house of love comes from some other place, some other time. Living in it is the last thing you get to do. That's when you find out what kind of building chops you have. Before that, there are physics to obey: gravity, hydraulics, capillary action, tensile strength, thermal dynamics, the works.

There's an order to things, and the order isn't whimsy or personal preference. If you want the house to stand, that order is consulted and respected. Patrimony comes first. Not "most important." Just prior. Patrimony is the willingness to engage the work of assembling all the tools and materials without getting to live in the house first. That work is the love song patrimony sings to matrimony. Patrimony is courtship working at the level of culture.

The mammalian reproductive system is remarkably adept at sussing out the likelihoods for success, remarkably sensitive to the prevailing conditions of its time. That is its sentience at work. Conception is less likely in times of distress, flight, menace, scarcity, malaise. Nowadays, we overwhelm the wisdom of reproduction with our on-demand reproductive technologies and our rights. But the inability to conceive might be existential stuff, too. *Infertility* doesn't sound like the right word to describe this body wisdom. This is not a time that is weeping promise, and there's wisdom in this obedience of the female body.

So patrimony's work is to make a house fit for well-being. It is a beauty that works. It crafts a mythic, poetic, and psychic plea for matrimony to inhabit that work, to recognize and employ and rely upon that work. Matrimony needs precedents, and it needs companionship of this kind. Can you marry without this patrimony? Yes, indeed you can, in the same way you can marry without matrimony, without witnesses. Most people where I come from do. Their material and ideological self-sufficiency is a point of pride. Matrimony's not self-sufficient that way.

I didn't set out one day to become an officiant or a master of ceremonies. It hadn't crossed my mind until I was asked to do it. I was, I'll admit, intrigued by the notion. But I did not say yes right away. It must have been dismaying to those petitioners, but I knew early on that there were troubles in the shadows, and I was leery. I was leery for the same reasons that they were so sure. They were trying to make a good thing out of iffy materials. I was leery, too, for the momentousness of the thing. It was akin to being asked to name someone's newborn, which I've done. I knew I'd be setting into motion things that would arc out beyond anyone's intent or dominion.

So I did my homework. I studied the weddings I'd been to as a younger man and especially my reactions to them. I was saddened by them, by what a near miss they seemed to be. I felt disabled by them somehow, diminished and left lesser by them. I thought about my own first wedding, the overly familiar anonymity of the thing. It was an amalgam, a hybrid, an accommodation to the generic expectations brought to bear upon

weddings. They were, each of them, anarchic, without a root in something tenable, with longing but no belonging. They were chaperoned but unled.

And then I listened carefully to why these couples wanted me to do their weddings for them, why they didn't want to go the usual route. For some, it was for want of tradition or spiritual affiliation or spiritual home. Some bore antipathy for the old religions. Chief among their misgivings was that they feared for the authenticity of their wedding. They mistrusted the foregoneness of the usual thing, the autonomia of it all. They lamented the husk quality of what they'd seen of matrimony. They wanted something "real," something "true," they said, something more like them. They often used "personal" and "new" and "unscripted" to describe the ideal they were bargaining for.

They'd done their homework, too. They were familiar with my books and teachings, and were anticipating that I'd probably go all in with recombining the DNA of the usual affair, the customizing and detailing of it. So they were surprised—as was I—when my first questions were: "What makes you think that 'more personal' means 'good,' that 'unscripted' means 'better'? Is that what you think matrimony is?"

And with that, we were off to race among the ruins.

It seems natural enough now in my corner of the world to equate tradition with anything outmoded, disqualified, corrupted. Indigenous tradition gets a pass, but it's heavy going otherwise. But there is a clutch of expectations around "alternative matrimony," though. It's a kind of disorganized religion for the unaffiliated. There is a "Book of Supposed To," another kind of gospel, and it's open wide. It's big on spontaneity, hard on formality. Here's the thing: in times of cultural disarray, formality is more mercy than it is constraint. The formality of the wedding ritual is there to give shape and sound and translation to the mercurial volatility of the transubstantiation that is matrimony, to its bloodying and its blessing.

Like death, matrimony is a deity, a very consequential deity. Like death, matrimony has its physics and metaphysics. Its blessings are taxing. And as in approaching death, humans need an etiquette repertoire to treat with matrimony. Formality in ritual is fundamental to being able to "speak matrimony." And as in dying, there needs to be someone

present in the wedding's conceiving and preparation and incarnation who is matrimony's amanuensis, its guardian and spirit lawyer. I stepped forward and became one of those.

The trouble these couples had wasn't with formality per se. It was with the fact that they didn't know where these formalities came from, or what they meant, or what fractured matrimonial vessel they were once a part of. They'd had dealings with the orphan of matrimony, but that was all. There was little or nothing in their daily lives that made matrimony recognizable; nothing that employed it and gave it pride of place. And so I set about piecing the shards together, coaxing a shape from them, and a function, and a purpose.

One story I used to tell in the early days of the travelling medicine show I called *Nights of Grief and Mystery* had this as a kind of punch line: "Some of us disbelieve in the dead. They have their right. Let us hope that the dead are not sitting in conclave this very evening exercising their right to disbelieve in us."

When it comes to that long parade of exiles, pilgrims, lost souls, and saints from whom they draw down most of the physical and psychic stuff they take to be theirs, most people I know just don't proceed in their daily lives as if there was such a thing as "ancestors." We haven't much practice at being beholden. And so they're on their own. If you use the old-fashioned word *ancestor* at all, you are likely to do so as a screen saver for the past tense of everything. Traditional peoples don't have more ancestors than we do. They're just better at having ancestors. Their cultural patrimony and etiquette include scores of opportunities and obligations rising up on a daily basis to include and implore and invite and honour those from whom they come—not all of whom are human.

You may not believe in the dead. But the dead believe in you. If that's true, if ancestry is more fact than feeling, and "the dead" are not "how you feel about the dead," then maybe there's a reciprocity of obligation and spirit maintenance governing the proceedings. Maybe they're not doing just fine without us. It is part of our unsuspected inheritance from the old conversion to monotheism that we take any otherworldly thing to be whole and complete unto itself, requiring nothing more from us than obedience. Maybe not.

It's hard for people from Anglo–North America to start any enterprise at the feet of their ancestral dead. So, arbitrarily, I start with the would-be bride's parents. Have they been approached formally? Has their blessing been sought? Not their agreement—their blessing. Were the other set(s) of parents included somehow? None of these things are likely. There's already been sexual intercourse, maybe some informal playing house, cohabitation. What could an older person's blessing possibly count for with so many of the matrimonial preliminaries dispensed with? I talk to them about the formalities of blessing and then send them on their way. Can they proceed without understanding everything first? If not, it could be marriage without matrimony for them.

When they return—if they return—to ask me to do these weddings, protocol requires that I refuse. Gently, in courtly fashion, I refuse. Here's why: I am holding the would-be betrothed in high esteem, this time by handing back to them their petition for elaboration and safekeeping. The second petition will deepen the first, deepen its art, its worth. I refuse in the presence of—for the sake of—their ancestors. I do so in their stead. In refusing, I say as much. The couple may balk, grow frustrated, take offence. Without a shared understanding, without a tradition, the whole thing is up for grabs. But where do you begin a restoration of cultural practice that nobody remembers? You start with the poverty of your times. You start with a shard, or you don't start at all. Of course it's awkward. That awkwardness is a gift we have to give to what has come before us. The orchestration of that awkwardness is patrimony's gift to matrimony.

The second request unfolds in a less hurried way. It includes food and drink this time, and nobody's trying to get to the point, which is code in ceremony for "trying to get it over with so something more important can be had." They've realized that this request isn't a problem to solve, that I'm not an obstacle to overcome. I am enforcing courtly hesitation. The request comes well into the meeting, almost as an afterthought. In the third request, they address my ancestors, and their own, in the second person. There's an acknowledgment of how long it's been since they've done so. There are gifts this time, to honour those who've been at the matrimonial crossroads before them and to honour those who've entrusted this understanding to me. The courtship has begun now, in earnest, the beginnings of a translation of the feelings these two people have for each other. And that's what I say yes to. We have begun,

however uncertainly, to understand each other, understand what's at stake and what's possible and what's called for.

Gathering of their age kin comes next. There's serious work here. This is the business of designating and petitioning the wedding party. The couple knows from me that the preparations might take the best part of a year, not a weekend, that the work will be considerable. However the couple describes the thing to their friends, the would-be wedding party gathers for the first time. I'm introduced. Some people are uneasy at once, some a bit let down that I look so much like them, not exotic at all.

For fifteen or twenty minutes I give them the idea of what we're up to, up against, the cultural poverties that are at play. They know early on that this'll be no fifteen-minute wedding with drinks and dip to follow. It's purposefully short on details. I stop then and say, "At this point, you'll have to decide if you are in or not. No further information will help. Just in or out. If I told you more now, it'd be harder for you to leave later. And some of you will leave, no matter what your promise or commitment might be now. That'll be hard on those who stay with it. Nobody needs that. So, with that understanding of compassion in hand, take a moment now to trust your instincts and decide if you are with us. If not, you'll have to leave us now, with our blessing and gratitude for the attention you've lent to this enterprise. Wish us luck."

Maybe a third of their closest friends in this world, a third of their blood kin, walk out, without a word, awkwardly, sullenly, resentfully. Strong looks come my way. The couple is reeling. Those who are still seated wonder whether they missed something, whether it's because of that alone that they're still in the room. There is a hard nakedness in the room, a comfortless candour. The whole enterprise has left its youth behind, and we've not yet begun, and already there are casualties. Someone trying to be helpful moves to rearrange the chairs so there are no empty ones, no sign of the sudden loneliness.

"No, no," I tell them. "Leave the empty chairs just as they are. A year from now, I'll need you to remember this moment, this feeling of being walked out on, your efforts to understand it, the shock of it. How hard this is will need remembering."

And for the next few hours, I begin to lift the matrimonial shards up into the light. Some of their friends never talk to them again. The betrothed are beginning to see that even their progressive friends aren't

likely to gather round a wedding they don't understand on the off chance it'll change the world. We are starting with our poverty.

Matrimony isn't a congealing of good intentions. It isn't a victory of peak feelings over ordinary life. In our time, it is the unbidden memory of a time when people knew what life was asking of them. In this case, I assumed the voice of life, and I did the asking.

Old Order Matrimony needs things to be found and gathered, sourced and made. It needs its patrimony. That helps its spirit to be drawn down into this world, and these things help dilute and distribute the crush of romantic love for a while by giving it something to do. That is, I'm fairly sure, the origin of the rhyme "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue." In the name of the Ancients of Days and the dusty Rafter Dwellers, I set the wedding party on an ancestral search. I oblige them to discover the last people in their line, say, who had sheep, on whatever continent this occurred. I oblige them to learn those people's names, and at least a dozen phrases or sentences those people were likely to have used in their daily shepherd work, in their language, be it living or endangered or in eclipse. Next, they're to learn the name of the breed those shepherds worked. Next, they are to find somewhere in the world where that breed, or its close genetic kin, is still worked, and somehow petition the current shepherd to part with fleece from that breed and bring that fleece to our meeting in a month's time. This is what courtship looks like when it isn't fueled exclusively by romance. It's a deep-running, disheveling, and solemn business with scores of moving parts, transacted in the ruins.

Of course, the quest has dead ends, and family trees have broken limbs, leading to cold leads half a world away. Google Maps doesn't help. But the sheer unlikeliness of the thing, and the moxie, and the old-world spirit of it more often than not charms people half a world away, and there are, I'm sure, old sheep farmers in distant lands today who could tell the story of their parents receiving a barely decipherable letter asking in a halting and strangely elegant way if such a thing is still possible in this world, if a bit of fleece could be had. People find that their own ancestry veers close to another's in the group, someone they didn't know existed a month before. They are themselves being shepherded toward their Old Ones.

Once gathered, with all the stories of unlikely success in tow, there comes the learning of wool, the particulars of the thing. I set them to learning the cleaning of the lanolin and the burrs, and the mysteries of carding and roving, the accident of felt, and so on. This is a proper hedge school now. Leadership now is by example, not instruction. People are learning to pay attention. The women go on to learn spinning and dyeing and weaving of wool. They learn it with their fingers and eyes, with their memories and their Old People, not as alone as they once were. The men go on to learn timber harvesting and woodworking and blade stropping and the like. And they'll learn weaving's mystery too because they'll be making the hand tools and building a shuttle loom the women will eventually need when they set to weaving. Because the matrimony needs a well-made carpet that the betrothed might stand upon to make their vows, and the carpet needs to be from somewhere, and it needs to be a storied thing with a fine pedigree and style for days.

But nobody knows any of this yet. Nobody quite knows how their work—patrimony's work—will end up in someone else's hands, nor what the other group is up to. And then comes the ritual of parting with what they've just begun to learn and love, when the tearful men unveil the loom, hoping it'll serve, not sure that they have it right, and with halting and spare eloquence learned in the procurement of the fleece, they plead with the women to take up the loom and the wool. And they do so in the teeth of the storm of all the gender wars. And the women, stirred by the nobility of the attempt and stunned by the solemn solidity of the thing, listen without a word and try to take in what they're all in the midst of. And when the petitions are done and the men sit in sorrow for what they're sure is a lack of grace under pressure, the women respond in murmurs of gratitude and grace and grief, for they've begun to realize that the matrimony's stirring, that they are midwives to it, that they are not alone in it. And no one there, not a soul, deep into their thirties or forties as they are, has done anything like this in their lives. And grace is abounding. And though the poverties of their upbringing are there, some hint of the nobility of another time is there too, and the shards of matrimony are beginning to take a vessel's shape. And the cultural vacancy they're heirs to is loosening its hold on their memories. It's sad. And it's wondrous.

Malapropisms are gifts from the language Gods, to be sure. On a dime, they can change your mind, often for the better. There was a time years ago, when asked to preside over younger people's weddings, as I first set out to

make something of matrimony, when the time for wool and weaving came, that I meant to say "loom weaving," and each time it came out "womb leaving." Eventually I stopped correcting myself, for this was me standing corrected.

It is a hard business, this unsuspected encounter with the cultural poverties one is heir to and unwitting practitioner of. It registers most often as personal inadequacy. It riles people up. It forces them and their unsuspected convictions, especially the conservative ones, out into the open. Some get protective, though they don't yet know of what. Some hold on to whatever understanding of weddings and marriage and love they came with, and they walk away from all this. And some few of them rise to the mystery.

There's no one outside of the circle to tell. Nothing translates easily into something recognizable. People will wonder if it's a cult they're in, if I'm a cult leader. Something that is supposed to grow into a rambunctious village-mindedness is drawing inward, toward itself. There's no one to include, for now. Nobody would understand anyway. It's isolating. It's nothing like the rehearsal, the shower, the scripted camaraderie, the high school daze of the usual thing. It's womb leaving alright. It's real. It's on now.

The preparing months go by. We begin to use a qualifier whenever we speak of the wedding proper: if we get there. We're starting to get the idea of doing time in a desert of culture and inheritance. We're learning the difference between information and eloquence, between decorating and conjuring, habit and ritual, intention and ritual. These things are hard to learn, blessedly hard.

Everyone learns the potter's arts, the intricacies of mud and clay, what glaze and craze require of them, what "dry" really means, what "holding water" means, how cracking and breakage gather round their plans, where beauty really comes from. The vitrifying magic comes from the addition of a broken piece of old pottery ground fine gone into the clay, just as ritual gathers traditions and people that fail at lasting forever. They are making the tableware that will grace the groaning board of the feasting time, if we get there. The cups and plates go into the inferno in a hole in the ground, and people learn what patience means, and the work of waiting, and what prayer is. Their hearts are tempered by the firing, by the possibility that all has been for naught, that the cups will not hold, that there might be a stain of sorts or an unconscious curse or an errant opinion or a whammy laid upon the proceedings.

They learn the art of velum making, the ordinary but uncommon marvel of ink making. They learn the basics of calligraphy. All of this is poured into the crafting of wedding invitations. The composition of the calling out to the kith and kin of the betrothed goes through many revisions. They're trying to get the spirit right, the spirit of something they've not seen before. They're learning the weight of words.

The wedding party quietly sets about learning how to fashion or procure the gifts that will punctuate the palms-up protestations of love to come. They are learning how it is the giving of a gift, and the storying that goes with it, that makes a gift of the work. They learn the blessing of being parted from the fruits of their labour, the soul-widening power of it. They learn the nobility of labour, the blessing of manual dexterity when lent to something worthy. They are becoming faithful witnesses to matrimony by doing the patrimonial work of provisioning the ceremony.

Some learn silversmithing, some hide tanning and tailoring, some fermentation and farming and husbandry. The wedding party is already touched by a surprising pride in the thing. They are going about their daily lives as if something they don't control genuinely depends on them, and so they are canvassing the world for gifts of note and merit and beauty and lineage. A certain very cool vintage/tribal arts shop is unofficially designated their ceremonial department store, and the store's owners are gathered into this mystery play unfurling in the big city. Somehow, they get it.

With each iteration, the sense of uncancellable debt that gathers around and bears down upon the betrothed grows. People they barely know are trading whole months of their lives for the chance of learning how to gild ceremony with nobility. Skills are acquired, money spent, crops planted, and animals tended to so that an unprecedented event that spills over the borders of understanding in time to come might draw the nobility in people thither. If things go well, if the spirit of matrimony holds, the betrothed in years to come will never be able to compensate those they've begun to lean upon. They'll never break even. Matrimony banishes the balanced book. This is the way of being beholden, an Old English word meaning "the intense and cresting sense of being held." It means "sustained, upheld from below, not left to fall." Beholden is the root condition of being in obligation, caught up in the spirit mechanics of village-mindedness.

The betrothed are learning the strange, unsuspected astringency and thinness of self-sufficiency, sovereignty, and independence of spirit.

Matrimony is gathering in their need of others. The wedding they once envisioned is losing their imprint, their brand. It is outgrowing their feelings for each other.

The preparatory days are growing short. In the last week, the wedding party gathers at the farm site of the doings. The men's and women's coterie are each granted an elder who will attend to them throughout the ritual. These elders have time in with these mysteries. They enforce and police in a fitting way the separation of the prospective bride and groom, who will neither see nor hear of each other for days. Firewood is seen to, ovens cleaned, the timber hall swept, the kitchens provisioned. Small gangs of women are giving direction to the hovering volunteers. The men keep their respectful, bewildered distance, growing into their husbandry, seeing to the periphery of the ritual place, making sure the roof holds, the seating is set, the mead they learned to make a year ago is at hand. The chairs are in rows on the two long sides of the hall, with an aisle between them, facing each other.

On the morning of, people are milling about. The wedding party is notable and recognizable at a distance, as befits any event of note. They are possessed now of an employable, working nervousness. They have a rogue finery about them, too, laden as they are with good-looking heirloom jewelry, a centuries-past sense of occasion. They're in on it by now, and it shows. Some of them are attending to the would-be bride and groom in places known only to them. Some are seeing to the details no one thought of, the eleventh-hour gremlins of any ritual. The invited guests, who've been asked to bring their gifts, are bewildered—some affably, some capably, some not so much. They're being shown to their seats, according to their kin affiliation, oldest family members close to the front so they can see and hear the proceedings. Their gifts are piled at either end of the aisle, and they are facing the kith and kin opposite them. Everyone is waiting for the betrothed, waiting for this thing to start. They don't know it started a year ago.

Now four-fifths of any ritual of agency and aplomb is taken up in waiting. And it is in their manner of waiting that you might take the measure of people. No one involved, myself included, has the God's-eye view of the proceedings. There are scores of moving parts, and you'll be waiting to

find out where in the proceedings you are, particularly in the beginnings, which are legion.

Waiting is style and substance wed. Waiting has both a tempering of impulse and an education of the spirit in it. You know you're to be waiting, but you don't know upon what you wait, not really. If the spirits and the Ancients have been courted, chances are your way of waiting will be evident to them. It is certainly evident to the people sitting across from you. Since there is no audience in a ritual, you've learned that all present are agents and caretakers of this event. And guarantors. So waiting is not hovering in the absence of something yet to happen. It is landing subtly in the midst of something happening that you neither quite see nor understand, whose beginnings you somehow missed. The most stylish people in a ceremony are most stylish in their waiting. They tend to be the humblest as well. They are the ones you take your notes from, the ones you'd want to resemble if you live long enough. They don't wait for something. Their waiting *is* something, something worth waiting for. In the style of their waiting, the ritual begins to find its feet.

Almost nobody present knows this, though.

This is perhaps the hardest moment of the whole affair. It is now, before the betrothed take their places among us, that it falls to me to initiate those in attendance into the conjuring business of matrimony. This, more or less, is impossible. Or at least I've not found a way of instructing people who are coming cold to the encounter in the intricacies of conjuring something that doesn't yet exist from things that do, and doing that conjuring at the same time. This unlikelihood is especially true of a wedding, which is often the only event officially designated "ceremonial" that most people have ever attended. Which means that most people sitting in front of me are sure beyond questioning it that they know what a wedding is. Which means that no one present feels the need of a primer on the matter, never mind the seismic renovation of understanding that's in the offing. And few in attendance are likely to recognize their own wedding in this one, even a shard of it. And they'll feel forced to choose among their allegiances. And some, most even, are likely to choose what they know.

If this were a working culture, these people would have seen these machinations at work constantly and from a very early age. They'd know their place, they'd know what was at stake, and they'd have the knack of bringing solemnity to joy. They'd take their ritual cues from the middle-aged

workers and the old aged past masters. But where I come from, people without benefit of initiation tend to approach things they don't recognize or understand with doubt or derision or demands for proof. The vernacular of working humility is not much known to us. And this is on display this morning. What can fairly be called ritual illiteracy is rife.

A year before I made an oath to the betrothed and to the wedding party and to all those who'd had a hand in my soul's education. I did not vow to bring everyone by hook or crook (a shepherd's term) to this day, though I'd do my best. I did not vow to be their best friend. I vowed to be in their corner, come what may. In times when they would wander and stray and grow uncertain of the wisdom of this enterprise, that could mean they'd grown sure that I'd parted company with them, grown weary of them, turned on them. When that came round, I had to be matrimony's advocate, its spirit lawyer, its fixer and right-hand man. It was to matrimony that I owed my allegiance, the best of what I knew. I drew them not to me but to matrimony. In doing so, there were times when I was deeply misunderstood and then finally understood. For better and for worse, at portentous risk to the enterprise, all of this had to coalesce on this day. On this day I had to hand the spirit of matrimony to the wedding party for safekeeping, for safe passage, for the mystery work.

And so I do my halting best to compress a year's worth of hard-won, esoteric understanding and practice into an hour or two of storytelling, cajoling, anointing and appointing and sensitizing and joking and praying—not the most common combination of things to oblige a hall full of people who don't know each other and who are quickly deciding they don't know what's going on or what all this is.

That compression requires a foil, it seems. I try to lift the shards of Old Order Matrimony up into the light, and in so doing I begin to come to grips with the contemporary wedding, the wedding that most in attendance are still looking for, that most of them are social and biological products of. Whatever its affiliation with tradition, its economy and efficiency, the contemporary wedding is typically a well-intentioned and sometimes high-strung weather report. It describes the emotional, devotional, and romantic weather that prevails between two people and draws certain lifestyle predictions from that weather, the "having

and holding" kind of predictions. It exacts a number of vows of fidelity, exclusivity, unanimity of purpose from the betrothed, and in exchange visits an imprimatur on what they've managed to be to each other thus far. It does so in the presence of a chorus of affirmation: the cheers and best wishes of the invited guests. That's what a celebration of love is, and it's a wonderful thing, and there are marriages aplenty among us that could use a bit of that celebration, even years into the fray.

That's not what a ritual is, though. In place of a celebration's imprimatur, ritual exacts alchemy. A ritual acknowledges what's happened only in passing. Its principal job is to make something happen by transubstantiation—surely where the phrase "and the two shall be made one" comes from. And that is why you can marry without benefit of matrimony: they're not the same thing, nor does one magically derive from the other. Matrimony seizes upon a wedding as its latest chance to wring a better world from our strivings for companionship.

Not all of the alchemy takes place between two people, nor within them. The lion's share of the alchemy takes place around them. Their lives are changed, in other words, by changing their status and standing and station in life. That is why there are a hundred-plus unwitting coconspirers awaiting instructions, uneasily. I tell them just at this point that most of the intoning and evocation will be done by them. They are there to make the case for the fittingness of this union, if the union is a fit thing. God knows, as does the brace of old people in our midst this morning, that not all of them are. I tell them the story of the salt and the indigo, the petition for blessing, the old sacraments of trade. I charge them with the obligation to give voice to the ambivalence that so many of us hold for marriage and matrimony and tradition.

"Understand," I say, "that this aisle between you is the land between two tribes, or clans. It is a land you'll have to traverse in order to work the business that must be worked between you. It doesn't represent or symbolize that land. It *is* that land. This will become clear to you when you stand, walk into the aisle, and speak. It is, as much as anything is this day, holy ground. Understand that it is the centuries-long distance between you and the last time these matrimonial mysteries were understood and practiced by your people's people. It is in their presence that you will stand. The betrothed at whose invitation you come here have those people in them. Their blood. Their stories. And there's all that time since they were last formally addressed and gathered in.

"The time has come now for you to stand for this young person who has come from among you. Opposite you sit those from whom the beloved of your young person, the one who is your treasure, come. Give them real reasons to lend their assent to this betrothal. They will, if eloquence still lives in these times, do the same for you. You don't know each other, but you know some of what is at stake now. You will learn the hearts of those across from you, and they yours. The betrothed need this from you now more than they need each other.

"When you are done, and have reached the fullness of the understanding that life has leant you, you will take up that gift you've brought with you, and with it formally petition those people opposite you and offer them this gift in hopes that it shows the people opposite that you are mindful of what you ask of them, that they part with one of their young most precious, and lend him or her to matrimony for the balance of their lives. You will be a lifelong witness to this work.

"It is why you're here today. This you do in the presence of their ancestors and your own. In this way, you do what they might have done in times before your remembering."

And then, and not until then, the betrothed are brought that great long distance from their seclusion to the hall. Shielded from each other's gaze by finery and blankets, they sit among their age kin, their allies in the wedding party, behind their parents, grandparents, and Godparents if any or all of them are still alive, behind their friends, cousins. They will hear everything said in praise of them, in prayers for them, but they will speak only when everyone else has made their case and rested. And if things go well, and if we make it, and if anything of the Old Order Matrimony holds, then they'll hear the murmurs woven over them that may have begun at their inception or at their birth, that have now gained a new intensity and purpose. To do any of this, the witnesses will have to outgrow much of what they've seen, wedding-wise, and realize how needed they are. Not all are willing. But some are. Some do. And because they do, the young among them take heart. And the work gains purchase and begins to lift.

"Speak now, or forever hold your peace."

That, or some version of it, was said over the heads of witnesses in days gone by. In many jurisdictions the law required it.

"If anyone here knows good reason that these two people should not be brought together in holy wedlock . . ."

And what might have been "good reason"? Bigamy, for one, in the days when record keeping was not as it is now. When the officiants say it today—if anything of this practice remains—it is with arch humor that they do so. It is the cue for those in attendance to laugh wryly, to laugh as though "good reason" doesn't belong in the proceedings, doesn't exist. But there's more to this anachronism than a bit of irony and fun. Good reason may not belong in a celebration of love, but it belongs in a ritual of matrimony. *Reason* means "cause," "purpose." It means "to challenge, to question." It means "justification," and it means "well thought out, and rendered and clarified." It means "stands the test." Lots going on here.

The old people in attendance, and the twice- or thrice-married, know that there's plenty of reason, good reason, for people today to fold their matrimonial tent and go with prenups and good intentions and five-year plans. Weddings burdened by matrimony the likes of which I apply proceed against the odds. Weddings not so burdened are no more likely to prevail. This is a no-fault observation. If you banish doubt or reason from matrimony, what's left? Wholesome helium. The vows are there to anchor the ambivalence, not dispel it. (Bear in mind that the root of *witness* is *wit*, meaning "knowledge or understanding," not "moot, mute presence.")

The witnesses are there to hold the betrothed to what they vow to do and to give voice to the ambivalence that the betrothed cannot afford, that their good intentions cannot withstand. It is ambivalence in matters of the heart that gives matrimony substance. It is reasoned compassion that the witnesses have to give. That ambivalence deserves a seat at the table. Banished, it tends to go for the table, the whole hall, the jugular of the untested romantic. Giving it a seat is the work of the witnesses, those other dearly beloved of matrimony.

The testifying begins. Once it's haltingly underway, there's no stopping it. It's come round. Many people toe the line of good intentions: the betrothed clearly love each other, that'll be enough. The mood shifts when some of the younger, edgier people underpersuaded by marriage take their turn. Some plead for a kind of marriage they've never seen and dare not countenance. Some are full to the brim with spirit activism. A former

romantic partner rises, begins by levelling her gaze in the direction of the would-be groom and his people, and says, "I know him. I know him well. I know how he is with women. I know how he is when he's not at his best." She's at her best now. People draw in their breath. Some bristle. The groom's mother rises, speaks her measured response. The lid could get blown off this thing, but doesn't. With every declaration and tendered memory, a gift is added to the trading ground, tangible proof that the witnesses are finding ways to get behind matrimony's plough; tangible proof that taking their time on holy ground is bringing something old and new, borrowed and true; tangible proof that the hands of the betrothed are word by word being given. People forget that the betrothed can hear them, they forget themselves for a time, and substance ensues. Sometimes there are quiet sobs rising from behind the finery in back of the two clans. No one has heard anything like this before.

This takes a few hours to unfold, longer even. Eventually I have to decide that all the likelihoods have appeared, the reasons spoken, all the salt and indigo left on holy ground. Many are spent with the effort. I gesture to the two piles of treasure.

"This is what you mean, then. This is what you stand by, now and in the time to come. If all that you have pleaded for comes to pass, you will remember what you said, and what was said, and how deep-running all this really is. You've made your best case, and you don't know any more? Speak now, and know in the time to come that you had the chance to do so, that we turned to you, that we relied upon you."

I nod to the two elders who oversee the wedding party. The time for vows has come. Slowed almost to a standstill by what they've heard arc overhead and rumble below, the two parties make their separate ways to the edge of the holy ground. Perhaps twenty feet apart now, still shrouded, any rehearsed speech gone without a trace, with the murmured guidance of their elders and their age kin, in a kind of call-and-response gospel jazz, they begin quietly and haltingly by speaking of and to their ancestors, and to those who did not live long enough to see this day. It's mostly thanksgiving and sorrow at the beginning, but soon they find the prayerful cadence. They acknowledge the long-ignored standing of their kin, the weddings that preceded this one, the old and new friendships. They recognize the epic words that have been spun and woven for their sakes.

While these recitations of the Worthies are being spoken, the betrothed are processing slowly down the holy ground between their peoples and

toward each other. The witnesses strain forward to hear. Everyone now feels the gravitational pull of one of these for the other. But their elders and their age kin are chaperoning them in this last year's last mile, and they are stopped in their tracks, gently obliged to kneel, to let the silence settle. Everyone's aboard the mystery train now. I take my place between them, on that carpet woven so uncertainly months before, so as to hear every word. Only then do they begin speaking to each other. As they do, their age kin are bringing the yearlong laboured-over gifts forward. With each vow they make, they adorn it with the gifts all have had a hand in making. The ante is raised with each vow. Patrimony has done its work. They run out of things to say and to give.

I ask if they have spoken their hearts without encumbrance. They have. This is the second high-water mark of the ritual. Everyone's heard everything that's likely to be said by now. So I ask each of the clans in their turn:

"You have heard the work being done. You see before you the fruits of that work. You've been asked to consider the worthiness of the young one from among those seated across from you. And you've been asked to part with your young one, for the sake of a better day for this world. You've been asked to lend them to matrimony for the balance of their lives, that this world might benefit from your parturition. If you agree, your young one will no longer be young. Nor will they be the one you gave birth to or the one you grew to know. They will belong to the wide world hereafter, and that world will exact a greater claim upon them.

"With all of that before us, do you now accede to these pleas and prayers? Are you willing for this to be so? Are you willing now to live as if all of this has come to pass, and to bear faithful witness to these proceedings in time to come? If so, rise now and take possession of these gifts given in the name of the young people around whom we gather, for their sakes and for yours. If any are left, we cannot proceed, and won't. If none are left, life will take this as a sign that you are in accord with this union, and I will speak to the betrothed in your stead."

Of course, most people wish they'd chosen or crafted their gift with some awareness that this is what it was for. This is how it is with gifts sometimes, and with life: you don't know where they're headed or to whom. You are more conduit than conductor. So be it.

There's stillness, and then there's commotion. Some people come to the moment as they would the bargain counter at a vintage store. So be it. Some are taken up by the moment, transfixed or transformed. A big biker-looking fellow will ask me, "Is it supposed to hurt?"

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"It does, yes, but I don't know why."

"Well, there is your answer," I say.

Let's say that, on this day, the gifts are all taken up, every one. I say to the betrothed, "Your people want this for you, and for themselves, and for each other, and for the sake of this wondrous and sorrowing world. Life and your Old Ones have witnessed their willingness for this to be so. They want it also."

I ask them to stand with me. With a handwoven sash made on the wept-over loom, I bind their hands together, turn them toward their people and say, "Then by the power vested in me by no one at all, I see that this is so and has come to be among us, and that life wants this to be so, and by the work of your kin, life has come among us to bless you. Live from today as if this is so, as if we have gathered for the sake of life."

Easier said than done. In the heat of the ceremonial moment, everything's possible, and you're keen on it all. You have to plant something real in people that they can tug on when the going gets ordinary and things fall by the wayside.

A riotous, relieved cheer rises up. There's the long-delayed embrace and kiss. There's the long procession through the hall as married people, where the old kin and new kin embrace them, fete them, honour them, bless them. The betrothed feed each of the witnesses a bit of the bread of life, baked by their age kin.

In the melee, I melt away, master of very little now, steward of almost everything we've conjured. The feasting and the hoisting of the glasses begin. There's relief in the air, and belief, and victory. Before turning in, I find the two wedding party elders.

"Meeting tomorrow morning, just at first light. It's our last time. Gather your people. Bride and groom, and the wedding party we started with a year ago. Gotta be there, gotta look good, no matter who's had what to drink tonight."

Morning comes as it comes when it's the morning after: too soon. I'm there first, praying for guidance in how to bring this thing home, for keeps. The good people straggle from tents and campers into the field. Wood smoke is hanging in the still, cool autumn air. Nobody's stirring but us. I get them all in a circle, facing each other, arms around shoulders. Weary, spent, relieved the way warriors are relieved at still being alive. They're all looking at me, waiting. I start.

"Look around at this circle of allies. You've been at this for a year, and now you're done. No more of this, now. You've done beautifully well. I'm older than I was, beat up by it all, proud. You're older too, and you're good. You're brave. You didn't blink on me. I'll be grateful to you, and proud of this, until I die. It was for this moment that I said yes. Not last night. Now. I won't lie. I'm relieved, and I'm done. But I'll miss this. I'll miss you. I don't want anything about this to end. If it wasn't for everything we set aside to do this, it might not end. But the world's waiting for you, for all of this. I'm about to turn you into civilians. Look around one last time. Say your goodbyes. Give your thanks. It's old work we did. Try to remember it all. You won't. You'll need help to remember."

Everyone's weepy now. They say what they can say by way of farewell to each other and to me.

"Okay, friends. Here's the last thing. Stay in your spot, but turn around. You feel the other person by your side. But you can't see each other anymore. You're facing the world now, and life, and your little life. Start walking toward them. Walk that holy ground. They're waiting for you there. Don't look back now. It's done."

And they walk.

ANALOGUE

Doing the Aftermath

For now, as we make our way through the drastic days, it may seem that we've but two schemes for matrimony to choose from.

One: Working cultures have strategies for fashioning humans from bundles of contending strivings. There are a lot of loose ends dangling until they are woven together by the practice of initiation. Once their human-making ways have taken hold, they make a ritual life to fashion citizens from bundles of humans. Matrimony is a working culture's way of employing those citizens in a disciplined and devoted love of the world that grants them their lives. Matrimony is one alchemy for belonging to the world. It does so by exacting an end to youth-affinity identities and expanding clan affiliation through moral and material obligation. That is matrimony's blessing. Matrimony is one way by which you learn that you are not young anymore, nor as alone as you believed yourself to be.

Two: Cultures in postmodern, secular humanist disarray see no need for fashioning humans, since for them humanity is a natural and inalienable given of birth. It is not a given of conception, which has created considerable moral dilemmas. Nobody there seems to know when being human begins or ends, so birth and death are the usual stand-ins when people lose their nerve and blink on the big questions. Citizenship is how postmodern cultures choreograph the anxieties of not quite belonging. They concoct national mythologies, craft taxation laws, relax family boundaries, and reward affinity groupings to mobilize the anxieties of chronic individuals into identities. Marriage is an optional, postmodern strategy for

channeling chronic attractions into serial affiliations of two. It's bad for women. Matrimony is an enemy of autonomy. The world is on its own.

Nothing is as simple as that, thankfully, or as stark. Humans, we are a complicating bunch. Our circumstances are probably that drastic though. *Drastic* means "vigorous" or "consequential." It originally described exceptionally strong potions or medicines, that deserving of our best.

Those could be helpful distinctions to consider if you are in the mood for marriage, or you're considering one of the marriage-lite equivalents, or you're wrestling with the political and style problems of tradition. Given a choice, you might think that any clear-minded person would opt for working-culture status, would lend their love life to the cause. You'd think they would. But nervous or scared or vulnerable people—fitting descriptors for "being in love in a dangerous time"—go for shelter in a storm, most of us. We craft personalized wedding shelters. We get conservative and circle up. And why not? These days, not many go to a wedding to change the world. It isn't crazy. It's mournful, though. Because it could be otherwise.

I've done a handful of weddings after the fashion I've described here. I'd like to be able to say that something monumental and obvious happened, that some ancestral wrong was made right when we tried our hands at matrimony. Maybe it did, and I just don't have all the information. I'd like to be able to say that the older people in particular really showed up for duty or found in themselves some regard for the young people's striving after authenticity, that the scales fell from their eyes, and that they worked to contend well with the strangeness of an old-style wedding. Some did more than others. Some, frankly, didn't. Some dug in their heels, refused the invitation to remember Old Order Matrimony, let me know of their displeasure, walked away without a word, after a year's worth of work on behalf of their child or grandchild. I was the brunt of a lot of enmity. I wish I could say that such a crucible of the soul's work wrought an unbreakable bond among the age kin who shouldered so much of it. That isn't what happened. That's movie stuff.

The truth is that most of the people drawn up into this way of marrying returned on Monday morning to lives that had little or no way

of employing or even recognizing what they learned and saw during the matrimonial days. That's what the beginnings of culture change and spirit work look like, though. The ceremonial and spirit poverties of the times preyed upon what in them had grown tender and willing. Over the longer haul, the vows tended to wear thin. The truth is that younger people, by virtue of being young, had no more capacity to work the ritual and contend honourably with the poverties of their times than older people did.

And yet . . . I am fairly sure that revolutions in a culture's soul begin with groups smaller than the ones I worked with, smaller and less promising. Things did happen when we tried, and lives were made fit and hale because we tried. The shape of Old Order Matrimony came a little clearer. A few of the shards were fitted together. Young people went after the makings of a better day and used their weddings to do it. I loved that they asked me. I loved that they tried. I love it still.

If you're in the culture business, and you're dragging around your dream for a better day from one crisis to the next, you've reason to expect that your work will be a bit of a shit magnet and will draw down the poverties you are trying to ennoble. That is what happens. The dearth of genuine allies could unnerve you. They say that a good ritualist is not one who knows what to do, but who knows what to do when things go truly sideways. As you age in your work, you'll discover that in the first generation or two of a serious spiritual revolution, the fruits will probably elude you. You will forever be Moses on the Dead Sea shore, dreaming the better day, seeing it, but barred from crossing over, from living it out. Your work is to see what isn't working, engage disciplined inquiry to understand its ways, and plant the trees of possibility. Time goes on as it does, and your time of elderhood will be taken up in being an exemplar to the young of what grace under pressure looks like. You live as if their grandchildren will be tempered and trued by your example, though you'll never meet them. Matrimony is one place where all of that can gather.

When is the best time to plant a tree? Twenty-five years ago. If you want the fruit and the shade today, you need to have planted it twenty-five years ago. If you didn't, it's too late now. And yet there *are* trees, even with all this forgetting. Some of them were planted by those who came before, to ignite in you a love for those who'll come after. So plant, even so. You'll soon enough be their "twenty-five years ago," their shade a living sign that there were people who remembered.

Remember, the old story tells you, assures you, that the devil awaits you on the road to betrothal. Your culture's ruptures and fissures, your personal frailties, they await you there. But the devil's wife awaits there, too. She knows everything. She knows the devil and his ways better than he knows them himself. She doesn't slay the devil. She's wiser than that. She abides with the devil, employs his understanding. She's the ally in the cure of a culture's woes. She is matrimony's matron saint, the conjunction of heaven and earth. She's the old wisdom's mother. She's working her marriage for the sake of the world, mothering the culture. She's a shela na gig, nether parts wide to the holy precinct and the world beyond. Her secret consort—her spirit husband—is the king. They each work an angle of the mystery, kin of a kind, never meeting. Take your cues from them both.

If you step a foot away from the centre of anything and shuffle to the left or right just one degree, you see no movement, no change. Nothing seems to happen. But at ten feet away things happen. The further from the centre you move, in time and in space, the more consequence one degree's worth of shift has. That's how culture work goes.

It might be, in the time yet to be, that nothing comes of this. Or it might prove to be that me telling you what happened when we worked as matrimony's envoys might get more spirit work done, the work we couldn't do when it was our turn. People still ask me to do their weddings. Likely I'm done with that. But it's likely that you're not done. You wouldn't likely have got this far with me if you were. So here's the baton. It's my blessing.

Ve con los dioses. Go with the Gods, friends, and with the Ancients of Days, and the Rafter Dwellers, and the Worthies, and the saints. They need you now.

Work. Bless. Repeat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Jenkinson, MTS, MSW, is a cultural worker, teacher, author, and farmer. He is the creator and principal instructor of the Orphan Wisdom School, founded in 2010. He has master's degrees from Harvard University (theology) and the University of Toronto (social work). He's the author of *Come of Age*, the award-winning *Die Wise*, *Money and the Soul's Desires*, *A Generation's Worth*, and *Reckoning* (with Kimberly Ann Johnson). Since 2017, with musical partner Gregory Hoskins, he has toured *Nights of Grief and Mystery* internationally. For more, visit orphanwisdom.com.

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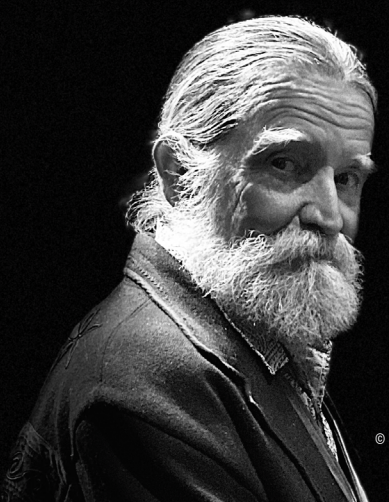
"Matrimony is the place where culture leans on love for its portion, its tithe," writes Jenkinson. "It is the mothering of culture, and ritual is its vehicle, and patrimony its precursor." Turning matrimony into a social institution barren of all substance, and flattening rituals into benign, generic celebrations of life, erodes our skills as citizen witnesses to a troubled time. Through witty stories, insightful history, and meditative questions, *Matrimony* examines ritual, ceremony, and cultural articulation—and how to redeem them for future generations.



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