Challenge Early College High School

Summer 2021

Mr. Dostert mdostert@houstonisd.org

11th Grade AP Language Summer Reading Texts

"Working at Wendy's" by Joey Franklin

"More Room" by Judith Ortiz Cofer

"Rhode Island" by Jhumpa Lahiri

"Under the Influence" by Scott Russell Sanders

"Soldiers on the Fault Line" (speech) by Ben Fountain

AP Lang Tone Words Packet

Joey Franklin wrote this essay when he was an English major at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. It was published in Twentysomething Essays by Twentysomething Writers *(2006), a collection of writings from the winners of a national contest organized by the publishing company Random House.*

Joey Franklin

Working at Wendy's

It's 8:45 P.M., and I am standing in front of the counter at Wendy's. It smells of French fries and mop water. In my right hand I hold my résumé. I don't know if I need a résumé to apply for the Wendy's night shift, but I bring it anyway. It anchors me as I drift toward the sixteen-year-old kid behind the counter and ask to speak to his manager.

"One mandarin orange salad?" the boy asks.

"Uh, no. Actually, I'd like to speak to the *manager*." As the cashier retreats to the back of the store, I recognize a large kid with curly hair working the fryer—he used to play football with some of the members of my Boy Scout troop. He looks up at me, and I avert my eyes. Part of me wants to turn around and leave before the manager comes out. A couple in their twenties walks into the restaurant behind me. I step away from the counter and pretend to read the menu, holding my résumé close to my chest. The urge to leave increases. Just then the manager comes out and asks, "You here about the night shift?"

As I hand the manager my résumé, I realize it is a mistake. He doesn't want to know my service experience, or my academic references, or my GPA. All he wants to know is if I can spell my name correctly.

"Er, the application is over there," the manager says, handing me back my résumé and pointing to a file folder mounted on the wall next to the counter. I take the application to an empty table in the corner of the restaurant and hunch over it, wishing I had a drink, or a hamburger, or something to put on the table beside me.

The next day I go for an interview with the hiring manager. I sit down at a table in the lobby and answer two questions: "What hours do you want to work?" and "When can you start?"

When he was sixteen, my brother, Josh, got his first job at McDonald's. He lasted two weeks before deciding the greasy uniform and salty mop water weren't worth $5.25 an hour. His manager used to show off rejected applications to the other employees in the back of the store. Most were high school dropouts looking for spending money, but a few had college degrees. One application was from a doctor who had recently left his practice because he "couldn't handle the mortality rate."

I think about that doctor now as I sit in a small back room at Wendy's. I have just watched thirty minutes of training videos about customer service, floor mopping, heavy lifting, and armed robbery. Chelsea, the training manager, hands me two neatly folded uniforms and a brand-new hat. Holding the hat in my hand, I look out into the kitchen at my new coworkers. At the fryer is the large high school kid I remember from the night before. A skinny brown-haired Asian-looking boy who must be about nineteen years old is washing dishes. Two girls are at the front of the store taking orders, and the manager is on the phone with an angry customer. "Can I do this?" I ask myself, and put on my hat.

Chelsea is pregnant. During our training session, I guess she is about six months along. It turns out she is due in three days. "This is my last week on the day shift," she says. "After the baby is born, I'll be back on nights." This is her first child, she explains, and says she is looking forward to being a mom. She smiles as she pats her stomach and asks about my son.

"Eighteen months," I tell her, "a real handful." I explain that I want to work nights so I can take care of my son during the day while my wife finishes her last semester of college. I ask about the pay, but I already know her answer. "We start at five-seventy-five," she says, "but the night guys get six." I ask her what

she thinks about $7. She says she'll see what she can do.

Chelsea trains me on Tuesday and goes into labor on Wednesday. I don't see her again for three weeks.

Kris Livingston's mom ran the register at the Taco Bell on the corner of Lombard Street and Allen Boulevard in a poorer section of Beaverton, Oregon. Her name was Dawn. She was divorced and had three boys. She shared a three-bedroom apartment with another single mom and her own five children. They listened to Snoop Dogg and Ice-T, drank forty-ounce malt liquors, and walked over two miles round-trip every Saturday to watch the neighborhood boys play basketball at Schiffler Park.

On welfare-check days, Dawn went grocery shopping and brought home twelve-packs of Pepsi, stacks of frozen steaks, crinkly bags of potato chips, several gallons of 2-percent milk, and bag after bag of Malt-O-Meal cereal. The week before welfare checks came, they ate eggs and instant ramen—lots of ramen.

Her son Kris was my best friend in sixth grade. We often walked to Taco Bell together to visit his mother. She usually bought us a taco while we sat in a booth in the corner of the store and talked about bicycles, girls, and football. Once, on the way home from visiting his mom, Kris said, "She used to sell drugs, you know. We had plenty of money, and nobody thought she was a bad mom then."

My first night on the job, I work with Dave. He is seventeen years old, five-ten, and keeps his hair short, like a soldier. He goes to an alternative high school if he wakes up in time and is looking forward to enlisting in the military when he turns eighteen. His dad, who recently remarried and moved, told Dave he would have to find his own place to live. When Dave isn't sleeping on his friends' couches, he lives in his car, a 1982 Volkswagen Rabbit with a hole in the floor just beneath the gas pedal.

Dave works with me a few nights a week and knows the business well. He's quick with a mop, can make all the sandwiches blindfolded, and has the entire computer memorized. When he's not working, he hangs out in the restaurant lobby trying to steal Frosties and old fries when no one is looking. The manager says she will give him food if he needs it and asks that he not steal anymore. "Asking gets you nowhere," he says, and keeps stealing.

Because I live just two blocks from the store, I recognize a disproportionate number of the late-night drive-through customers. Mostly, I see parents of the scouts I work with, or other scout leaders, and occasionally a friend from school. When they pull up to the window and see me in the Wendy's hat and headphones, the following conversation ensues:

"Joey, I didn't know you worked here! How's it going?"

"Good, good. Just flipping burgers."

"Hey, you've got to do what you've got to do."

Then I explain the job is temporary, and it's the only job in town that allows me to work at night so I can watch my son during the day while my wife finishes school. I tell them in another month I'll be back in school and working at a better-paying, less humiliating campus job.

One evening a fellow scout leader comes through, and after an exchange similar to the one described above, he says, "Hey, more power to ya. I know a lot of people who think they're above that." He thanks me as I hand him his triple cheeseburger, and he drives around the corner and out of sight.

At 250 pounds, Danny really fills out his uniform. He played varsity football for the local high school, has earned his Eagle Scout award, and knows his way

around a car engine. On several occasions he has changed spark plugs, jumped batteries, and even replaced brakes on the cars of fellow employees, usually right in the store parking lot.

Wendy's is the first job Danny has ever had. With six months' experience, he is the senior employee and is being considered for a management position. He brings in about $1,000 a month, much of which he gives to his grandmother. At closing, he always saves the good salads for me and talks the manager into letting me go home early. He likes listening to Metallica, working on his Trans Am, and talking with Tonya, a high school junior who also works at the store.

25 While I'm washing my hands in the bathroom at work, a well-groomed twenty-something man standing at the sink next to me starts a conversation. "Do you like working the night shift?" he asks.

"It's not bad," I say, shaking my wet hands over the sink.

"How long have you worked here?"

"Two weeks."

"Have you ever thought about college?" he asks. I want to tell him I'm in the top 5 percent of students at my college, that I am two semesters away from graduating, and that I'm on my way to grad school to get a Ph.D. in English literature. Instead, I shrug and tell him the same line I tell everyone: "Oh yeah, I'm just working here until my wife finishes." He doesn't believe me. To him, I look like another wasted life, another victim. He thinks I got my girlfriend pregnant, that I never graduated from high school, that I can't do any better than flip burgers at two in the morning. He feels sorry for my kids.

30 "I only applied here because I knew I would get hired," says Sara the first night I work with her. She is a nineteen-year-old single mother with a sixteen-month-old boy. She is very tall and wears her long brown hair in a ponytail pulled through the hole in the back of her Wendy's hat. I ask her why she needed a job so bad.

"I had to get one," she tells me. "My parole officer said it was the only way to stay out of jail." I start at this and then ask, "Why were you in jail?"

"Drugs," she says, and pauses, testing me. "I was wearing my boyfriend's jacket, and the cops found a heroin pipe in the pocket." I ask how long she was in jail. "One year," she tells me. "I just got out a month ago."

When I was in fifth grade, my dad got a job delivering pizza. As an eleven-year-old, pivoting on that blurry edge between boyhood and adolescence, I found myself bragging to my friends about the prospect of free pizza and then wishing I hadn't told them anything about my father's job. He worked a few nights a week, and when he came home, his uniform smelled like steaming cardboard and burnt cheese, but he always brought home pizza.

Oren is nineteen years old and works at Wendy's to pay for a cell-phone bill and to get out of the house. His parents are devout Mormons and think he is a disgrace to their entire family. He wants to sell marijuana because he believes he can do nothing else. "I don't do anything well," he tells me one night while

washing dishes. "I don't know what I want to do with my life." He asks Sara to find some pot for him to sell.

Oren's mother is Japanese, born and raised, and speaks to her children in her native tongue. That means Oren speaks Japanese and has family connections in Japan. 35

Oren also owns an AK-47 and likes to go up into the canyons and shoot jackrabbits. He showed me a picture once of a rabbit carcass out in the desert, its innards all blown out and dangling for the camera. 36

Tonight, while working the grill, Danny tells me he has never been on a date. "Girls don't like me," he says as he flips a row of sizzling, square quarter-pound patties. I can tell he believes it. Danny, by his own admission, is the kind of guy whom girls like for support. He is a gentleman, he asks thoughtful questions, and he's always willing to talk. He thinks his weight and his scruff turn girls off. He tells me he is going to ask Tonya to a movie this weekend but isn't sure she'll say yes. Later, Tonya comes into the store, and Danny disappears with her for a few minutes out in the lobby. He comes back with a large smile on his face and says, "I've got a date this weekend, can you work for me?" 37

I don't like when Dave works the front line with me. I can't make sandwiches very fast yet, and he gets tired of waiting. More than once he pushes me aside to finish an order. If he sees me hesitate on a step, he barks at me, "Red, green, red, green! Ketchup, pickle, tomato, lettuce! Come on, Joe, it's not that hard." 38

Later, while I'm mopping the floor at closing, Dave comes by and takes the mop from my hand. "Like this," he says, scrubbing the tile vigorously. He thrusts the mop back in my hands and walks away, rolling his eyes. 39

Chelsea is back at work tonight for the first time since having her baby. She appears fairly happy, and I am surprised at how well adjusted she seems to being a working mom. The phone rings several times, and Chelsea takes the calls in her office. She tells me her husband has lots of questions about putting the baby to bed. After the lobby closes, Chelsea disappears into the bathroom for nearly half an hour. This happens every time I work with her. I wonder if she is sick. Then I notice the breast pump in a case on her desk. Another employee tells me Chelsea has been expressing milk in one of the bathroom stalls on her breaks. 40

Danny and Tonya have been dating for two weeks. He shows up for his shift an hour early to see her before she gets off. They sit in the lobby holding hands and talking for almost the entire hour. When they're not in the store together, she sends text messages to his phone, which I catch him reading while he stands at the grill. 41

Tonight Danny approaches me while I'm opening boxes of French fries. He wants advice on how to ask Tonya to her junior prom. "I want to do something romantic," he says. I suggest Shakespeare's eighteenth sonnet. He has never heard of it. "'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day . . .'" I recite. "She'll love 42

it." I print off the sonnet at home and bring it to work for him the next day. He writes it in a card and delivers it with flowers. Two weeks later, in a rented tux at Tonya's junior prom, Danny gets his first kiss.

I call my dad tonight. He asks about school, about my son, and about work. I tell him about Wendy's.

"What? Who?" he says.

"Me. I got a job at Wendy's." Long pause. "I needed a job I could do at night." More silence. "It's not so bad." Still silence. "I work from nine P.M. to one A.M. a few nights a week."

Just when I think the line must be disconnected, Dad clears his throat and asks, "What happened to your computer job?"

"The guy ran out of work for me."

"Oh." More silence. I imagine he looks around the room to make sure no one is listening before he says, "Wendy's? When did that happen?" I want to tell him that it didn't *happen,* that it wasn't an accident, but I am stuck wondering how to make him understand, and at the same time wondering why I should have to explain anything at all. I wonder what his reaction would be if I had chosen to get more student loans instead of the part-time job. I choose to say nothing. Then I offer him my employee discount on fries next time he is in town. He says he'll take me up on it.

When I come into the store tonight, Dave is talking loudly to some employees gathered in the lobby. I ask what all the laughing is about. They tell me that last night Dave and Oren siphoned all the gas out of Dave's stepmother's four-wheeler, and then they urinated on her car handles.

Everyone dreads working with Chelsea. When she is not in her office counting the till or on the phone with her husband, she sits on the front counter and complains about her mother-in-law. She does very little to help prep the store for closing, and we rarely get out before two A.M.

Tonight she tells me about her mother-in-law's most recent visit. "I cleaned the house for hours before she came," Chelsea says, nursing a Diet Coke. "And the first thing she says when she gets there is how disgusting the place looks. She won't even eat my cooking." According to Chelsea, her mother-in-law has hated her ever since she got engaged. She wouldn't even visit except that Chelsea has a baby now, and the mother-in-law feels obligated. Chelsea's mother-in-law is disappointed that she is still working. "A mother's place is in the home," she says to Chelsea. "Your kids will be ruined."

Tonight Waymon Hamilton comes through the drive-up window with his family. Waymon lives around the corner from me, and his two sons are in my scout troop, but they spend most of their free time traveling around the state playing premier Little League baseball. They order a few value meals, some drinks, and they ask how I'm doing. There is no hint of concern or condolence in their voices, and I appreciate it.

I hand them their food and watch them drive away. Most people know Waymon the way I know him, as a dedicated father who works hard at a thankless job to provide for his family. His unassuming nature and warm smile are what I see when I think about him. Few people know him as the fleet-footed running back who helped Brigham Young University win Holiday Bowls in 1981 and 1983. Few people know he holds several BYU scoring records, including second place for touchdowns in a season, third in career touchdowns, and fifth for both season and career points scored. I didn't even know he played college football until someone mentioned it at a scout meeting. I once worked all day with Waymon, putting in a new driveway for a neighbor, and he never mentioned his football days once. He told me about his boys, about teaching public school in California, and about pouring lots of concrete.

After the store closes, I come home, take off my uniform, and climb into bed with my wife. She rolls over, tells me she loves me, and murmurs something about the smell of French fries. I kiss her on the cheek and close my eyes. It is winter, but the house is warm. My son is asleep in the next room. There is food in the fridge, and I have a job that pays an honest wage. In the morning I will make breakfast and send my wife off to school. And then, after the dishes are done, if the weather permits, my son and I will take a walk to the park.

MLA CITATION

Franklin, Joey. "Working at Wendy's." *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction*, edited by Melissa A. Goldthwaite et al., 15th ed., W. W. Norton, 2020, pp. 79–85.

QUESTIONS

1. What is Joey Franklin's attitude toward working at Wendy's? How does he demonstrate it? In answering these questions, look especially at the conclusion of the essay and at the details he chooses about how others respond to him.

2. Franklin uses considerable detail to develop his coworkers as characters (see paragraph 13 for an example). Which details do you find especially effective? Why?

3. Most of this essay is written in the present tense (with past-tense reflections about former jobs held by family members). What is the effect of Franklin's use of this verb tense? How would the essay differ if he wrote the entire essay in past tense?

4. Write an essay about a job you've held. Use dialogue and details to develop characters.

* This essay is part of Ms. Cofer's book, Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood

Judith Ortiz Cofer *More Room*

My grandmother's house is like a chambered nautilus; it has many rooms, yet it is not a mansion. Its proportions are small and its design simple. It is a house that has grown organically,
1 according to the needs of its inhabitants. To all of us in the family it is known as *la casa de Mamá*[1]. It is the place of our origin; the stage for our memories and dreams of Island life.

I remember how in my childhood it sat on stilts; this was before it had a downstairs - it rested on its perch like a great blue bird, not a flying sort of bird, more like a nesting hen, but with spread wings. Grandfather had built it soon after their
2 marriage. He was a painter and housebuilder by trade, a poet and meditative man by nature. As each of their eight children were born, new rooms were added. After a few years, the paint did not exactly match, nor the materials, so that there was a chronology to it, like the rings of a tree, and Mamá could tell you the history of each room in her *casa*, and thus the genealogy of the family along with it.

Her own room is the heart of the house. Though I have seen it recently - and both woman and room have diminished in size, changed by the new perspective of my eyes, now capable of looking over countertops and tall beds - it Is not this picture I
3 carry in my memory of Mamá's *casa*. Instead, I see her room as a queen's chamber where a small woman loomed large, a throne room with a massive four-poster bed in its center, which stood taller than a child's head. It was on this bed, where her own children had been born, that the smallest grandchildren were allowed to take naps in the afternoons; here too was where Mamá secluded herself to dispense private advice to her

[1] Mama's house.

daughters, sitting on the edge of the bed, looking down at whoever sat on the rocker where generations of babies had been sung to sleep. To me she looked like a wise empress right out of the fairy tales I was addicted to reading.

Though the room was dominated by the mahogany four-poster, it also contained all of Mamá's symbols of power. On her dresser there were not cosmetics but jars filled with herbs: *yerba buena, yerba mala*[2], the makings of purgatives and teas to which we were all subjected during childhood crises. She had a steaming cup for anyone who could not, or would not, get up to face life on any given day. If the acrid aftertaste of her cures for malingering did not get you out of bed, then it was time to call *el doctor*.

And there was the monstrous chifforobe she kept locked with a little golden key she did not hide. This was a test of her dominion over us; though my cousins and I wanted a look inside that massive wardrobe more than anything, we never reached for that little key lying on top of her Bible on the dresser. This was also where she placed her earrings and rosary when she took them off at night. God's word was her security system. This chifforobe was the place where I imagined she kept jewels, satin slippers, and elegant silk, sequined gowns of heartbreaking fineness. I lusted after those imaginary costumes. I had heard that Mamá had been a great beauty in her youth, and the belle of many balls. My cousins had other ideas as to what she kept in that wooden vault: its secret could be money (Mamá did not hand cash to strangers, banks were out of the question, so there were stories that her mattress was stuffed with dollar bills, and that she buried coins in jars in her garden under rosebushes, or kept them in her

[2] Good herbs, bad herbs.

inviolate chifforobe); there might be that legendary gun salvaged from the Spanish-American conflict over the Island. We went wild over suspected treasures that we made up simply because children have to fill locked trunks with something wonderful.

On the wall above the bed hung a heavy silver crucifix. Christ's agonized head hung directly over Mamá's pillow. I avoided looking at this weapon suspended over where her head would have lain; and on the rare occasions when I was allowed to sleep on that bed, I scooted down to the safe middle of the mattress, where her body's impression took me in like a mother's lap. Having taken care of the obligatory religious decoration with the crucifix, Mamá covered the other walls with objects sent to her over the years by her children in the States. *Los Nueva Yores*[3] were represented by, among other things, a postcard of Niagara Falls from her son Hernán, postmarked, Buffalo, N.Y. In a conspicuous gold fame hung a large color photograph of her daughter Nena, her husband and their five children at the entrance to Disneyland in California. From us she had gotten a black lace fan. Father had brought it to her from a tour of duty with the Navy in Europe. (On Sundays she would remove it from its hook on the wall to fan herself at Sunday mass.) Each year more items were added as the family grew and dispersed, and every object in the room had a story attached to it, a *cuento*[4] which Mamá would bestow on anyone who received the privilege of a day alone with her. It was almost worth pretending to be sick, though the bitter herb purgatives of the body were a big price to pay for the spirit revivals of her story-telling.

---

[3] The New Yorkers.
[4] Tale.

Except for the times when a sick grandchild warranted the privilege, or when a heartbroken daughter came home in need of more than herbal teas, Mamá slept alone on her large bed.

In the family there is a story about how this came to be.

When one of the daughters, my mother or one of her sisters, tells the *cuento* of how Mamá came to own her nights, it is usually preceded by the qualifications that Papá's exile from his wife's room was not a result of animosity between the couple. But the act had been Mamá's famous bloodless coup for her personal freedom. Papá was the benevolent dictator of her body and her life who had had to be banished from her bed so that Mamá could better serve her family. Before the telling, we had to agree that the old man – whom we all recognized in the family as an *alma de Dios*[5], a saintly, a soft-spoken presence whose main pleasures in life, such as writing poetry and reading the Spanish large-type editions of *Reader's Digest*, always took place outside the vortex of Mamá's crowded realm, was not to blame. It was not his fault, after all, that every year or so he planted a baby-seed in Mamá's fertile body, keeping her from leading the active life she needed and desired. He loved her and the babies. Papá composed odes and lyrics to celebrate births and anniversaries and hired musicians to accompany him in signing them to his family and friends at extravagant pig-roasts he threw yearly. Mamá and the oldest girls worked for days preparing the food. Papá sat for hours in his painter's shed, also his study and library, composing the songs. At these celebrations he was also known to give long speeches in praise of God, his fecund wife, and his beloved Island. As a middle child, my mother remembers

[5] Literally, "soul of God." A thoroughly good person.

these occasions as time when the women sat in the kitchen and lamented their burdens, while the men feasted out in the patio, their rum-thickened voice rising in song and praise for each other, *companeros*[6] all.

It was after the birth of her eighth child, after she had lost three at birth or in infancy, that Mamá made her decision. They say that Mamá had had a special way of letting her husband know that they were expecting, one that had begun when, at the beginning of their marriage, he had built her a house too confining for her taste. So, when she discovered her first pregnancy, she supposedly drew plans for another room, which he dutifully executed. Every time a child was due, she would demand, *More space, more space.* Papá acceded to her wishes, child after child, since he had learned early that Mamá's renowned tempter was a thing that grew like a monster along with a new belly. In this way Mamá got the house that she wanted, but with each child she lost in health and energy. She had knowledge of her body and perceived that if she had any more children, her dreams and her plans would have to be permanently forgotten, because she would be a chronically ill woman, like Flora with her twelve children: asthma, no teeth, in bed more than on her feet.

And so, after my youngest uncle was born, she asked Papá to build a large room at the back of the house. He did so in joyful anticipation. Mamá had asked him for special things this time; shelves on the walls, a private entrance. He thought that she meant this room to be a nursery where several children could sleep. He thought it was a wonderful idea. He painted it his favorite color, sky blue, and made large windows looking out over a green hill and the church spires beyond. But nothing

[6] Companions.

happened. Mamá's belly did not grow, yet she seemed in a frenzy of activity over the house. Finally, an anxious Papá approached his wife to tell her that the new room was finished and ready to be occupied. And Mamá, they say, replied: "Good, it's for *you*."

And so it was that Mamá discovered the only means of birth control available to a Catholic woman of her time: sacrifice. She gave up the comfort of Papá's sexual love for something she deemed greater: the right to own and control her body, so
12 that she might live to meet her grandchildren—me among them—so that she could give more of herself to the ones already there, so that she could be more than a channel for other lives, so that even now that time has robbed her of the elasticity of her body and of her amazing reservoir of energy, she still emanates the calm joy that can only be achieved by living according to the dictates of one's own heart.

JHUMPA LAHIRI

Rhode Island

RHODE ISLAND IS NOT AN ISLAND. Most of it is attached to the continental United States, tucked into a perfect-looking corner formed by the boundaries of Connecticut to the west and Massachusetts above. The rest is a jagged confusion of shoreline: delicate slivers of barrier beach, numerous inlets and peninsulas, and a cluster of stray puzzle pieces, created by the movement of glaciers, nestled in the Narragansett Bay. The tip of Watch Hill, in the extreme southwest, extends like a curving rib bone into the Atlantic Ocean. The salt ponds lining the edge of South Kingstown,[1] where I grew up, resemble the stealthy work of insects who have come into contact with nutritious, antiquated paper.

In 1524, Giovanni Verrazzano[2] thought that the pear-shaped contours of Block Island, nine miles off the southern coast, resembled the Greek island of Rhodes. In 1644, subsequent explorers, mistaking one of Rhode Island's many attendant islands—there are over thirty of them—for another, gave the same name to Aquidneck Island, famous for Newport, and it has now come to represent the state as a whole. Though the name is misleading it is also apt, for despite Rhode Island's physical connection to the mainland, a sense of insularity prevails. Typical to many island communities, there is a combination of those who come only in the warm months, for the swimming and the clam-cakes, and those full-time residents who seem never to go anywhere else.

Published in State by State: A Panoramic Portrait of America *(2008), a collection edited by Matt Weiland and Sean Wilsey to show the regional diversity of the United States. All fifty contributors wrote about their home states, exploring the intersections of personal, regional, and national history.*

1. Small town in the southern part of the state and home to the University of Rhode Island.

2. Italian explorer (1485–1528) working for King Francis I of France, who sailed the North American coast between South Carolina and Newfoundland.

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Cornelius Vanderbilt[3] were among Rhode Island's summer people. Given its diminutive proportions there is a third category: those who pass through without stopping. Forty-eight miles long and thirty-seven wide, it is a brief, unavoidable part of the journey by train between Boston and New York and also, if one chooses to take I-95, by car.

Historically it has harbored the radical and the seditious, misfits and minorities. Roger Williams, the liberal theologian who is credited with founding Rhode Island in 1636, was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony by, among others, Nathaniel Hawthorne's great grandfather.[4] Williams's unorthodox views on matters religious and otherwise made him an enemy of the Puritans. He eventually became and remained until his death a Seeker, rejecting any single body of doctrine and respecting the good in all branches of faith. Rhode Island, the thirteenth of the original thirteen colonies, had the greatest degree of self-rule, and was the first to renounce allegiance to King George in 1776. The Rhode Island Charter of 1663 guaranteed "full liberty in religious concernments," and, to its credit, the state accommodated the nation's first Baptists, its first Quakers, and is the site of its oldest synagogue, dedicated in 1763. A different attitude greeted the indigenous population, effectively decimated by 1676 in the course of King Philip's War.[5] Rhode Island is the only state that continues to celebrate, the second Monday of every August, VJ Day, which commemorates the surrender of Japan after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On a lesser but also disturbing note, it has not managed to pass the bottle bill, which means that all those plastic containers of Autocrat Coffee Syrup, used to make coffee milk (Rhode Island's official beverage), are destined for the purgatory of landfills.

Though I was born in London and have Indian parents, Rhode Island is the reply I give when people ask me where I am from. My family came in the summer of 1970, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, so that my father could begin work as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. I had just turned three years old. URI is located in the village of Kingston, a place originally called Little Rest. The name possibly stems from accounts of Colonial troops pausing on their way to fight the Narragansett tribe on the western banks of Worden Pond, an event known as the Great Swamp Massacre.[6] We lived on Kingston's

3. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis (1929–1994), wife of U.S. president John Fitzgerald Kennedy and later of Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis; Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794–1877), American multimillionaire who made his wealth from steamships and railroads, and built "The Breakers," a summer house in Newport, Rhode Island.

4. Roger Williams (c. 1603–1683) was banished by Colonel John Hawthorne (1641–1717), the judge most famous for presiding over the Salem witch trials in 1692. His descendant was the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864).

5. King Philip's War (1675–1676), sometimes called Metacom's Rebellion after the Native American leader whom the English called "King Philip," was fought between the Native American inhabitants of New England and the English settlers.

6. Pivotal battle in King Philip's War, fought in November 1675 between the colonial militia and the Narragansett tribe.

main historic tree-lined drag, in a white house with a portico and black shutters. It had been built in 1829 (a fact stated by a plaque next to the front door) to contain the law office of Asa Potter, who was at one point Rhode Island's secretary of state, and whose main residence was the larger, more spectacular house next door. After Asa Potter left Rhode Island to work in a bank in New York, the house became the site of a general store, with a tailor's shop at the front. By 1970 it was an apartment house owned by a fellow Indian, a professor of mathematics named Dr. Suryanarayan.

5 My family was a hybrid; year-rounders who, like the summer people, didn't fundamentally belong. We rented the first floor of the house; an elderly American woman named Miss Tay lived above us, alone, and her vulnerable, solitary presence was a constant reminder, to my parents, of America's harsh ways. A thick iron chain threaded through wooden posts separated us from our neighbors, the Fishers. A narrow path at the back led to a brown shingled shed I never entered. Hanging from one of the outbuildings on the Fishers' property was an oxen yoke, an icon of old New England agriculture, at once elegant and menacing, that both intrigued and scared me as a child. Its bowed shape caused me to think it was a weapon, not merely a restraint. Until I was an adult, I never knew exactly what it was for.

Kingston in those days was a mixture of hippies and Yankees and professors and students. The students arrived every autumn, taking up all the parking spaces, crowding the tables in the Memorial Union with their trays of Cokes and French fries, one year famously streaking on the lawn outside a fraternity building. After commencement in May, things were quiet again, to the point of feeling deserted. I imagine this perpetual ebb and flow, segments of the population ritually coming and going, made it easier for my foreign-born parents to feel that they, too, were rooted to the community in some way. Apart from the Suryanarayans, there were a few other Indian families, women other than my mother in saris walking now and then across the quad. My parents sought them out, invited them over for Bengali[7] dinners, and consider a few of these people among their closest friends today.

The gravitational center of Kingston was, and remains, the Kingston Congregational Church ("King Kong" to locals), where my family did not worship but where I went for Girl Scout meetings once a week, and where my younger sister eventually had her high-school graduation party. Across the street from the church, just six houses down from ours, was the Kingston Free Library. It was constructed as a courthouse, and also served as the state house between 1776 and 1791. The building's staid Colonial bones later incorporated Victorian flourishes, including a belfry and a mansard roof. If you stand outside and look up at a window to the right on the third floor, three stern white life-sized busts will stare down at you through the glass. They are thought to be likenesses of Abraham Lincoln, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Greenleaf Whit-

7. From the historic region now in northern India and southern Bangladesh.

tier.[8] For many years now, the bust of Lincoln has worn a long red-and-white striped hat, *Cat in the Hat*[9]–style, on its head.

From my earliest memories I was obsessed with the library, with its creaky, cramped atmosphere and all the things it contained. The books used to live on varnished wooden shelves, the modest card catalog contained in two bureau-sized units, sometimes arranged back to back. Phyllis Goodwin, then and for decades afterward the children's librarian, conducted the story hours I faithfully attended when I was little, held upstairs in a vaulted space called Potter Hall. Light poured in through enormous windows on three sides, and Asa Potter's portrait, predominantly black apart from the pale shade of his face, presided over the fireplace. Along with Phyllis there were two other women in charge of the library—Charlotte Schoonover, the director, and Pam Stoddard. Charlotte and Pam, roughly my mother's generation, were friends, and they both had sons about my age. For many years, Charlotte, Pam, and Phyllis represented the three graces to me, guardians of a sacred place that seemed both to represent the heart of Kingston and also the means of escaping it. They liked to play Corelli or Chopin ón the little tape recorder behind the desk, but ordered Patti Smith's *Horses* for the circulating album collection.[10]

When I was sixteen I was hired to work as a page at the library, which meant shelving books, working at the circulation desk, and putting plastic wrappers on the jackets of new arrivals. A lot of older people visited daily, to sit at a table with an arrangement of forsythia or cattails at the center, and read the newspaper. I remember a tall, slightly harried mother with wire-rimmed glasses who would come every two weeks with many children behind her and a large canvas tote bag over her shoulder, which she would dump out and then fill up again with more volumes of *The Borrowers* and Laura Ingalls Wilder[11] for the next round of collective reading. Jane Austen was popular with the patrons, enough for me to remember that the books had red cloth covers. I was an unhappy adolescent, lacking confidence, boyfriends, a proper sense of myself. When I was in the library it didn't matter. I took my cue from the readers who came and went and understood that books were what mattered, that they were above high school, above an adolescent's petty trials, above life itself.

8. Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), president of the United States during the Civil War; Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841–1935), legal theorist and associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court from 1902 until 1932; John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892), American Quaker poet.

9. Children's book (1957) that launched the career of Dr. Seuss.

10. Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713), Italian composer; Frédéric François Chopin (1810–1849), Polish composer and pianist; Patti Smith (b. 1946), American musician, poet, and visual artist.

11. *The Borrowers* (1952), the first in a series of children's books by Mary Norton about little people who live in the houses of big people and "borrow" things; Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867–1957), author of the popular "Little House" series for children.

10 By this time we no longer lived in Kingston. We had moved, when I was eight and my sister was one, to a house of our own. I would have preferred to stay in Kingston and live in an enclave called Biscuit City, not only because of the name but because it was full of professors and their families and had a laid-back, intellectual feel. Instead we moved to a town called Peace Dale, exactly one mile away. Peace Dale was a former mill town, an area where the university didn't hold sway. Our housing development, called Rolling Acres, was a leafy loop of roads without sidewalks. The turn into the neighborhood, off the main road, is between a John Deere showroom[12] and a bingo hall. Our house, a style called Colonial Garrison according to the developer's brochure, was historical in name only. In 1975 it was built before our eyes—the foundation dug, concrete poured, pale yellow vinyl siding stapled to the exterior.

After we moved into that house, something changed; whether it was my growing older or the place itself, I was aware that the world immediately outside our door, with its red-flagged mailboxes and children's bicycles left overnight on well-seeded grass, was alien to my parents. Some of our neighbors were friendly. Others pretended we were not there. I remember hot days when the mothers of my American friends in the neighborhood would lie in their bikinis on reclining chairs, chatting over wine coolers as my friends and I ran through a sprinkler, while my fully dressed mother was alone in our house, deep-frying a carp or listening to Bengali folk songs. In Rolling Acres we became car-bound. We couldn't walk, as we had been able to do in Kingston, to see a movie on campus, or buy milk and bread at Evan's Market, or get stamps at the post office. While one could walk (or run or bike) endlessly around the looping roads of Rolling Acres, without a car we were cut off from the rest of the world. When my parents first moved to Rhode Island, I think they both assumed that it was an experiment, just another port of call on their unfolding immigrant journey. The fact that they now owned a house, along with my father getting tenure, brought the journey to a halt. Thirty-seven years later, my parents still live there. The Little Rest they took in 1970 has effectively become the rest of their lives.

The sense of the environment radically shifting from mile to mile holds true throughout Rhode Island, almost the way life can vary block by block in certain cities. In South Kingstown alone there is a startling mixture of the lovely and the ugly—of resort, rural, and run-of-the-mill. There are strip malls, most of them radiating from a frenetic intersection called Dale Carlia corner, and no one who lives in my town can avoid negotiating its many traffic lights and lanes on a regular basis. There are countless housing developments, filled with energy-efficient split-levels when I was growing up, these days with McMansions. There are several Dunkin' Donut shops (Rhode Island has more per capita than any other state). There are also quiet farms where horses graze, and remote, winding roads through woods, flanked by low stone walls. There are places to buy antiques and handmade pottery. Along South Road is a sloping, empty field that resem-

12. For the sale of John Deere tractors and other agricultural equipment.

bles the one where Wyeth painted *Christina's World*.[13] There is a house on Route 108, just after the traffic light on 138, with the most extraordinary show of azaleas I have ever seen. And then, of course, there are the beaches.

We did not live on the ocean proper, but it was close enough, about five miles away. The ocean was where we took all our visitors from Massachusetts (which was where the majority of my parents' Bengali friends lived), either to Scarborough, which is the state beach, or to Point Judith Light. They used to sit on the grassy hill speaking a foreign tongue, sometimes bringing a picnic of packaged white bread and a pot of *aloo dum*.[14] On the way back they liked to stop in the fishing village of Galilee, where the parking lots of the shops and restaurants were covered with broken seashells. They did not go to eat stuffies, a local delicacy made from quahogs and bread crumbs, but to see if the daily catch included any butterfish or mackerel, to turn into a mustard curry at home. Occasionally my mother's best friend from Massachusetts, Koely Das, wanted to get lobsters or crabs, but these, too, received the curry treatment, a far, fiery cry from a side of melted butter.

The Atlantic I grew up with lacks the color and warmth of the Caribbean, the grandeur of the Pacific, the romance of the Mediterranean. It is generally cold, and full of rust-colored seaweed. Still, I prefer it. The waters of Rhode Island, as much a part of the state's character, if not more, as the land, never asked us questions, never raised a brow. Thanks to its very lack of welcome, its unwavering indifference, the ocean always made me feel accepted, and to my dying day, the seaside is the only place where I can feel truly and recklessly happy.

My father, a global traveler, considers Rhode Island paradise. For nearly four decades he has dedicated himself there to a job he loves, rising through the ranks in the library's cataloging department to become its head. But in addition to the job, he loves the place. He loves that it is quiet, and moderate, and is, in the great scheme of things, uneventful. He loves that he lives close to his work, and that he does not have to spend a significant portion of his life sitting in a car on the highway, or on a crowded subway, commuting. (Lately, because my parents have downsized to one car, he has begun to take a bus, on which he is frequently the sole passenger.) Though Rhode Island is a place of four proper seasons, he loves that both winters and summers, tempered by the ocean breezes, are relatively mild. He loves working in his small garden, and going once a week to buy groceries, coupons in hand, at Super Stop&Shop. In many ways he is a spiritual descendant of America's earliest Puritan settlers: thrifty, hard-working, plain in his habits. Like Roger Williams, he is something of a Seeker, aloof from organized religions but appreciating their philosophical worth. He also embodies the values of two of New England's greatest thinkers,

13. Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009), Maine artist whose most famous work, *Christina's World* (1948), shows a woman in a field of golden grass struggling to reach a farmhouse at the top of the hill.

14. Potato curry.

demonstrating a profound lack of materialism and self-reliance that would have made Thoreau and Emerson proud.[15] "The great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude," Emerson wrote. This is the man who raised me.

My mother, a gregarious and hard-wired urbanite, has struggled; to hear her recall the first time she was driven down from Massachusetts, along I–95 and then a remote, lightless stretch of Route 138, is to understand that Rhode Island was and in many ways remains the heart of darkness for her. She stayed at home to raise me and my sister, frequently taking in other children as well, but apart from a stint as an Avon Lady she had no job. In 1987, when my sister was a teenager, my mother finally ventured out, directing a day care and also working as a classroom assistant at South Road Elementary School, which both my sister and I had attended. One day, after she'd been working at the school for a decade, she started to receive anonymous hate mail. It came in the form of notes placed in her mailbox at school, and eventually in her coat pocket. There were nine notes in total. The handwriting was meant to look like a child's awkward scrawl. The content was humiliating, painful to recount. "Go back to India," one of them said. "Many people here do not like to see your face," read another. By then my mother had been a resident of Rhode Island for twenty-seven years. In Rhode Island she had raised two daughters, given birth to one. She had set up a home and potted geraniums year after year and thrown hundreds of dinner parties for her ever-expanding circle of Bengali friends. In Rhode Island she had renounced her Indian passport for an American one, pledged allegiance to the flag. My mother was ashamed of the notes, and for a while, hoping they would stop, she kept them to herself.

The incident might make a good start to a mystery novel, the type that always flew out of the Kingston Free Library: poison-pen letters appearing in a quaint, sleepy town. But there was nothing cozily intriguing about the cold-blooded correspondence my mother received. After finding the note in her coat pocket (it was February, recess time, and she had been expecting to pull out a glove), she told the school principal, and she also told my family what was going on. In the wake of this incident, many kind people reached out to my mother to express their outrage on her behalf, and for each of those nine notes, she received many sympathetic ones, including words of support from the former president of the university, Francis Horn. The majority of these people were Americans; one of the things that continues to upset my mother was that very few members of Rhode Island's Indian community, not insignificant by then, were willing to stand by her side. Some resented my mother for creating controversy, for drawing attention to their being foreign, a fact they worked to neutralize. Others told her that she might not have been targeted if she had worn skirts and trousers instead of saris and bindis. Meetings were held at the elementary school, calling for increased tolerance and sensitivity. The story was covered by the *Providence Journal-*

15. Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), American writer; see "The Battle of the Ants" (pp. 725–27) and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (pp. 481–89); Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), American writer and philosopher.

Bulletin and the local television news. Montel Williams[16] called our house, wanting my mother to appear on his show (she declined). A detective was put on the case, but the writer of the notes never came forward, was never found. Over ten years have passed. South Road School has shut down, for reasons having nothing to do with what happened to my mother. She worked for another school, part of the same system, in West Kingston, and has recently retired.

I left Rhode Island at eighteen to attend college in New York City, which is where, following a detour up to Boston, I continue to live. Because my parents still live in Rhode Island I still visit, though the logistics of having two small children mean they come to me these days more often than I go to them. I was there in August 2007. My parents, children, sister, and I had just been to Vermont, renting a cabin on a lake. There was a screened-in porch, a Modern Library first edition of *To the Lighthouse*[17] in the bookcase, and a severe mouse problem in the kitchen. In the end the mice drove us away, and during the long drive back to my parents' house, I was aware how little Vermont and Rhode Island, both New England states, have in common. Vermont is dramatically northern, rural, mountainous, landlocked. Rhode Island is flat, briny, more densely populated. Vermont is liberal enough to sanction gay marriage but feels homogenous, lacking Rhode Island's deep pockets of immigration from Ireland, Portugal, and Italy. Rhode Island's capital, Providence, was run for years by a Republican Italian, Buddy Cianci. In 1984 he was convicted of kidnapping his then-estranged wife's boyfriend, beating him with a fire log, and burning him with a lighted cigarette. In 1991 he ran again for mayor, and the citizens of Rhode Island handed him 97 percent of the vote.

It was hotter in Rhode Island than it had been in Vermont. The Ghiorse Beach Factor, courtesy of John Ghiorse, the meteorologist on Channel 10, was a perfect 10 for the weekend we were there. On my way to buy sunscreen at the CVS pharmacy in Kingston, I stopped by the library, excited to see the sign outside indicating that the summer book sale was still going on. The library has been expanded and renovated since I worked there, the circulation desk much larger now and facing the entering visitor, with a computer system instead of the clunky machine that stamped due date cards. The only familiar thing, apart from the books, was Pam. "Just the dregs," she warned me about the book sale. As we were catching up, an elderly couple with British accents approached. "Excuse me," the woman interrupted. "Can you recommend something decent? I'm tired of murder mysteries and people being killed. I just want to hear a decent family story." Pam led her away to the books on tape section, and I went upstairs to Potter Hall to look at the sale. It was just the dregs, as Pam had said, but I managed to find a few things I'd always meant to read—a paperback copy of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, and *Monkeys* by Susan Minot. The curtained stage that used to be at one end of the room, on which I had performed, among

16. Montel Williams (b. 1956) hosted an Emmy Award–winning daytime talk show from 1991 to 2008.

17. Novel (1927) by Virginia Woolf set in a summer house by the sea.

other things, the role of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, was gone, so that the space seemed even bigger. The grand piano was still there, but Asa Potter's portrait was at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Pam later explained, for repairs. She told me she was thinking of retiring soon, and that Phyllis, who had retired long before, had discovered a late-blooming talent for portrait painting. "It's a quirky place," Pam reflected when I asked her about Rhode Island, complaining, "There's no zoning. No united front." And practically in the same breath, proudly: "Kingston is the melting pot of the state."

20 In the afternoon I took my children, along with my mother and sister, to Scarborough. The beach was packed, the tide high and rough. As soon as we set down our things, a wave hit us, forcing us to pick up a drenched blanket and move. Scarborough is a large beach with a paved parking lot that feels even larger. The parking lot itself is also useful in the off-season, for learning how to drive. Scarborough lacks the steep, dramatic dunes and isolated aura of lower Cape Cod, a stretch of New England coastline I have come, in my adult life, to love more than the beach of my childhood. The sand at Scarborough is extremely fine and gray and, when moist, resembles wet ash. A large tide pool had formed that day, and it was thick with young muddied children lying on their bellies, pretending to swim. My son darted off to chase seagulls. The breeze blew impressively in spite of the sultry weather, justifying Ghiorse's ten out of ten. In the distance I could see Point Judith Light. The giant billboard for Coppertone, the Dr. T. J. Eckleburg of my youth,[18] has vanished, but I imagined it was still there—the model's toasted bikini-clad seventies body sprawled regally, indifferently, above the masses.

An announcement on the loudspeaker informed us that a little girl was lost, asking her to meet her mother under the flag on the boardwalk. Another announcement followed: The men's hot water showers were temporarily out of service. The population was democratic, unpretentious, inclusive: ordinary bodies of various sizes and shades, the shades both genetic and cultivated, reading paperback bestsellers and reaching into big bags of chips. I saw no *New Yorker* magazines being read, no heirloom tomato sandwiches or organic peaches being consumed. A trio of deeply tanned adolescent boys tripped past, collectively courting, one could imagine, the same elusive girl. The sun began to set, and within an hour the crowd had thinned to the point where a man started to drag his metal detector through the sand, and the only kids in the tide pool were my own. As we were getting up to go, our bodies sticky with salt, it occurred to me that Scarborough Beach on a summer day is one of the few places that is not a city but still manages, reassuringly, to feel like one. Two days later, I headed home with my sister and my children to Brooklyn. On our way through West Kingston to catch the highway, a lone green truck selling Dell's, Rhode Island's beloved frozen lemonade, beckoned at an otherwise desolate intersection, but

18. Lahiri alludes to a billboard in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which shows the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, "blue and gigantic—their irises are one yard high."

my sister and I drove on, accepting the fact that we would not taste Dell's for another year.

As long as my mother and father live, I will continue to visit Rhode Island. They are, respectively, in their late sixties and seventies now, and each time I drive by the local funeral home in Wakefield, I try to prepare myself. Just after I'd finished a draft of this essay, early one November morning, my mother had a heart attack at home. An Indian doctor at Rhode Island Hospital, Arun Singh, performed the bypass operation that has saved her life. When I was a child, I remember my mother often wondering who, in the event of an emergency or other crisis, would come running to help us. During the weeks when I feared she might slip away, everyone did. Our mailbox was stuffed with get-well cards from my mother's students, the refrigerator stuffed with food from her friends. My father's colleagues at the library took up a collection to buy my family Thanksgiving dinner. Our next door neighbor, Mrs. Hyde, who had seen the ambulance pulling up to our house, crossed over to our yard as I was heading to the hospital one day, and told me she'd said a special prayer for my mother at her church.

Due to my parents' beliefs, whenever and wherever they do die, they will not be buried in Rhode Island soil. The house in Rolling Acres will belong to other people; there will be no place there to pay my respects. At the risk of predicting the future, I can see myself, many years from now, driving up I–95, on my way to another vacation on the Cape. We will cross the border after Connecticut, turn off at exit 3A for Kingston, and then continue along an alternative, prettier route that will take us across Jamestown and over the Newport Bridge, where the sapphire bay spreads out on either side, a breathtaking sight that will never grow old. There will no longer be a reason to break the journey in Little Rest. Like many others, we will pass through without stopping.

MLA CITATION

Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Rhode Island." *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction*, edited by Melissa A. Goldthwaite et al., 15th ed., W. W. Norton, 2020, pp. 110–19.

QUESTIONS

1. One purpose of the collection in which Jhumpa Lahiri's essay appeared is to show the diversity of the fifty American states. How does Lahiri achieve this purpose? What details does she provide that are unique to Rhode Island or New England?

2. Lahiri is a novelist who alludes to other authors and their writing. Choose one allusion to a novel or short story, and explain how this reference enriches Lahiri's narrative.

3. Lahiri gives both her personal history and a brief history of the state in which she grew up. What connections might be drawn between the personal and the regional? Consider both the explicit and implicit connections.

4. Write an account of the region or state in which you grew up, integrating some of its history with your personal experience.

Originally published in Harper's Magazine *(1989), an American monthly covering politics, society, culture, and the environment.*

Scott Russell Sanders

Under the Influence

My father drank. He drank as a gut-punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling. I use the past tense not because he ever quit drinking but because he quit living. That is how the story ends for my father, age sixty-four, heart bursting, body cooling and forsaken on the linoleum of my brother's trailer. The story continues for my brother, my sister, my mother, and me, and will continue so long as memory holds.

In the perennial present of memory, I slip into the garage or barn to see my father tipping back the flat green bottles of wine, the brown cylinders of whiskey, the cans of beer disguised in paper bags. His Adam's apple bobs, the liquid gurgles, he wipes the sandy-haired back of a hand over his lips, and then, his bloodshot gaze bumping into me, he stashes the bottle or can inside his jacket, under the workbench, between two bales of hay, and we both pretend the moment has not occurred.

"What's up, buddy?" he says, thick-tongued and edgy.

"Sky's up," I answer, playing along.

"And don't forget prices," he grumbles. "Prices are always up. And taxes."

In memory, his white 1951 Pontiac with the stripes down the hood and the Indian head on the snout jounces to a stop in the driveway; or it is the 1956 Ford station wagon, or the 1963 Rambler shaped like a toad, or the sleek 1969 Bonneville that will do 120 miles per hour on straightaways; or it is the robin's-egg blue pickup, new in 1980, battered in 1981, the year of his death. He climbs out, grinning dangerously, unsteady on his legs, and we children interrupt our game of catch, our building of snow forts, our picking of plums, to watch in silence as he weaves past into the house, where he slumps into his overstuffed chair and falls asleep. Shaking her head, our mother stubs out the cigarette he has left smoldering in the ashtray. All evening, until our bedtimes, we tiptoe past him, as past a snoring dragon. Then we curl in our fearful sheets, listening. Eventually he wakes with a grunt, Mother slings accusations at him, he snarls back, she yells, he growls, their voices clashing. Before long, she retreats to their bedroom, sobbing—not from the blows of fists, for he never strikes her, but from the force of words.

Left alone, our father prowls the house, thumping into furniture, rummaging in the kitchen, slamming doors, turning the pages of the newspaper with a savage crackle, muttering back at the late-night drivel from television. The roof might fly off, the walls might buckle from the pressure of his rage. Whatever my brother and sister and mother may be thinking on their own rumpled pillows, I lie there hating him, loving him, fearing him, knowing I have failed him. I tell myself he drinks to ease an ache that gnaws at his belly, an ache I must have caused by disappointing him somehow, a murderous ache I should be able to relieve by doing all my chores, earning A's in school, winning baseball games, fixing the broken washer and the burst pipes, bringing in money to fill his empty wallet. He would not hide the green bottles in his tool box, would not sneak off to the barn with a lump under his coat, would not fall asleep in the daylight, would not roar and fume, would not drink himself to death, if only I were perfect.

I am forty-two as I write these words, and I know full well now that my father was an alcoholic, a man consumed by disease rather than by disappointment. What had seemed to me a private grief is in fact a public scourge. In the United States alone some ten or fifteen million people share his ailment, and behind the doors they slam in fury or disgrace, countless other children tremble. I comfort myself with such knowledge, holding it against the throb of memory like an ice pack against a bruise. There are keener sources of grief: poverty, racism, rape, war. I do not wish to compete for a trophy in suffering. I am only trying to understand the corrosive mixture of helplessness, responsibility, and shame that I learned to feel as the son of an alcoholic. I realize now that I did not cause my father's illness, nor could I have cured it. Yet for all this grown-up knowledge, I am still ten years old, my own son's age, and as that boy I struggle in guilt and confusion to save my father from pain.

Consider a few of our synonyms for *drunk*: tipsy, tight, pickled, soused, and plowed; stoned and stewed, lubricated and inebriated, juiced and sluiced; three sheets to the wind, in your cups, out of your mind, under the table; lit up, tanked up, wiped out; besotted, blotto, bombed, and buzzed; plastered, polluted, putrified; loaded or looped, boozy, woozy, fuddled, or smashed; crocked and shitfaced, corked and pissed, snockered and sloshed.

It is a mostly humorous lexicon, as the lore that deals with drunks—in jokes and cartoons, in plays, films, and television skits—is largely comic. Aunt Matilda nips elderberry wine from the sideboard and burps politely during supper. Uncle Fred slouches to the table glassy-eyed, wearing a lamp shade for a hat and murmuring, "Candy is dandy but liquor is quicker." Inspired by cocktails, Mrs. Somebody recounts the events of her day in a fuzzy dialect, while Mr. Somebody nibbles her ear and croons a bawdy song. On the sofa with Boyfriend, Daughter giggles, licking gin from her lips, and loosens the bows in her hair. Junior knocks back some brews with his chums at the Leopard Lounge and stumbles home to the wrong house, wonders foggily why he cannot locate his pajamas, and crawls naked into bed with the ugliest girl in school. The family dog slurps from a neglected martini and wobbles to the nursery, where he vomits in Baby's shoe.

It is all great fun. But if in the audience you notice a few laughing faces turn grim when the drunk lurches on stage, don't be surprised, for these are the children of alcoholics. Over the grinning mask of Dionysus,[1] the leering mask of Bacchus,[2] these children cannot help seeing the bloated features of their own parents. Instead of laughing, they wince, they mourn. Instead of celebrating the drunk as one freed from constraints, they pity him as one enslaved. They refuse to believe *in vino veritas*,[3] having seen their befuddled parents skid away from truth toward folly and oblivion. And so these children bite their lips until the lush staggers into the wings.

My father, when drunk, was neither funny nor honest; he was pathetic, frightening, deceitful. There seemed to be a leak in him somewhere, and he poured in booze to keep from draining dry. Like a torture victim who refuses to squeal, he would never admit that he had touched a drop, not even in his last year, when he seemed to be dissolving in alcohol before our very eyes. I never knew him to lie about anything, ever, except about this one ruinous fact. Drowsy, clumsy, unable to fix a bicycle tire, throw a baseball, balance a gro-

1. Greek name for the god of wine and intoxication.
2. Roman name for the god of wine and intoxication.
3. Latin for "in wine is truth."

cery sack, or walk across the room, he was stripped of his true self by drink. In a matter of minutes, the contents of a bottle could transform a brave man into a coward, a buddy into a bully, a gifted athlete and skilled carpenter and shrewd businessman into a bumbler. No dictionary of synonyms for *drunk* would soften the anguish of watching our prince turn into a frog.

Father's drinking became the family secret. While growing up, we children never breathed a word of it beyond the four walls of our house. To this day, my brother and sister rarely mention it, and then only when I press them. I did not confess the ugly, bewildering fact to my wife until his wavering walk and slurred speech forced me to. Recently, on the seventh anniversary of my father's death, I asked my mother if she ever spoke of his drinking to friends. "No, no, never," she replied hastily. "I couldn't bear for anyone to know."

The secret bores under the skin, gets in the blood, into the bone, and stays there. Long after you have supposedly been cured of malaria, the fever can flare up, the tremors can shake you. So it is with the fevers of shame. You swallow the bitter quinine[4] of knowledge, and you learn to feel pity and compassion toward the drinker. Yet the shame lingers in your marrow, and, because of the shame, anger.

15 For a long stretch of my childhood we lived on a military reservation in Ohio, an arsenal where bombs were stored underground in bunkers, vintage airplanes burst into flames, and unstable artillery shells boomed nightly at the dump. We had the feeling, as children, that we played in a mine field, where a heedless footfall could trigger an explosion. When Father was drinking, the house, too, became a mine field. The least bump could set off either parent.

The more he drank, the more obsessed Mother became with stopping him. She hunted for bottles, counted the cash in his wallet, sniffed at his breath. Without meaning to snoop, we children blundered left and right into damning evidence. On afternoons when he came home from work sober, we flung ourselves at him for hugs, and felt against our ribs the telltale lump in his coat. In the barn we tumbled on the hay and heard beneath our sneakers the crunch of buried glass. We tugged open a drawer in his workbench, looking for screwdrivers or crescent wrenches, and spied a gleaming six-pack among the tools. Playing tag, we darted around the house just in time to see him sway on the rear stoop and heave a finished bottle into the woods. In his good night kiss we smelled the cloying sweetness of Clorets, the mints he chewed to camouflage his dragon's breath.

I can summon up that kiss right now by recalling Theodore Roethke's[5] lines about his own father in "My Papa's Waltz":

> The whiskey on your breath
> Could make a small boy dizzy;
> But I hung on like death:
> Such waltzing was not easy.

Such waltzing was hard, terribly hard, for with a boy's scrawny arms I was trying to hold my tipsy father upright.

For years, the chief source of those incriminating bottles and cans was a grimy store a mile from us, a cinder block place called Sly's, with two gas pumps outside and a moth-eaten dog asleep in the window. A strip of flypaper, speckled the year round with black bodies, coiled in the doorway. Inside, on rusty metal shelves or in wheezing coolers, you could find pop and Popsicles, ciga-

4. Drug used to treat malaria, made from the bark of the South American cinchona tree.
5. American poet (1908–1963) whose father also drank a lot.

rettes, potato chips, canned soup, raunchy postcards, fishing gear, Twinkies, wine, and beer. When Father drove anywhere on errands, Mother would send us kids along as guards, warning us not to let him out of our sight. And so with one or more of us on board, Father would cruise up to Sly's, pump a dollar's worth of gas or plump the tires with air, and then, telling us to wait in the car, he would head for that fly-spangled doorway.

Dutiful and panicky, we cried, "Let us go in with you!"

"No," he answered. "I'll be back in two shakes."

"Please!"

"No!" he roared. "Don't you budge, or I'll jerk a knot in your tails!"

So we stayed put, kicking the seats, while he ducked inside. Often, when he had parked the car at a careless angle, we gazed in through the window and saw Mr. Sly fetching down from a shelf behind the cash register two green pints of Gallo wine. Father swigged one of them right there at the counter, stuffed the other in his pocket, and then out he came, a bulge in his coat, a flustered look on his red face.

Because the Mom and Pop who ran the dump were neighbors of ours, living just down the tar-blistered road, I hated them all the more for poisoning my father. I wanted to sneak in their store and smash the bottles and set fire to the place. I also hated the Gallo brothers, Ernest and Julio, whose jovial faces shone from the labels of their wine, labels I would find, torn and curled, when I burned the trash. I noted the Gallo brothers' address, in California, and I studied the road atlas to see how far that was from Ohio, because I meant to go out there and tell Ernest and Julio what they were doing to my father, and then, if they showed no mercy, I would kill them.

While growing up on the back roads and in the country schools and cramped Methodist churches of Ohio and Tennessee, I never heard the word *alcoholism,* never happened across it in books or magazines. In the nearby towns, there were no addiction treatment programs, no community mental health centers, no Alcoholics Anonymous chapters, no therapists. Left alone with our grievous secret, we had no way of understanding Father's drinking except as an act of will, a deliberate folly or cruelty, a moral weakness, a sin. He drank because he chose to, pure and simple. Why our father, so playful and competent and kind when sober, would choose to ruin himself and punish his family, we could not fathom.

Our neighborhood was high on the Bible, and the Bible was hard on drunkards. "Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink," wrote Isaiah. "The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are confused with wine, they err in vision, they stumble in giving judgment. For all tables are full of vomit, no place is without filthiness." We children had seen those fouled tables at the local truck stop where the notorious boozers hung out, our father occasionally among them. "Wine and new wine take away the understanding," declared the prophet Hosea. We had also seen evidence of that in our father, who could multiply seven-digit numbers in his head when sober, but when drunk could not help us with fourth-grade math.

Proverbs warned: "Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things." Woe, woe.

Dismayingly often, these biblical drunkards stirred up trouble for their own kids. Noah made fresh wine after the flood, drank too much of it, fell asleep without any clothes on, and was glimpsed in the buff by his son Ham, whom Noah promptly cursed. In one passage—it was so shocking we had to read it under our blankets with flashlights—the patriarch Lot fell down drunk and slept with his daughters. The sins of the fathers set their children's teeth on edge.

Our ministers were fond of quoting St. Paul's pronouncement that drunkards would not inherit the kingdom of God. These grave preachers assured us that the wine referred to during the Last Supper was in fact grape juice. Bible and sermons and hymns combined to give us the impression that Moses should have brought down from the mountain another stone tablet, bearing the Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt not drink.

The scariest and most illuminating Bible story apropos of drunkards was the one about the lunatic and the swine. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each told a version of the tale. We knew it by heart: When Jesus climbed out of his boat one day, this lunatic came charging up from the graveyard, stark naked and filthy, frothing at the mouth, so violent that he broke the strongest chains. Nobody would go near him. Night and day for years this madman had been wailing among the tombs and bruising himself with stones. Jesus took one look at him and said, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirits!" for he could see that the lunatic was possessed by demons. Meanwhile, some hogs were conveniently rooting nearby. "If we have to come out," begged the demons, "at least let us go into those swine." Jesus agreed. The unclean spirits entered the hogs, and the hogs rushed straight off a cliff and plunged into a lake. Hearing the story in Sunday school, my friends thought mainly of the pigs. (How big a splash did they make? Who paid for the lost pork?) But I thought of the redeemed lunatic, who bathed himself and put on clothes and calmly sat at the feet of Jesus, restored—so the Bible said—to "his right mind."

30 When drunk, our father was clearly in his wrong mind. He became a stranger, as fearful to us as any graveyard lunatic, not quite frothing at the mouth but fierce enough, quick-tempered, explosive; or else he grew maudlin and weepy, which frightened us nearly as much. In my boyhood despair, I reasoned that maybe he wasn't to blame for turning into an ogre. Maybe, like the lunatic, he was possessed by demons. I found support for my theory when I heard liquor referred to as "spirits," when the newspapers reported that somebody had been arrested for "driving under the influence," and when church ladies railed against that "demon drink."

If my father was indeed possessed, who would exorcise him? If he was a sinner, who would save him? If he was ill, who would cure him? If he suffered, who would ease his pain? Not ministers or doctors, for we could not bring ourselves to confide in them; not the neighbors, for we pretended they had never

seen him drunk; not Mother, who fussed and pleaded but could not budge him; not my brother and sister, who were only kids. That left me. It did not matter that I, too, was only a child, and a bewildered one at that. I could not excuse myself.

On first reading a description of delirium tremens—in a book on alcoholism I smuggled from the library—I thought immediately of the frothing lunatic and the frenzied swine. When I read stories or watched films about grisly metamorphoses—Dr. Jekyll becoming Mr. Hyde,[6] the mild husband changing into a werewolf, the kindly neighbor taken over by a brutal alien—I could not help seeing my own father's mutation from sober to drunk. Even today, knowing better, I am attracted by the demonic theory of drink, for when I recall my father's transformation, the emergence of his ugly second self, I find it easy to believe in possession by unclean spirits. We never knew which version of Father would come home from work, the true or the tainted, nor could we guess how far down the slope toward cruelty he would slide.

How far a man *could* slide we gauged by observing our back-road neighbors—the out-of-work miners who had dragged their families to our corner of Ohio from the desolate hollows of Appalachia, the tight-fisted farmers, the surly mechanics, the balked and broken men. There was, for example, whiskey-soaked Mr. Jenkins, who beat his wife and kids so hard we could hear their screams from the road. There was Mr. Lavo the wino, who fell asleep smoking time and again, until one night his disgusted wife bundled up the children and went outside and left him in his easy chair to burn; he awoke on his own, staggered out coughing into the yard, and pounded her flat while the children looked on and the shack turned to ash. There was the truck driver, Mr. Sampson, who tripped over his son's tricycle one night while drunk and got so mad that he jumped into his semi and drove away, shifting through the dozen gears, and never came back. We saw the bruised children of these fathers clump onto our school bus, we saw the abandoned children huddle in the pews at church, we saw the stunned and battered mothers begging for help at our doors.

Our own father never beat us, and I don't think he ever beat Mother, but he threatened often. The Old Testament Yahweh was not more terrible in his wrath. Eyes blazing, voice booming, Father would pull out his belt and swear to give us a whipping, but he never followed through, never needed to, because we could imagine it so vividly. He shoved us, pawed us with the back of his hand, as an irked bear might smack a cub, not to injure, just to clear a space. I can see him grabbing Mother by the hair as she cowers on a chair during a nightly quarrel. He twists her neck back until she gapes up at him, and then he lifts over her skull a glass quart bottle of milk, the milk running down his forearm; and he yells at her, "Say just one more word, one goddamn word, and I'll shut you up!" I fear she will prick him with her sharp tongue, but she is terrified into silence, and so am I, and the leaking bottle quivers in the air, and

6. London physician and his evil alter ego, in Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

milk slithers through the red hair of my father's uplifted arm, and the entire scene is there to this moment, the head jerked back, the club raised.

35 When the drink made him weepy, Father would pack a bag and kiss each of us children on the head, and announce from the front door that he was moving out. "Where to?" we demanded, fearful each time that he would leave for good, as Mr. Sampson had roared away for good in his diesel truck. "Someplace where I won't get hounded every minute," Father would answer, his jaw quivering. He stabbed a look at Mother, who might say, "Don't run into the ditch before you get there," or, "Good riddance," and then he would slink away. Mother watched him go with arms crossed over her chest, her face closed like the lid on a box of snakes. We children bawled. Where could he go? To the truck stop, that den of iniquity? To one of those dark, ratty flophouses in town? Would he wind up sleeping under a railroad bridge or on a park bench or in a cardboard box, mummied in rags, like the bums we had seen on our trips to Cleveland and Chicago? We bawled and bawled, wondering if he would ever come back.

He always did come back, a day or a week later, but each time there was a sliver less of him.

In Kafka's[7] *The Metamorphosis,* which opens famously with Gregor Samsa waking up from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into an insect, Gregor's family keep reassuring themselves that things will be just fine again, "When he comes back to us." Each time alcohol transformed our father, we held out the same hope, that he would really and truly come back to us, our authentic father, the tender and playful and competent man, and then all things would be fine. We had grounds for such hope. After his weepy departures and chapfallen returns, he would sometimes go weeks, even months without drinking. Those were glad times. Joy banged inside my ribs. Every day without the furtive glint of bottles, every meal without a fight, every bedtime without sobs encouraged us to believe that such bliss might go on forever.

Mother was fooled by just such a hope all during the forty-odd years she knew this Greeley Ray Sanders. Soon after she met him in a Chicago delicatessen on the eve of World War II and fell for his butter-melting Mississippi drawl and his wavy red hair, she learned that he drank heavily. But then so did a lot of men. She would soon coax or scold him into breaking the nasty habit. She would point out to him how ugly and foolish it was, this bleary drinking, and then he would quit. He refused to quit during their engagement, however, still refused during the first years of marriage, refused until my sister came along. The shock of fatherhood sobered him, and he remained sober through my birth at the end of the war and right on through until we moved in 1951 to the Ohio arsenal, that paradise of bombs. Like all places that make a business of death, the arsenal had more than its share of alcoholics and drug addicts and other varieties of escape artists. There I turned six and started school and woke into a child's flickering awareness, just in time to see my father begin sneaking swigs in the garage.

7. Franz Kafka (1883–1924), Prague-born novelist and short-story writer.

He sobered up again for most of a year at the height of the Korean War, to celebrate the birth of my brother. But aside from that dry spell, his only breaks from drinking before I graduated from high school were just long enough to raise and then dash our hopes. Then during the fall of my senior year—the time of the Cuban missile crisis, when it seemed that the nightly explosions at the munitions dump and the nightly rages in our household might spread to engulf the globe—Father collapsed. His liver, kidneys, and heart all conked out. The doctors saved him, but only by a hair. He stayed in the hospital for weeks, going through a withdrawal so terrible that Mother would not let us visit him. If he wanted to kill himself, the doctors solemnly warned him, all he had to do was hit the bottle again. One binge would finish him.

Father must have believed them, for he stayed dry the next fifteen years. It was an answer to prayer, Mother said, it was a miracle. I believe it was a reflex of fear, which he sustained over the years through courage and pride. He knew a man could die from drink, for his brother Roscoe had. We children never laid eyes on doomed Uncle Roscoe, but in the stories Mother told us he became a fairy-tale figure, like a boy who took the wrong turning in the woods and was gobbled up by the wolf.

The fifteen-year dry spell came to an end with Father's retirement in the spring of 1978. Like many men, he gave up his identity along with his job. One day he was a boss at the factory, with a brass plate on his door and a reputation to uphold; the next day he was a nobody at home. He and Mother were leaving Ontario, the last of the many places to which his job had carried them, and they were moving to a new house in Mississippi, his childhood stomping grounds. As a boy in Mississippi, Father sold Coca-Cola during dances while the moonshiners peddled their brew in the parking lot; as a young blade, he fought in bars and in the ring, seeking a state Golden Gloves championship; he gambled at poker, hunted pheasants, raced motorcycles and cars, played semiprofessional baseball, and, along with all his buddies—in the Black Cat Saloon, behind the cotton gin, in the woods—he drank. It was a perilous youth to dream of recovering.

After his final day of work, Mother drove on ahead with a car full of begonias and violets, while Father stayed behind to oversee the packing. When the van was loaded, the sweaty movers broke open a six-pack and offered him a beer.

"Let's drink to retirement!" they crowed. "Let's drink to freedom! to fishing! hunting! loafing! Let's drink to a guy who's going home!"

At least I imagine some such words, for that is all I can do, imagine, and I see Father's hand trembling in midair as he thinks about the fifteen sober years and about the doctors' warning, and he tells himself *God damnit, I am a free man,* and *Why can't a free man drink one beer after a lifetime of hard work?* and I see his arm reaching, his fingers closing, the can tilting to his lips. I even supply a label for the beer, a swaggering brand that promises on television to deliver the essence of life. I watch the amber liquid pour down his throat, the alcohol steal into his blood, the key turn in his brain.

Soon after my parents moved back to Father's treacherous stomping ground, my wife and I visited them in Mississippi with our five-year-old daughter. Mother

had been too distraught to warn me about the return of the demons. So when I climbed out of the car that bright July morning and saw my father napping in the hammock, I felt uneasy, for in all his sober years I had never known him to sleep in daylight. Then he lurched upright, blinked his bloodshot eyes, and greeted us in a syrupy voice. I was hurled back helpless into childhood.

"What's the matter with Papaw?" our daughter asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing!"

Like a child again, I pretended not to see him in his stupor, and behind my phony smile I grieved. On that visit and on the few that remained before his death, once again I found bottles in the workbench, bottles in the woods. Again his hands shook too much for him to run a saw, to make his precious miniature furniture, to drive straight down back roads. Again he wound up in the ditch, in the hospital, in jail, in treatment centers. Again he shouted and wept. Again he lied. "I never touched a drop," he swore. "Your mother's making it up."

I no longer fancied I could reason with the men whose names I found on the bottles—Jim Beam, Jack Daniels—nor did I hope to save my father by burning down a store. I was able now to press the cold statistics about alcoholism against the ache of memory: ten million victims, fifteen million, twenty. And yet, in spite of my age, I reacted in the same blind way as I had in childhood, ignoring biology, forgetting numbers, vainly seeking to erase through my efforts whatever drove him to drink. I worked on their place twelve and sixteen hours a day, in the swelter of Mississippi summers, digging ditches, running electrical wires, planting trees, mowing grass, building sheds, as though what nagged at him was some list of chores, as though by taking his worries on my shoulders I could redeem him. I was flung back into boyhood, acting as though my father would not drink himself to death if only I were perfect.

50 I failed of perfection; he succeeded in dying. To the end, he considered himself not sick but sinful. "Do you want to kill yourself?" I asked him. "Why not?" he answered. "Why the hell not? What's there to save?" To the end, he would not speak about his feelings, would not or could not give a name to the beast that was devouring him.

In silence, he went rushing off the cliff. Unlike the biblical swine, however, he left behind a few of the demons to haunt his children. Life with him and the loss of him twisted us into shapes that will be familiar to other sons and daughters of alcoholics. My brother became a rebel, my sister retreated into shyness, I played the stalwart and dutiful son who would hold the family together. If my father was unstable, I would be a rock. If he squandered money on drink, I would pinch every penny. If he wept when drunk—and only when drunk—I would not let myself weep at all. If he roared at the Little League umpire for calling my pitches balls, I would throw nothing but strikes. Watching him flounder and rage, I came to dread the loss of control. I would go through life without making anyone mad. I vowed never to put in my mouth or veins any chemical that would banish my everyday self. I would never make a scene, never lash out at the ones I loved, never hurt a soul. Through hard work, relentless work, I would achieve something dazzling—in the classroom, on the basketball floor, in the science lab, in the pages of books—and my achievement

would distract the world's eyes from his humiliation. I would become a worthy sacrifice, and the smoke of my burning would please God.

It is far easier to recognize these twists in my character than to undo them. Work has become an addiction for me, as drink was an addiction for my father. Knowing this, my daughter gave me a placard for the wall: WORKAHOLIC. The labor is endless and futile, for I can no more redeem myself through work than I could redeem my father. I still panic in the face of other people's anger, because his drunken temper was so terrible. I shrink from causing sadness or disappointment even to strangers, as though I were still concealing the family shame. I still notice every twitch of emotion in the faces around me, having learned as a child to read the weather in faces, and I blame myself for their least pang of unhappiness or anger. In certain moods I blame myself for everything. Guilt burns like acid in my veins.

I am moved to write these pages now because my own son, at the age of ten, is taking on himself the griefs of the world, and in particular the griefs of his father. He tells me that when I am gripped by sadness he feels responsible; he feels there must be something he can do to spring me from depression, to fix my life. And that crushing sense of responsibility is exactly what I felt at the age of ten in the face of my father's drinking. My son wonders if I, too, am possessed. I write, therefore, to drag into the light what eats at me—the fear, the guilt, the shame—so that my own children may be spared.

I still shy away from nightclubs, from bars, from parties where the solvent is alcohol. My friends puzzle over this, but it is no more peculiar than for a man to shy away from the lions' den after seeing his father torn apart. I took my own first drink at the age of twenty-one, half a glass of burgundy. I knew the odds of my becoming an alcoholic were four times higher than for the sons of nonalcoholic fathers. So I sipped warily.

I still do—once a week, perhaps, a glass of wine, a can of beer, nothing stronger, nothing more. I listen for the turning of a key in my brain.

MLA CITATION

Sanders, Scott Russell. "Under the Influence." *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Nonfiction*, edited by Melissa A. Goldthwaite et al., 15th ed., W. W. Norton, 2020, pp. 35–45.

QUESTIONS

1. Scott Russell Sanders frequently punctuates his memories of his father with information from other sources—dictionaries, medical encyclopedias, poems and short stories, the Bible. What function do these sources perform? How do they enlarge and enrich Sanders's essay?

2. Why does Sanders conclude his essay with paragraphs 53–55? What effect do they create that would be lost without them?

3. Drawing on your memories of a family member, write an essay about a problem that person had and its effect on your life.

BEN FOUNTAIN

Soldiers on the Fault Line: War, Rhetoric, and Reality

The Seventh Annual David L. Jannetta Distinguished Lecture in War, Literature & the Arts
September 10, 2013 / U.S. Air Force Academy

The reason I'm here is because I wrote a novel called *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* that was published last year. It's a war novel, and specifically, it's about our wars of the past twelve years in Iraq and Afghanistan, but I suppose it's kind of a strange war novel in that it takes place entirely at a Dallas Cowboys football game on Thanksgiving Day, at the old Texas Stadium, where the Cowboys used to play before Jerry Jones moved them down the road to his new stadium.

Some of you have been forced to read *Billy Lynn* for class, and for that I apologize, but for those of you who haven't, just to give you a rough idea, it's about football, cheerleaders, sex, death, war, capitalism, the transmigration of souls, brothers and sisters, parents and children, the movie industry, Destiny's Child, and the general insanity of American life in the early years of the 21st century. The impulse for this book started building in me around 2003, 2004, when I began to realize that I didn't understand my country—this place where I was born and grew up and had spent my whole life, I didn't have a clue as to why it was the way it was. Mainly this sense coalesced around the war in Iraq. By 2004, it was apparent that we'd begun

this war under false pretenses, on the basis of Weapons of Mass Destruction that didn't exist, and that the best intelligence had shown all along didn't exist. We invaded a country about which we knew virtually nothing, with no coherent plan for occupation, or for implementing our stated goal of establishing democracy, or for our eventual withdrawal.

By the time I'm talking about, 2004, dozens and sometimes scores of American soldiers were losing their lives every month, fighting this war. The best evidence indicated that upwards of 100,000 Iraqi civilians had been killed in the course of the invasion and subsequent insurgency. Our country was running up a mind-boggling debt that's going to be with us for generations. We were also in the midst of producing a cohort of some 40,000 wounded veterans, whose injuries, both physical and psychological, will continue to have consequences for themselves, their families, and our society long after Saddam Hussein is just a blip on our national memory. By any objective measure, the war in Iraq was a disaster, and even worse, a disaster we'd brought on ourselves, yet it continued to be sold to the American people as a just and virtuous and necessary war, a war we could win, that in fact we were winning even as the insurgency grew stronger and more aggressive.

How could a ridiculously low-tech arsenal of suicide vests, car bombs, and IEDs defeat the most powerful military on earth?

This was our government's position, and we accepted it. We swallowed it hook, line, and sinker, and the proof was George W. Bush's re-election as president—some would say his first actual election—in November of 2004.

Cadets, we've seen this movie before, and not that long ago. That was the movie known as Vietnam, and it's recent enough history that its lessons should have been fresh in our minds. Not just the disaster of the war itself, but all of the rhetoric and dissembling that went into justifying the decision to go to war, and then the nearly decades-long parade of whitewashed assessments as to the progress we were making, the victory that would soon be ours.

Vietnam; then Afghanistan and Iraq; and now, perhaps, Syria?

This would be a good time to remember the words of the late I.F. Stone, one of the finest investigative journalists in America during the middle years of the 20th century: "All governments lie, and nothing they say should be believed."

There's no question that al Qaeda was and continues to be a sworn blood-enemy of the United States. It attacked us by land in 1993, with its first bombing of the World Trade Center. It attacked by land again in 1998, with the bombings of our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. It attacked us by sea in 2000, with the bombing of the U.S.S. *Cole* in Yemen. And then, of course, by air in the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Land, sea, and air. I hope even the most confirmed pacifist would recognize the need to respond with decisive force to this kind of sustained attack. But our entirely sane instinct for self-preservation was transformed by our government into something quite different and strange. To put it bluntly—because of 9-11, we invaded Iraq, a country that had nothing to do with 9-11, and whose regime in fact was a bitter enemy of al Qaeda.

Why? How did this happen? How did we let it happen, and why did we endorse the war by re-electing the President in 2004? Are we stupid? As Norman Mailer once said, "Stupidity is the American disease," but I would argue it's not that simple. This country has done far too many fine and brilliant things to ascribe the disaster of Iraq to plain stupidity. I would approach it from a different direction and argue that our culture is stupid, and while that doesn't necessarily make us stupid in the literal sense, it does make us numb. By "culture" I'm talking about the 24-7 force-feed of movies, music, television, Internet, youtubes, youporns, cell phones, iPods, iPads, sports of all kinds at all hours, right-wing news, left-wing news, celebrity news, texts, tweets, emails, and all the rest of it, and that's even before we get into the numbing effects of the huge array of pharmaceuticals available to us, legal or otherwise.

Cadets, I think this avalanche of electronica, entertainment, and media needs a name, so let me suggest that we call it the Fantasy Industrial Complex.

When you boil it down, it's pretty clear that the Fantasy Industrial Complex is mostly someone trying to sell us something—a product, a political agenda, a lifestyle, an alleged means to a more beautiful version of ourselves. Or what may be even worse, it's selling us, our vital statistics in terms of purchasing power and preference, so that we can be targeted by marketers with ever more finely calibrated accuracy. Thanks to the Fantasy Industrial Complex, I think there's a strong argument to be made that we often don't know what's real anymore. To a signficant extent, our lives take place in the realm of fantasy, triviality, and materialism, and our senses and mental capacity become numbed as a result.

Well, what's wrong with being numb; with being comfortably numb, as the song says. What's wrong with being the functional equivalent of fat and happy, of cruising along in the prolonged adolescence that seems to be the ideal human condition as rendered by the Fantasy Industry? Nothing, maybe, until reality comes along and slaps us in the face: the death of someone close to us, say, or serious illness, or extreme emotional suffering—trouble in our marriage, trouble with children, failed relationships, failure or frustration in our work, or a collective trauma such as we experienced on 9-11, 2001. In other words, the hard stuff of life as it's actually

lived. It's not a question of if we're going to get hit with a crisis, but when, and the question then is whether we have the emotional and intellectual tools for dealing with it capably enough that we have a chance of coming through more or less intact.

We've all heard the saying, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." In my opinion, that has to be one of the most inane statements ever made about human experience. It's possible for people to be shattered beyond repair, and countries, too. We survive, but we're broken. We limp along in a reduced state. It happens all the time.

9-11 was a crisis of the first order, both individually and collectively. It inflicted on us a harsh and complex reality, harsh enough that for a brief a window of time America was shocked out of its numbness. There were the beginnings of a serious discussion about our history, our role in the world, and who we are as a country. What kind of country we want to be. All this by way of trying to comprehend the violence that was brought down on us in the attacks of 9-11.

Was it something in us?

Was it something in them?

And by the way, who were they, the "them" that attacked us? Every American with a pulse knew about Osama bin Laden, but what about the rest of them, the thousands of young men and presumably women who swore jihad against the United States?

A few days after 9-11, I saw an SUV near my home in Dallas with the words "Nuke Them All" soaped in huge letters along the side windows. I think we can all understand and sympathize with that kind of raw outrage, but the "them" in that equation, that's the hard part. Determining exactly who they are and what they want, what motivates them. "Know your enemy" Sun Tzu says over and over in The Art of War. "If ignorant both of your enemy and yourself, you are certain to be in peril."

I think Susan Sontag made a lot of sense when she counseled in the week after 9-11 that "a few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand how we got to this point." For starters, we could have looked into the recent history of the Middle East for some answers, and for clues as to a viable way of going forward. I'm not talking about assigning blame, or embarking on an agenda of running down the United States of America. Rather, I'm talking about trying to determine the facts of the situation—what happened, and who acted, and why. Not the fantasy version, the numbed-out and dumbed-down version, but the true version, or as close to the truth as clear thinking and seeing can get us.

You, cadets, don't have the luxury of living out the perpetual adolescence of the numb and the dumb. At a relatively young age, much younger than most of your fellow Americans, you've made the most profound kind of commitment. It's most definitely not a game, the work you're about. It's about as far from "virtual" as one could imagine, and it runs you up against the most basic existential questions we human beings face.

As a practical matter, being numb and dumb simply isn't an option for soldiers in combat, not if they plan on surviving. I would venture that any numbed-out soldier operating in a combat zone isn't long for this world.

The reality of the military has to be about as far from the world of the Fantasy Industrial Complex as we can get, so it's surely one of the great paradoxes of our time that the Fantasy Industry has so thoroughly co-opted the military for its own purposes. We saw the process beginning in the days immediately following 9-11. As huge and awful as the attacks of 9-11 were, the Fantasy Industrial Complex showed itself to be bigger, stronger, more enduring. The difficult and complicated reality behind those attacks was quickly reduced to a simple-minded, easily digestible narrative of us versus them, good versus evil, Christians versus infidels.

One clue to the unsettling complexity of the real situation might have been found in the nationalities of the hijackers, the mysterious "them" that I was talking about a few moments ago. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were from our staunch ally Saudi Arabia. One of the leaders of the hijackers, Mohammed Atta, was from that other staunch American ally, Egypt. Not a single hijacker was Iraqi or Afghan. Not a single hijacker came from what would soon become known as the infamous "Axis of Evil." A few determined pulls on those loose threads might have gone a long way toward unraveling the fantasy narrative, but rather than engaging in a clear-eyed study of the situation, we got instead the vast machine of the Fantasy Industrial Complex, whose full might was brought to bear in promoting this dangerously simplified narrative known as the War on Terror.

Our government embarked on a concerted advertising campaign to build support for war, and specifically, for an invasion of Iraq. It's an old story now. For those who care to read the history, the components of that relentless ad campaign are right out there to see: the fear-mongering in the form of WMDs; the grand neoconservative project of implanting democracy in the Middle East, and remaking the entire region in our own image; and the goal of restoring American prestige by replacing images of the burning Twin Towers with those of American forces triumphing over Arab enemies. The campaign was persuasive enough that Congress and public opinion quickly fell into line. We invaded Iraq in March of 2003, and by May 1st

we were presented with the mother of all commercials, President Bush in a flight suit on the deck of the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln*, telling us against the backdrop of the "Mission Accomplished" banner that major combat operations in Iraq had come to a successful conclusion.

At this point, I think it's worth examining an interview with the man who conceived and stage-managed President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" moment on the *Abraham Lincoln*. That man was none other than Karl Rove, otherwise known as "Bush's Brain," who sat down for an interview with the journalist Ron Suskind that was subsequently published in the New York Times Sunday Magazine in October, 2004. Rove explained in remarkably frank terms the Administration's approach to power: Those in the, quote, "reality-based community [journalists, historians, old-fashioned policy wonks] . . . believe that solutions emerge from [the] judicious study of discernible reality . . . But that's not the way the world really works anymore. [The United States is] an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality."

In Rove's view, it doesn't matter what the reality of a situation is when you can remake it at will. "The judicious study of discernible reality"—in other words, the past five hundred years of Renaissance empiricism and Enlightenment principles—go straight out the window, because we're an empire now, and the world is whatever we want it to be.

But as we've seen, reality, discernible or not, is stronger than any of us. As the reality of Iraq showed itself to be less than malleable to the Rovian concept of power and empire, we saw the Fantasy Industrial Complex go into overdrive. Some of the pronouncements and slogans that resulted were famous for a while, platitudes and political swagger such as "Freedom is on the march," "Bring it on," and "We're kicking ass." Words that had nothing to do with reality, words whose purpose was to distort, to sell an agenda, to numb the audience—or to put it another way, the language of advertising.

The American soldier was one of the most effective props in the Fantasy Industry's marketing arsenal. Support the Troops became the phrase we heard constantly, and not just the government, but the entire private-sector Fantasy Industry got in on it. War, and specifically, Supporting the Troops, became a great branding device. We saw it in the entertainment industry, in professional sports, and in business generally. If you wanted to generate positive associations for your product, you made it clear how much you supported the troops.

The sum effect of all this was to take us farther and farther from the reality of the war. We were allowed and even encouraged to dwell in the fantasy version of war,

the infantile version. No photos of coffins at Dover Air Force Base. No torture, but rather, "an alternative set of procedures." Abu Ghraib, that was the work of "a few bad apples." Dead Iraqi civilians, the very people we were supposed to be liberating, were "collateral damage." The insurgents were a ragtag bunch of "dead-enders," and month after month we were assured that the insurgency was "on its last legs."

The ceaseless refrain of "Support the Troops" made it all so much easier to accept, as if to analyze the reasons and conduct of the war might imply less than total support for the young men and women who were doing the fighting.

In the fantasy version, it's easy to support the troops. What's the personal cost to us to say, "I support the troops"? To fly the flag, to thank soldiers when they cross our paths, to pay for their meals and drinks, to give up our seat in first class. These are all fine and good as expressions of appreciation, and entirely appropriate. The troops absolutely deserve our support, and that was one of the many tragedies of Vietnam, the abuse that so many soldiers endured when they returned home. But let's be real about what's going on here. This is the easy part, the feel-good part, wearing lapel flag pins, thanking the soldiers and buying them drinks, flying the flag on Memorial Day. We can congratulate ourselves for being good and virtuous Americans, for doing our civic duty. We can feel secure in the knowledge that we're patriots—in other words, that we love our country.

Okay, but what is love?

In my experience, real love, true love, involves pain, sacrifice, hardship, selflessness. That's adult love, when all the fantasies and illusions get burned away, and you're left with reality. That's the kind of love you ultimately discover in marriage, if your marriage is going to have any chance of lasting more than a couple of years. That head-over-heels stuff, that hormone rush of infatuation and sexual buzz, that's great, but it's not love. It's not really love until it hurts.

By the same token, how genuine can our patriotism, our love of country, be when the cost to us is so trivial?

In some ways, the war has never been more accessible to those of us at home. We can find it in the news; we can access the most graphic, horrifying images online. But I think that in a profound sense the war remains an abstraction unless and until we have skin in the game, a vital personal stake. Maybe it takes love to make war real. Maybe the reality of war isn't really driven home unless we ourselves, or someone who we love very much, becomes directly involved.

In that sense, Vietnam was front and center in the lives of the majority of Americans. Every family with a draft-age son had a stake in the war. I remember my older cousins and neighbors, and the friends of my oldest sister, all sweating out the

draft lottery every year. We all knew someone who was serving, either a neighbor or a family member, and we were forced to think about the war in a very real way, to consider the reasons why it was being fought, and to look long and hard at the costs.

Contrast that with the wars of the past dozen years. Certainly the most striking difference is the absence of a draft, which means that most of us have been excused from thinking about the war in personal terms. Not only that, but no sacrifice was asked of us in other ways. We were told to go shopping, to spend money, to buy stuff. Not only were taxes not raised in order to fund the war effort, tax rates were lowered. Contrast that with the top tax rate during World War Two, which was—brace yourselves—ninety percent. That's how you pay for a war. That's how you share the sacrifice. That's how you make it real in the life of the country.

In the past dozen years, you never heard the first mention, not a breath, about rationing. The heyday of the Hummer in Texas was during the first years of the Iraq war; you couldn't drive down a street in Dallas without seeing at least one of those huge, heavy, gleaming vehicles trundling along, loaded up with chrome and steel. Meanwhile, back at the war, soldiers were driving around in Humvees that lacked appropriate armor, and the scarcity of effective body armor was a chronic problem for our soldiers. And as we all know, these days the Veterans Administration is seriously overwhelmed by the influx of veterans from the past dozen years of war. So if we really want to support the troops, how about if we slap a tax on every vehicle that weighs over a certain amount, or averages less than forty miles a gallon, and direct that stream of tax revenue to the VA?

Support the troops.

What do you suppose the life expectancy is of a country that's lost its grip on reality? Whose national consciousness is based on delusion and fantasy? Whose dominant mode of expression is the language of advertising and sloganeering?

For you, cadets, this isn't an academic or theoretical proposition. The course of your lives, and perhaps even whether you survive your twenties, depends on it. You're of a generation that's come of age in a time of constant war, a time that's happened to coincide with the full flowering of the Fantasy Industrial Complex. You live directly on the fault line between the two, and that strikes me as a dangerous place to be. There are times when war is necessary, but in circumstances where the justification is less than clear, when, in fact, there's serious question as to the necessity or wisdom of going to war, what then? How are you supposed to conduct yourself? How do you keep your conscience and your soul and your honor intact?

Given recent history, the odds are you're going to find yourselves in that exact situation. You may be required to lay your life on the line for reasons that you might very well suspect are the product of fantasy and delusion. I call that not just a crisis, but a tragedy. That's how lives are ruined and souls are shattered. We all have some idea of the kinds of things that are done in wars, the things that are hard to live with afterwards. Experience shows that it's hard enough to live with those things when the war was just. And if it was less than justified, imagine how much harder.

Of course, the obvious answer, the default answer to this dilemma, is that you follow orders, you do your duty no matter what. As Alfred Lord Tennyson writes in "The Charge of the Light Brigade," "Theirs is not to reason why/theirs is but to fight and die." It's a snooze of a line, but there's a lot of truth in it. Certainly it was true for British soldiers of the Victorian era, conditioned as they were to hierarchy and total devotion to the Queen.

But what about for you, young Americans? Your entire lives you've been taught the virtues of democracy and self-determination. The integrity of the individual. The right and imperative to question authority. It's not an accident that this is so ingrained in our culture. It started with the tradition of Protestant dissent that came over with the Puritans, that wonderful tradition of radical independence and rebellion against authority. All your life, the best examples have taught you that democracy requires us to be thinking, questioning, analyzing citizens. That it's not simply our right, but our obligation, to hold those in authority responsible for their actions, which is part and parcel of the notion of democracy—those in power govern only with the consent of the governed.

So then what happens? You graduate from high school, you go to the Air Force Academy, and all of a sudden you're reduced to the status of a serf! Or worse than a serf—you become a "doolie," from the Greek *doulos*, meaning: slave.

To be part of the military in a democracy, I've got to believe that requires living with a good deal of internal tension and psychological stress. I have a theory—probably not a very good theory, but nevertheless—that this tension might explain the American soldier's genius for profanity. It's a way of venting, giving expression to the sheer weirdness of having to balance two ways of being, the democratic and the authoritarian. I have to wonder if soldiers in authoritarian cultures as good as our soldiers at cussing. Say, the soldiers of North Korea with their blind obedience to the supreme leader, can they match our extraordinary eloquence? Maybe soldiers of all cultures have this genius for profanity, but what I do know for sure is that Americans have made it into an art form.

In any case, I think that pyschological stress is real, and it may never be more acute than when you're told to put your life at risk for what you sense may be a fantasy, a delusion. Alfred Lord Tennyson doesn't cut it in America, not here, not in this day and age. "Theirs is not to reason why . . ." No. You're Americans. It's in your nature and your culture to ask why.

My sense is that one of the things the United States military excels at is training its soldiers to compartmentalize. Focus on the mission, the task at hand. Break it down into discrete parts and execute each one in turn. That may well get you through the moment. You might even be able to get through an entire war that way, but sooner or later, on some level, you're going to find the *why* question coming down on you. Sanity demands it. Human nature demands it, the American nature. We need our actions, especially actions as fraught as those done in war, to have meaning and purpose. If I'm going to die, I want my death to mean something. If I'm going to give up my legs or arms or a chunk of my sanity, it needs to have served a worthwhile purpose. But to ask young soldiers to sacrifice crucial parts of themselves for what—delusions and fantasies?

I call that obscene. It's morally obscene, and as a practical matter it can't help but corrupt the life of the country. You can't ask your youth to sacrifice themselves over and over for nothing without the country eventually rotting from cynicism and disillusionment.

What does "literature" have to do with any of this? Does it have anything to do with you, cadets, living as you are on that fault line between the ultimate reality of war, and that other reality, the dream reality produced by the Fantasy Industrial Complex?

Can literature make a country wiser, less prone to engaging in foolish wars? Could it affect, dare I say it, the political life of the country?

I can't speak for other writers, but when I wrote *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* I wasn't thinking that John McCain or Barack Obama would read it someday and start making policy based on what they found there, or that Dick Cheney would read it and suddenly realize, Oh my God, I was so wrong! Invading Iraq was a terrible idea!

Cadets, I'd be out of my fucking mind if I thought that.

So I'll ask again, what can literature do? Does it do anything, does it have a social function? Or is it just ornament, decoration, something to entertain us in our downtime?

First, let's be clear about what "literature" is. These days, when somebody says "literature," a lot of us can't help thinking of the English teachers who tortured us

in high school with grammar fascism and terrible translations of "Beowulf." Or maybe we think of something rarified and dainty, something Oprah-ish about innermost feelings or the power of healing. I find myself clenching up whenever the word "literature" gets mentioned, because the modern connotations of the word seem so far removed from life as it's actually lived. So how about if by "literature" we mean words that get down to the real stuff of life, the sweat and worry and blood and guts and sex and pain and pleasure of it, the down-in-the-dirt human tumble that we're all going through at one time or another. So when we talk about "literature," or "literary" qualities, we're not talking about fancy turns of phrase or artifice or prettiness, but rather, meaning in the most profound sense. Writing that corresponds to the facts, to lived experience, with all its layers of past and present, motive and drift, conscious and sub-conscious. Writing that takes account of all the confusion and ambiguity and contingency of life. Writing that's true to "discernible reality."

So maybe that's the value of writers, of "literary" writers—to preserve and protect the language. To see things as they truly are, and to find the language that describes those things as accurately and fully as possible, without sentimentality, or a political agenda, or a wish to please the reader.

In his book *The ABC of Reading*, Ezra Pound emphasizes that writing has meaning only to the extent that it corresponds to the thing being described. He goes on to define literature as "language charged with meaning," and great literature, he says, is "language charged with meaning to the utmost degree." In other words, the rhetoric matches the reality. Reality is a thing to be apprehended by clear seeing and clear language, which stands in exact opposition to Karl Rove's imperial notion of reality, in which we get to "make" our own reality, and to hell with the facts, the messy truth of the situation.

A bit later in *ABC of Reading* Pound describes literature as "news that stays news," and as an example he cites Homer's *Odyssey,* one of the founding documents of Western literature, written some 2700 years ago.

Well, in essence, what's the story of the *Odyssey?* It's the story of soldiers trying to find their way home. They've been at war for ten years, and then they spend the next ten years trying to get home. Writing in the early 1920s, Pound noted that Homer's portrayal of Odysseus's companions seems to indicate they were suffering from what was called in the Great War, World War I, as shell shock. Of course, now we know that same affliction as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it's very much with us today. But writing some 2700 years ago, Homer's vision was so acute, and

his language so true to the situation, that he was diagnosing an effect of war that was every bit as relevant in 3000 B.C. as it is now in 2013.

News that stays news.

I read something a while back, a statistic to the effect that one out of every three homeless people in the United States is a veteran. Well, that's the story of Odysseus and his companions, soldiers who are wandering, trying to get home. But these homeless people among us, these veterans, they're the ones who didn't make it all the way—they are, literally, homeless. So, the next time you're in Denver or San Francisco or New York and you see a bunch of homeless folks hanging out on the sidewalk, think about Odysseus and his boys out there wandering.

News that stays news.

What about the causes of war, the reasons for going to war—does Homer have anything to say about that? Let's look at what triggered the Trojan War. Sexy Helen, hot Helen, the super model of her day, runs off with Paris back to his hometown of Troy. When her husband Menelaeus finds out, he goes to his brother King Agamemnon and says, Come on, let's get the army together, we have to invade Troy. Helen ran off with that turd Paris and we need to get her back.

Can you imagine a lamer reason for starting a war?

Agamemnon should have laughed in his brother's face. Dude, unh unh, no way, that's your problem. What you need is either a marriage counselor or a good divorce lawyer, but there's no way we're going to war just because you couldn't keep your wife happy.

But of course, that's not what he said. So the Greeks go to war for ten years to get Helen back.

Talk about a bullshit war.

Odysseus and his companions spend ten years fighting that war, then ten more years trying to get home when it's over. I wonder if Homer is saying something about bullshit wars, and whether that kind of war is harder for soldiers to come back from. Wars based on folly, fantasy, vanity; wars of choice as opposed to necessity. Maybe in the extreme difficulty they have in returning home, soldiers are manifesting some psychological truth about those kinds of wars that's deep in their bones.

The Trojan War.

Vietnam.

Iraq and Afghanistan.

News that stays news.

Okay, so what's been happening on the home front all these years, these twenty years that Odysseus has been gone? Well, his wife Penelope's been getting the hard sell from a bunch of guys who want to marry her. 108 of them, to be exact. Even worse, they've settled in right there at the house, so there they are 24-7, drinking Odysseus's wine, barbecuing his cows and sheep, abusing his servants, trying to sleep with his wife. Meanwhile, the man of the house is off fighting the war, doing his patriotic duty.

Homer goes to some pains to describe at least a few of these 108 men, and he makes it clear that they're the scions of the leading families of Ithaca. The leading families of Ithaca. The wealthy, the powerful, the well-connected. Well, why aren't they off fighting the war? Or did they get a pass because their families are wealthy, powerful, well-connected.

Sound familiar?

News that stays news.

Then when long-suffering, tough-as-nails Odysseus finally does make it home, he's changed so much that no one recognizes him, not even his wife. He's a stranger to them. How often have we heard that the past twelve years from wives and parents and friends of returning soldiers: He's a stranger. I feel like I don't know him anymore.

News that stays news.

Correction, somebody did recognize Odysseus—his dog. Argus was a puppy when Odysseus left, and now he's old and decrepit and can barely get around, but he recognizes Odysseus when no one else does.

Good old Argus.

So this poem, this very, very long poem that Homer wrote some 2700 years ago, is it just ornament, decoration? Something to read purely for pleasure and entertainment? Sure, it can be read taken that way, but suppose we're faced with a real crisis in our life. Suppose we're a young soldier trying to find his or her way back from the war, and we're struggling, and it may well be a matter of life and death. Suppose we're reading like our life depends on it, not in that numbed-out, Fantasy Industry frame of mind, but with our full attention. Maybe then it's not so much like entertainment, but the best chance we have of understanding our experience, of gaining a measure of peace in ourselves. A way to restore meaning when it seems meaning has been lost.

Or, say, we're a General, or a Senator, or even a President, faced with a geopolitical crisis that may involve force of arms. If he or she is willing to read with full attention and thoughtfulness—willing to read as if lives depend on it—maybe they'll come to

a fuller appreciation of risks and consequences, and of the potential for tragedy that's inherent in having great power.

Will reading Homer, or any work of literature, prevent unjust wars, unnecessary wars? Maybe yes. Maybe no. Maybe sometimes yes—and maybe that's the most we can hope for. It may well be that the reality connect of Homer, and writers like him, is the best shot we're going to get. So I would urge us all to read. To keep reading. Because we never know enough.

[Author's Note: This lecture owes much to the work of Mark Danner on language and war, particularly as found in his essays "What Are You Going to Do with That?", *The New York Review of Books*, June 23, 2005, and "Words in a Time of War," which may be found at www.markdanner.com]

BEN FOUNTAIN'S novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* was the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Fiction. It was also a finalist for the National Book Award. He is the author, too, of *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*, a short story collection that received the PEN / Hemingway Award, among other awards.

Tone Words and Definitions

Tone is more than merely an author's attitude toward his/her audience and characters; it is the stylistic means by which an author conveys his/her attitude(s) in a work of literature.

Tone is an integral part of a work's **meaning** because it controls the reader's response which is essential to fully experiencing literature. **To misinterpret tone is to misinterpret meaning.**

In order to recognize **tonal shift** and to interpret **complexities of tone,** the reader must be able to make inferences based on an active reading of the work. The author's tone or voice is revealed by organization, choice of detail, and sentence structure, but **word choice** is probably the strongest indicator of tone.

*Directions: Familiarize yourself with the denotations and connotations of the following **tone words.** This is by no means a comprehensive list! You should also practice utilizing adjective and adverb forms of each word:*

adjective: Leo uses a mocking tone when he describes Mrs. Bilse as a literary genius.
adverb: Leo mockingly describes Mrs. Bilse as a literary genius.

1. **Abashed:** *ashamed or embarrassed; disconcerted*
2. **Abhorring:** *to regard with extreme repugnance or aversion; detest utterly; loathe; abominate*
3. **Abstruse:** *difficult to understand*
4. **Absurd:** *ridiculous; silly*
5. **Accusing:** *to charge with the fault, offense, or crime*
6. **Acerbic:** *harsh or severe, as of temper or expression*
7. **Admiring:** *to regard with wonder, pleasure, or approval*
8. **Admonishing:** *cautioning, advising, or counseling against something; reproving or scolding, especially in a mild and good-willed manner; reminding*
9. **Adoring:** *to regard with the utmost esteem, love, and respect; honor.*
10. **Affectionate:** *showing, indicating, or characterized by affection or love; fondly tender*
11. **Afraid**
12. **Ambiguous:** *open to or having several possible meanings or interpretations*
13. **Ambivalent:** *uncertainty or fluctuation, esp. when caused by inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite or conflicting things*
14. **Amused:** *pleasurably entertained, occupied, or diverted*
15. **Angry**
16. **Annoyed:** *To cause slight irritation to (another) by troublesome, often repeated acts*
17. **Antagonistic:** *acting in opposition; opposing, esp. mutually/ hostile; unfriendly*
18. **Anxious:** *full of mental distress or uneasiness because of fear of danger or misfortune; greatly worried; solicitous/ earnestly desirous; eager*
19. **Apathetic:** *having or showing little or no emotion/ not interested or concerned; indifferent or unresponsive*

20. **Apologetic:** *containing an apology or excuse for a fault, failure, insult, injury*

21. **Appreciative:** *feeling or expressive of gratitude*

22. **Apprehensive:** *uneasy or fearful about something that might happen*

23. **Approving:** *to speak or think favorably of; pronounce or consider agreeable or good; judge favorably*

24. **Ardent:** *characterized by intense feeling; passionate; fervent; intensely devoted, eager, or enthusiastic; zealous; vehement; fierce*

25. **Arrogant:** *making claims or pretensions to superior importance or rights; overbearingly assuming; insolently proud*

26. **Audacious:** *extremely bold or daring; recklessly brave; fearless*

27. **Authoritarian:** *having an air of authority; accustomed to exercising authority; positive; peremptory; dictatorial*

28. **Baffled:** *to confuse, bewilder, or perplex*

29. **Bantering:** *Good-humored, playful conversation*

30. **Belligerent:** *warlike; given to waging war*

31. **Bemused:** *bewildered or confused/ lost in thought; preoccupied*

32. **Benevolent:** *characterized by or expressing goodwill or kindly feelings*

33. **Bewildered:** *completely puzzled or confused; perplexed*

34. **Biting:** *nipping; smarting; keen/ cutting; sarcastic*

35. **Bitter:** *having a harsh, disagreeably acrid taste, like that of aspirin, quinine, wormwood, or aloes/ characterized by intense antagonism or hostility/ hard to admit or accept*

36. **Blithe:** *joyous, merry, or gay in disposition; glad; cheerful*

37. **Blunt:** *abrupt in address or manner/ slow in perception or understanding; obtuse*

38. **Bold:** *not hesitating or fearful in the face of danger or rebuff; courageous and daring; not hesitating to break the rules of propriety; forward; impudent*

39. **Bored**

40. **Brisk:** *quick and active; lively/ sharp and stimulating*

41. **Brusque:** *abrupt in manner; blunt; rough*

42. **Burlesque:** *an artistic composition, esp. literary or dramatic, that, for the sake of laughter, vulgarizes lofty material or treats ordinary material with mock dignity*

43. **Calm:** *without rough motion; still or nearly still/ free from excitement or passion; tranquil*

44. **Candid:** *frank; outspoken; open and sincere/ free from reservation, disguise, or subterfuge; straightforward*

45. **Capricious:** *flighty; led by whims; erratic*

46. **Casual:** *without definite or serious intention; careless or offhand; passing/*

47. **Caustic:** *making biting, corrosive comments*

48. **Celebratory:** *seeming or tending to be indifferent to what is happening; apathetic; unconcerned*

49. **Censorious:** *severely critical; faultfinding*

50. **Ceremonial:** *of, pertaining to, or characterized by ceremony; formal; ritual*

51. **Cheerful:** *characterized by or expressive of good spirits or cheerfulness*

52. **Cheery:** *in good spirits*

53. **Childish:** *of, like, or befitting a child/ puerile; weak; silly*

54. **Choleric:** *extremely irritable or easily angered; irascible*

55. **Clinical:** *concerned with or based on actual observation and treatment of disease in patients rather than experimentation or theory/ extremely objective and realistic; dispassionately analytic; unemotionally critical*

56. **Cold**

57. **Colloquial:** *characteristic of or appropriate to ordinary or familiar conversation rather than formal speech or writing; informal.*

58. **Comforting:** *To soothe in time of affliction or distress.*

59. **Comic** - *funny; humorous*

60. **Commanding:** *appreciably superior or imposing; winning; sizable*

61. **Compassionate:** *having or showing compassion*

62. **Complex:** *characterized by a very complicated or involved arrangement of parts, units, etc.:*

63. **Complicated:** *composed of elaborately interconnected parts; complex*

64. **Complimentary:** *of the nature of, conveying, or expressing a compliment, often one that is politely flattering*

65. **Conceited:** *having an excessively favorable opinion of one's abilities, appearance, etc.*

66. **Concerned:** *interested or affected/ troubled or anxious/ having a connection or involvement; participating*

67. **Conciliatory:** *To overcome the distrust or animosity of; appease*

68. **Condemnatory:** *To express strong disapproval*

69. **Condescending:** *showing or implying a usually patronizing descent from dignity or superiority*

70. **Confident:** *having strong belief or full assurance; sure/ sure of oneself; having no uncertainty about one's own abilities, correctness, successfulness, etc.; self-confident; bold*

71. **Confused:** *to perplex or bewilder/ to make unclear or indistinct*

72. **Contemptuous:** *showing or expressing contempt or disdain; scornful*

73. **Contented:** *Desiring no more than what one has; satisfied./ Ready to accept or acquiesce; willing*

74. **Contentious:** *tending to argument or strife; quarrelsome/ causing, involving, or characterized by argument or controversy*

75. **Conversational:** *The spoken exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings; talk*

76. **Critical:** *inclined to find fault or to judge with severity, often too readily*

77. **Curt:** *rudely brief in speech or abrupt in manner/ brief; concise; terse; laconic*

78. **Cynical:** *scornful of the motives or virtues of others; bitterly or sneeringly distrustful, contemptuous, or pessimistic*

79. **Demanding:** *requiring or claiming more than is generally felt by others to be due/ calling for intensive effort or attention; taxing*

80. **Depressed:** *sad and gloomy; dejected; downcast/ pressed down, or situated lower than the general surface*

81. **Derisive:** *characterized by or expressing derision; contemptuous; mocking*

82. **Derogatory:** *tending to lessen the merit or reputation of a person or thing; disparaging; depreciatory*

83. **Despairing:** *To be overcome by a sense of futility or defeat/ To lose all hope*

84. **Desperate:** *reckless or dangerous because of despair or urgency/ having an urgent need, desire, etc.:*

85. **Detached:** *impartial or objective; disinterested; unbiased/ not involved or concerned; aloof*

86. **Diabolic:** *having the qualities of a devil; devilish; fiendish; outrageously wicked*

87. **Didactic:** *intended for instruction; instructive*

88. **Diffident:** *lacking confidence in one's own ability, worth, or fitness; timid; shy*

89. **Direct:** *proceeding in a straight line or by the shortest course; straight; undeviating; not oblique*

90. **Disappointed:** *depressed or discouraged by the failure of one's hopes or expectations*

91. **Disbelieving:** *to have no belief in; refuse or reject belief in*

92. **Disdainful:** *expressing extreme contempt*

93. **Disgusted:** *To excite nausea or loathing in; sicken/ To offend the taste or moral sense of; repel*

94. **Disrespectful:** *Having or exhibiting a lack of respect; rude and discourteous*

95. **Disturbed:** *marked by symptoms of mental illness:/ agitated or distressed; disrupted*

96. **Dogmatic:** *asserting opinions in a doctrinaire or arrogant manner; opinionated*

97. **Domineering:** *overbearing; tyrannical*

98. **Doubtful:** *of uncertain outcome or result*

99. **Dramatic:** *of or pertaining to the drama/ Arresting or forceful in appearance or effect*

100. **Dreary:** *causing sadness or gloom./ dull; boring*

101. **Dubious:** *wavering or hesitating in opinion; inclined to doubt*

102. **Earnest:** *serious in intention, purpose, or effort; sincerely zealous*

103. **Ebullient:** *overflowing with fervor, enthusiasm, or excitement; high-spirited*

104. **Ecstatic:** *subject to or in a state of ecstasy; rapturous*

105. **Effusive:** *unduly demonstrative; lacking reserve*

106. **Egotistical:** *given to talking about oneself; vain; boastful; opinionated; indifferent to the well-being of others; selfish*

107. **Elated:** *very happy or proud; jubilant; in high spirits*

108. **Elegiac:** *expressing sorrow or lamentation*

109. **Elevated:** *exalted or noble; lofty/ exalted or noble; lofty*

110. **Eloquent:** *having or exercising the power of fluent, forceful, and appropriate speech*

111. **Embarrassed:** *To cause to feel self-conscious or ill at ease; disconcert*

112. **Emotionless**

113. **Empathetic:** *showing empathy or ready comprehension of others' states*

114. **Encouraging:** *to inspire with courage, spirit, or confidence/ to stimulate by assistance, approval, etc/ to promote, advance, or foster*

115. **Energetic**

116. **Enraged:** *to make extremely angry; put into a rage; infuriate*

117. **Enthusiastic:** *having or showing great excitement and interest*

118. **Erudite:** *characterized by great knowledge; learned or scholarly*

119. **Eulogistic:** *To praise highly in speech or writing, especially in a formal eulogy*

120. **Euphoric:** *a feeling of happiness, confidence, or well-being sometimes exaggerated in pathological states as mania*

121. **Evasive:** *deliberately vague or ambiguous/ tending or seeking to evade; characterized by evasion*

122. **Excited**

123. **Exhilarated:** *to enliven; invigorate; stimulate/ to make cheerful or merry*

124. **Exhortatory**: *advising, urging, or cautioning earnestly; urgently admonishing*

125. **Expectant:** *marked by eager anticipation*

126. **Exuberant:** *effusively and almost uninhibitedly enthusiastic; lavishly abundant*

127. **Facetious:** *not meant to be taken seriously or literally/ amusing; humorous*

128. **Factual:** *of or pertaining to facts; concerning facts*

129. **Familiar:** *commonly or generally known or seen/ informal; easygoing; unceremonious; unconstrained*

130. **Fanciful:** *characterized by or showing fancy; capricious or whimsical in appearance*

131. **Farcical:** *ludicrous; absurd; mocking; humorous and highly improbable*

132. **Fatalistic:** *the acceptance of all things and events as inevitable; submission to fate*

133. **Fearful:** *feeling fear, dread, apprehension, or solicitude/ full of awe or reverence/ extreme in size, intensity, or badness*

134. **Fervent:** *having or showing great warmth or intensity of spirit, feeling, enthusiasm, etc.; ardent*

135. **Flippant:** *frivolously disrespectful, shallow, or lacking in seriousness; characterized by levity*

136. **Forceful:** *powerful*

137. **Foreboding:** *a strong inner feeling or notion of a future misfortune, evil, etc.; presentiment*

138. **Formal:** *stiff; using textbook style; following accepted styles, rules or ceremonies*

139. **Forthright:** *going straight to the point; frank; direct; outspoken*

140. **Frantic:** *desperate or wild with excitement, passion, fear, pain, etc.; frenzied*

141. **Frightened:** *To fill with fear; alarm*

142. **Frivolous:** *characterized by lack of seriousness or sense/ self-indulgently carefree; unconcerned about or lacking any serious purpose/ of little or no weight, worth, or importance; not worthy of serious notice*

143. **Frustrated:** *disappointed; thwarted*

144. **Furious:** *full of fury, violent passion, or rage; extremely angry; enraged*

145. **Gentle:** *kind; considerate; mild; soft*

146. **Ghoulish:** *strangely diabolical or cruel; monstrous; delighting in the revolting or loathsome*

147. **Giddy:** *frivolous and lighthearted; impulsive; flighty/ attended with or causing dizziness*

148. **Gleeful:** *full of exultant joy; merry; delighted.*

149. **Gloomy:** *dark or dim; deeply shaded/ hopeless or despairing; pessimistic*

150. **Grand:** *impressive in size, appearance, or general effect/ stately, majestic, or dignified/ of great importance, distinction, or pretension*

151. **Grave:** *serious or solemn; sober/ weighty, momentous, or important/ threatening a seriously bad outcome or involving serious issues; critical*

152. **Grim:** *stern and admitting of no appeasement or compromise/ having a harsh, surly, forbidding, or morbid air*

153. **Happy**

154. **Harsh:** *ungentle and unpleasant in action or effect/ physically uncomfortable; desolate; stark/ unpleasantly rough, ragged, or coarse to the touch*

155. **Haughty:** *disdainfully proud; snobbish; scornfully arrogant; supercilious*

156. **Hilarious:** *arousing great merriment; extremely funny*

157. **Histrionic:** *Over the top dramatic*

158. **Holier-than-thou:** *obnoxiously pious; sanctimonious; self-righteous*

159. **Hollow:**; *not solid; empty; without real or significant worth; meaningless; insincere or false*

160. **Hopeful:** *full of hope; expressing*

161. **Hopeless:** *providing no hope; beyond optimism or hope; desperate*

162. **Horrified:** *showing or indicating great shock or horror*

163. **Hostile:** *characteristic of an enemy/ opposed in feeling, action, or character; antagonistic/ not friendly, warm, or generous; not hospitable*

164. **Humorous:** *characterized by humor; funny; comical*

165. **Impartial:** *not partial or biased; fair; just*

166. **Impassioned:** *filled with emotion; ardent*

167. **Impassive:** *without emotion; apathetic; unmoved; calm; serene*

168. **Impatient:** *not patient; not accepting delay, opposition, pain, etc., with calm or patience*

169. **Impertinent:** *insolently rude; uncivil*

170. **Impudent:** *characterized by impertinence or effrontery*

171. **Incisive:** *penetrating; cutting; biting; trenchant/ remarkably clear and direct; sharp; keen; acute*

172. **Incredulous:** *not credulous; disinclined or indisposed to believe; skeptical*

173. **Indifferent:** *without interest or concern; not caring; apathetic/ having no bias, prejudice, or preference; impartial; disinterested*

174. **Indignant:** *feeling, characterized by, or expressing strong displeasure at something considered unjust, offensive, insulting, or base*

175. **Indirect:** *not in a direct course or path; deviating from a straight line; roundabout/ not straightforward; devious; deceitful*

176. **Inflammatory:** *tending to arouse anger, hostility, passion, etc.:*

177. **Informal:** *without formality or ceremony; casual/ suitable to or characteristic of casual and familiar, but educated, speech or writing/ not according to the prescribed, official, or customary way or manner; irregular; unofficial*

178. **Informative:** *giving information; instructive/ tending to increase knowledge or dissipate ignorance*

179. **Insecure:** *subject to fears, doubts, etc.; not self-confident or assured*

180. **Insipid:** *without distinctive, interesting, or stimulating qualities; vapid*

181. **Insistent:** *earnest or emphatic in dwelling upon, maintaining, or demanding something; persistent; pertinacious*

182. **Insolent:** *boldly rude or disrespectful; contemptuously impertinent; insulting*

183. **Instructive:** *serving to instruct or inform; conveying instruction, knowledge, or information; enlightening*

184. **Interested:** *having the attention or curiosity engaged/ characterized by a feeling of interest*

185. **Intimate:** *associated in close personal relations/ very private; closely personal/ detailed; deep*

186. **Introspective:** *given to examining own sensory and perceptual experiences*

187. **Ironic:** *containing or exemplifying irony/ coincidental; unexpected*

188. **Irascible:** *easily provoked to anger; very irritable*

189. **Irreverent:** *showing lack of due respect or veneration*

190. **Irritated:** *angered, provoked, or annoyed*

191. **Jocund:** *cheerful; merry; gay; blithe; glad*

192. **Joking**

193. **Jovial:** *endowed with or characterized by a hearty, joyous humor or a spirit of good-fellowship*

194. **Joyful:** *full of joy, as a person or one's heart; glad; delighted/ causing or bringing joy, as an event, a sight, or news; delightful*

195. **Joyous:** *joyful; happy; jubilant*

196. **Laudatory:** *containing or expressing praise*

197. **Learned:** *having much knowledge; scholarly; erudite/ connected or involved with the pursuit of knowledge, esp. of a scholarly nature*

198. **Lighthearted:** *carefree; cheerful; gay*

199. **Lively:** *full or suggestive of life or vital energy; active, vigorous, or brisk/ animated, spirited, vivacious, or sprightly*

200. **Lofty:** *exalted in rank, dignity, or character; eminent/ elevated in style, tone, or sentiment, as writings or speech*

201. **Loving:** *affectionate; showing intense, deep concern for someone or something*

202. **Ludicrous:** *causing laughter because of absurdity; provoking or deserving derision; ridiculous; laughable*

203. **Lugubrious:** *mournful, dismal, or gloomy, esp. in an affected, exaggerated, or unrelieved manner*

204. **Lyrical:** *Expressing deep personal emotion or observations; Highly enthusiastic; rhapsodic*

205. **Malicious** - *desiring to harm others or to see others suffer; ill-willed; spiteful*

206. **Matter–of-fact** -*adhering strictly to fact; not imaginative; direct or unemotional; straightforward; down-to-earth*

207. **Meditative:** *deeply or seriously thoughtful*

208. **Melancholic:** *characterized by or causing or expressing sadness*

209. **Melodramatic:** *exaggerated and emotional or sentimental; overdramatic*

210. **Mirthful:** *joyous; gay; jolly; arousing or provoking laughter*

211. **Mischievous:** *maliciously or playfully annoying; causing annoyance, harm, or trouble; roguishly or slyly teasing, as a glance; harmful or injurious*

212. **Mock – serious:** *pretending to be serious or in earnest*

213. **Mock-heroic:** *imitating or burlesquing that which is heroic, as in manner, character, or action*

214. **Mocking:** *To treat with ridicule or contempt; deride; To mimic, as in sport or derision*

215. **Modest:** *having or showing a moderate or humble estimate of one's merits, importance, etc.; free from vanity, egotism, boastfulness, or great pretensions; free from ostentation or showy extravagance*

216. **Moralistic:** *Characterized by or displaying a concern with morality; narrowly and conventionally moral*

217. **Mournful:** *feeling or expressing sorrow or grief; sorrowful; sad*

218. **Mysterious:** *of obscure nature, meaning, origin, etc.; puzzling; inexplicable*

219. **Nervous:** *highly excitable; unnaturally or acutely uneasy or apprehensive*

220. **Nonchalant:** *coolly unconcerned, indifferent, or unexcited; casual*

221. **Nonplussed:** *totally puzzled, perplexed, or confused*

222. **Nostalgic:** *unhappy about being away and longing for familiar things or persons*

223. **Obdurate:** *unmoved by persuasion, pity, or tender feelings; stubborn; unyielding; stubbornly resistant to moral influence*

224. **Objective:** *not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice; based on facts; unbiased*

225. **Obsequious** - *overly obedient and/or submissive*

226. **Ominous:** *portending evil or harm; foreboding; threatening; inauspicious*

227. **Optimistic:** *disposed to take a favorable view of events or conditions and to expect the most favorable outcome*

228. **Oratorical:** *characteristic of an orator or oratory; given to making speeches*

229. **Outraged:** *angered and resentful; furious; extremely angered*

230. **Outspoken:** *frank; candid; uttered or expressed with frankness or without reserve*

231. **Overbearing:** *domineering; dictatorial; haughtily or rudely arrogant*

232. **Panicked**

233. **Paranoid:** *Exhibiting or characterized by extreme and irrational fear or distrust of others*

234. **Passionate:** *having, compelled by, or ruled by intense emotion or strong feeling; easily aroused to or influenced by sexual desire; ardently sensual; easily moved to anger; quick-tempered; irascible*

235. **Pathetic:** *causing or evoking pity, sympathetic sadness, sorrow, etc.; pitiful; pitiable*

236. **Patronizing:** *displaying or indicative of an offensively condescending manner*

237. **Peaceful:** *not disturbed by strife or turmoil or war; quiet; calm; without worry or disturbance*

238. **Pedantic:** *ostentatious in one's learning; overly concerned with minute details or formalisms, esp. in teaching*

239. **Penitent:** *feeling or expressing sorrow for sin or wrongdoing and disposed to atonement and amendment; repentant; contrite*

240. **Pensive:** *dreamily or wistfully thoughtful; expressing or revealing thoughtfulness, usually marked by some sadness*

241. **Pessimistic:** *expecting the worst possible outcome*

242. **Petty:** *of little or no importance or consequence*

243. **Pitiful**

244. **Placid:** *pleasantly calm or peaceful; unruffled; tranquil; serenely quiet or undisturbed*

245. **Playful:** *pleasantly humorous or jesting*

246. **Poignant:** *keenly distressing to the feelings; keen or strong in mental appeal*

247. **Pompous:** *characterized by an ostentatious display of dignity or importance*

248. **Powerful:** *having or exerting great power or force; potent; efficacious*

249. **Pretentious:** *characterized by assumption of dignity or importance*

250. **Proud:** *feeling pleasure or satisfaction over something regarded as highly honorable or creditable to oneself; having or showing self-respect or self-esteem*

251. **Provocative:** *serving or tending to provoke, excite, or stimulate; tending or serving to provoke; inciting, stimulating, irritating, or vexing*

252. **Psychotic:** *affected by psychosis; characterized by a loss of contact with reality and an inability to think rationally. A psychotic person often behaves inappropriately and is incapable of normal social functioning*

253. **Quiet**

254. **Questioning:** *characterized by or indicating intellectual curiosity; inquiring*

255. **Reassuring:** *to restore to assurance or confidence*

256. **Rebellious**

257. **Recalcitrant:** *resisting authority or control; not obedient or compliant; refractory*

258. **Reflective:** *given to, marked by, or concerned with meditation or deliberation*

259. **Relaxed:** *being free of or relieved from tension or anxiety*

260. **Reminiscent:** *awakening memories of something similar; suggestive*

261. **Resigned:** *submissive or acquiescent*

262. **Respectful:** *full of, characterized by, or showing politeness or deference*

263. **Restrained:** *To hold back or keep in check; control*

264. **Reticent:** *disposed to be silent or not to speak freely; reserved; restrained*

265. **Reverent:** *deeply respectful; showing great esteem*

266. **Ridiculous:** *causing or worthy of ridicule or derision; absurd; preposterous; laughable*

267. **Righteous:** *believing ones-self to be morally right and just; guiltless*

268. **Risible:** *causing or capable of causing laughter; laughable; ludicrous*

269. **Romantic:** *characterized by a preoccupation with love or by the idealizing of love or one's beloved; imbued with or dominated by idealism, a desire for adventure, chivalry, etc*

270. **Sad**

271. **Sanguine:** *cheerfully optimistic, hopeful, or confident*

272. **Sarcastic:** *expressing or expressive of ridicule that wounds*

273. **Sardonic:** *characterized by bitter or scornful derision; mocking; cynical; sneering*

274. **Satiric (satirical):** *exposing human folly to ridicule*

275. **Scholarly:** *concerned with academic learning and research*

276. **Scornful:** *expressing extreme contempt*

277. **Seductive:** *tending to entice into a desired action or state*

278. **Self-assured:** *Having or showing confidence and poise*

279. **Self-depreciating:** *belittling or undervaluing oneself; excessively modest*

280. **Selfish:** *devoted to or caring only for oneself; concerned primarily with one's own interests, benefits, welfare, etc., regardless of others*

281. **Sentimental:** *weakly emotional; mawkishly susceptible or tender*

282. **Serene:** *calm, peaceful, or tranquil; unruffled*

283. **Serious:** *not funny; in earnest*

284. **Severe:** *harsh; unnecessarily extreme; serious or stern in manner or appearance*

285. **Sharp:** *clearly defined; distinct; keen or eager; fierce or violent*

286. **Shocked:** *struck with fear, dread, or consternation*

287. **Shocking:** *causing intense surprise, disgust, horror, etc*

288. **Silly,**

289. **Sinister:** *threatening or portending evil, harm, or trouble; ominous*

290. **Skeptical:** *Marked by or given to doubt; questioning*

291. **Sly:** *cunning or wily; stealthy, insidious, or secret*

292. **Solemn:** *grave, sober, or mirthless, as a person, the face, speech, tone, or mood*

293. **Somber:** *gloomy, depressing, or dismal; extremely serious; grave*

294. **Sophomoric:** *suggestive of or resembling the traditional sophomore; intellectually pretentious, overconfident, conceited, etc., but immature*

295. **Speculative:** *theoretical, rather than practical*

296. **Sprightly:** *animated, vivacious, or gay; lively*

297. **Stable:** *not likely to fall or give way, as a structure, support, foundation, etc.; firm; steady*

298. **Stately:** *majestic; imposing in magnificence, elegance, etc*

299. **Stern:** *firm, strict, or uncompromising; hard, harsh, or severe*

300. **Stolid:** *not easily stirred or moved mentally; unemotional; impassive*

301. **Straightforward:** *direct; not roundabout; free from crookedness or deceit; honest*

302. **Strident:** *making or having a harsh sound; grating; creaking*

303. **Stubborn**

304. **Subdued:** *quiet; inhibited; repressed; controlled*

305. **Supercilious:** *haughtily disdainful or contemptuous*

306. **Suspenseful:** *characterized by or causing suspense*

307. **Suspicious:** *openly distrustful and unwilling to confide*

308. **Sympathetic:** *characterized by, proceeding from, exhibiting, or feeling sympathy; sympathizing; compassionate*

309. **Taunting:** *To reproach in a mocking, insulting, or contemptuous manner*

310. **Tender:** *soft or delicate in substance; not hard or tough*

311. **Tense:** *stretched tight, as a cord, fiber, etc.; drawn taut; rigid; characterized by a strain upon the nerves or feelings*

312. **Terrified**

313. **Terse:** *neatly or effectively concise; brief and pithy, as language*

314. **Thoughtful:** *showing consideration for others; considerate; occupied with or given to thought; contemplative; meditative; reflective*

315. **Threatening:** *tending or intended to menace; causing alarm, as by being imminent; ominous; sinister*

316. **Timorous:** *full of fear; fearful*

317. **Tragic:** *extremely mournful, melancholy, or pathetic; dreadful, calamitous, disastrous, or fatal*

318. **Tranquil:** *free from commotion or tumult; peaceful; quiet; calm*

319. **Uncertain:** *not confident, assured, or free from hesitancy; not clearly or precisely determined; indefinite; unknown*

320. **Unconcerned:** *not involved or interested; disinterested.; not caring; unworried; free from solicitude or anxiety*

321. **Understated:** *restrained in design, presentation, etc.; low-key*

322. **Uneasy:** *not easy in body or mind; uncomfortable; restless; disturbed; perturbed.*

323. **Uninterested**

324. **Upset**

325. **Urgent:** *compelling or requiring immediate action or attention; imperative; pressing*

326. **Vexed:** *irritated; annoyed*

327. **Vibrant:** *moving to and fro rapidly; vibrating*

328. **Vindictive:** *revengeful; spiteful; bitter; unforgiving*

329. **Violent:** *acting with or characterized by uncontrolled, strong, rough force; furious in impetuosity, energy, etc.*

330. **Vitriolic:** *very caustic; scathing*

331. **Whimsical:** *given to whimsy or fanciful notions; capricious*

332. **Wistful:** *characterized by melancholy; longing; yearning; pensive*

333. **Worshipful:** *showing adoration; showing great reverence*

334. **Wrathful:** *vehemently incensed and condemnatory; very angry; ireful*

335. **Wry:** *devious in course or purpose; misdirected; distorted or perverted, as in meaning; bitterly or disdainfully ironic or amusing*

336. **Zealous:** *ardently active, devoted, or diligent*

Some TONE WORDS: Grouped with SYNONYMS

- simple, straightforward, direct, unambiguous, candid
- indirect, understated, evasive, allusive
- complicated, complex, difficult
- admiring, worshiping, approving
- complimentary, proud, effusive
- disliking, abhorring, contemptuous
- strident, harsh, acerbic, angry, outraged, violent, choleric, indignant, irascible
- forceful, powerful, confident
- energetic, vibrant
- ironic, sardonic, sarcastic, mocking, sly, wry
- satirical, critical
- sharp, biting
- bitter, grim, cynical
- interested, sympathetic, pitiful
- hollow, detached, cold, obdurate
- tired, bored, uninterested
- indifferent, unconcerned, disinterested, apathetic, impassive, emotionless, nonchalant
- impartial, objective
- humorous, playful, joking, frivolous, comical
- flippant, irreverent, facetious
- impish, silly, sophomoric, childish
- resigned, calm, tranquil, quiet, peaceful, reticent
- subdued, restrained, low-key
- sad, upset, depressed, melancholy, despairing
- afraid, fearful, horrific, terrified, panicked
- wistful, nostalgic, sentimental, tender, reminiscent
- solemn, serious, somber
- apologetic, penitent, ignominious
- recalcitrant, stubborn, rebellious
- apprehensive, anxious, pensive
- thoughtful, dreamy, fanciful
- vexed, uncertain, confused, ambivalent, nonplussed
- excited, exhilarated, exuberant
- ardent, fervent, zealous
- happy, contented, ecstatic, joyful, giddy
- incredulous, questioning, skeptical, dubious
- insistent, urgent, pressing
- pertinent, pointed, incisive
- commanding, demanding
- exhortatory, admonishing, censorious, damning
- condescending, arrogant, haughty
- elevated, grand, lofty, bombastic, pretentious, pompous
- oratorical, dramatic, melodramatic
- scornful, disdainful, supercilious, contemptuous
- audacious, bold, impudent, insolent
- alluring, provocative, seductive
- shocking, offensive, reprehensible, lurid
- didactic, instructive
- authoritarian, domineering, egotistical, overbearing, dogmatic
- erudite, learned, scholarly
- practical, pragmatic