

V I N T A G E

*Celebrating Ten Years of the Mildura Writers' Festival*

EDITED BY  
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Hardie Grant Books

where the great rose window  
glows like a heart

and sheds its warmth  
on the creatures below

the world survives  
as heads bend down  
to the cold floor  
and utter their prayer

as hands  
drop coins  
in the upturned cap  
at the door

above which St Louis  
and the Maid of Orleans  
jointly survey  
a shroud of grey

the rest of Paris  
is somewhere out there  
where the Eiffel Tower  
is swallowed in mist

#### TO QUOTE VERLAINE

I've read somewhere that in 1911, on her second visit to Paris, Anna Akhmatova met Modigliani. He, of course, was poor and unrecognised at this time, and she had yet to publish her first book. The two of them sat in the Luxembourg and recited the poems of Paul Verlaine to each other. He also sketched her and made a total of sixteen portraits, only one of which survives. Before them were the fates they could not imagine: for decades on end she lit up the Soviet night with her proud and impassioned verse, while he became an alcoholic and died young. It may only be a trick of the light, but their divergent fates are somehow embodied in the gardens this evening. There's a new moon entangled in the delicate tracery of the plane trees, and the wind -- to quote Verlaine -- is like the long sobs of autumn's violin.

MARK CLADIS

#### *To Lukachukai and Back: The Journey Home*

Some journeys take us away from home and some lead us back home. This essay is a reflection on a journey I took with Paul Kane in the summer of 2001.

We travelled to the south-western region of the US in search of material for a team-taught course, 'It's Only Natural: Contemplation in the American Landscape'. The course was to be an exploration of some philosophical, religious, literary and historical approaches to the land in American traditions. Paul and I each had our own familiarity with some of these traditions, but we felt the need to explore distinctively American approaches. This led us naturally to American Indian traditions and, in particular, to two people we believed could be of significant help. One of these was Benjamin Barney, a Navajo who lives in Arizona and is a teacher at Diné college.

The first part of this essay is a reflection on our journey to and with Ben; the second part is on a journey to and with a poem. So, two journeys and some lessons learned on the way as we travelled in search of a course.

#### I. IN SEARCH OF BEN BARNEY

Usually where and when we arrive is not nearly as important as how we arrive. Life's destinations draw meaning and significance in the process of arriving. Travel itineraries, then, give away very little. An itinerary tells us nothing about what is often most important -- the time and place of the unexpected and our response to it. For example, our South-West itinerary stated: 'Day 6: Arrive by noon at Lukachukai, home to Ben Barney, in the Navajo Nation'. Part I of this essay is about what it didn't state.

Paul and I woke up on day six in Farmington, and after a brief visit to Shiprock, we continued driving south-west toward Lukachukai and soon came upon a crossroad. We could take the smooth, wide, paved road north to Teec Nos Pos, west to Mexican Water, and then back south to Lukachukai -- not a direct route, to be sure (more like driving up and around an immense horseshoe), but a dependable course all the same. Or, we could take the proverbial short cut: a narrow, dirt road -- and I'm being generous here -- that went directly west to Lukachukai over the Chuska mountains.

As we approached the crossroads, discussing our options, we saw on our right a Navajo family getting into a pickup truck. Eager for advice from some locals, we asked about the condition of the dirt mountain pass (this

seemed especially prudent given that a highway sign warned that the pass road was washed out and closed). When I asked about the road, the driver was just about to climb into a brawny pickup truck. She turned, took a long look at me, at Paul, then at our tiny rental car, then back to me, and finally responded, 'The road's pretty bad.' At the time, I knew something of Navajo understatement, but evidently not enough. We took the Chuska pass road.

There are short cuts that we insist on taking, no matter how deep the cut. Imagine driving 2 mph in constant fear of a rock bursting your oil pan or a tyre plunging into a deep cavity. As with many ill-conceived decisions and journeys, our pass road initially cut a smooth path – at least, that is, until we reached the summit. Since the brokenness and peril began gradually, we continued confidently. Toss a frog in boiling water and it will leap for safety; place the same frog in a kettle of cool water, bring to a slow boil and you have frog legs. Starting as a slow simmer, our road bit by bit – stone by stone – brought us to a boil.

First there were the bumps. Being accustomed to rough roads, I slowed appropriately and dodged what I could. Next came the gullies – first as wide as a tyre, then as wide and deep as two or three tyres. Finally we encountered the large rocks – small boulders, really – that stood in our way like defiant French barricades. The bumps, gullies and rocks worked together in unison, often bringing us to a stop or even to reverse our course to attempt another tack. I was driving but Paul was equally piloting. For hours we plotted and conferred – about every 5 or 6 feet – about the way forward and all the while the undercarriage of our rental car was brushed or clawed by dirt and stone.

At one point, when the way forward *and* backward seemed hopeless, I reminded Paul that I had declined the supplemental rental auto insurance. If we had a cell phone, we wondered, could we call Budget Rental and request the additional insurance en route. You can imagine the call. 'Yes, we initially declined it, but we're having second thoughts.' 'Eh, what's that? Why have we changed our minds? Well, it recently occurred to us that given the vicissitudes of life, the vulnerability of a car's oil pan and the transactional relation between the two, extra insurance seems like a good idea.' That was the call we imagined, and within five minutes we saw this exact fear realised, but in someone else's car and life. I think it was a blue Nova or some other discontinued model, with the hood up and a young Navajo peering at the underbelly of the engine. We asked the unfortunate driver if he needed any help (what did we – two professors – have to offer, words of hope?). He walked up to our car, grinned and inquired pleasantly, 'Have a rubber oil pan?' Humour in a tight spot is the Navajo way. Panic would have been closer to my own.

About thirty minutes later the pass road gradually tamed and evened

out. And just where the dirt road could not have been any smoother and was about to become a paved federal highway, we saw an orange highway sign that announced, 'Bump'. 'Bump!' we cried out. The jolt was almost imperceptible. We had travelled from Navajo understatement to federal overstatement. Imagine the signs if the Highway Department had placed them earlier. 'Crater', 'Large granite boulder', 'Open Trench in Middle of Road'.

I have a photograph of Paul and me standing next to that orange highway bump sign. It sits on my desk in my study and reminds me each morning that my daily planner – the daily itinerary – provides only a faint prediction of how my day might go. Life's greatest bumps seldom come with a warning, or if they do, we often disregard them.

Our arrival in the Navajo Nation, however, did stir up an unquestionable warning – though I am uncertain whether the warning was intended primarily for the Navajo or for Paul and me. When we reached Lukachukai, home to Ben Barney and the Diné College where he teaches, we drove to the Thriftway gas station and convenience store. Ben had asked us to meet him there at noon. We parked in the back and sluggishly walked around the station toward the front. When we were about 20 feet from the entrance, I pointed out to Paul a small twister out in the desert. 'A dust devil,' Paul observed, 'what the Australians call a willy willy'. As we idly watched it, it seemed to gather in both size and speed. Before long, it was across the street from us, pausing and then it crossed the street and violently shook a pickup truck that stood between it and us.

At about this time it dawned on Paul and me that the dust devil was coming directly at us. We began walking nonchalantly toward the entrance, then quickened our pace until finally we broke into a sprint. Just as we pushed through the front doors the twister was at our heels, preventing us from closing the doors behind us. There was something of an explosion as the trashcan next to the door erupted like a volcano, spewing paper, dirt, bottles, and cans in every direction – inside the store and outside among the pumps. And the dust – my god, it was everywhere.

When the dust finally settled and our eyes cleared, we met the firm gaze of two Navajo women who worked behind the counter. In their eyes we glimpsed an amalgamation of amusement and disdain. What, after all, had they seen? Two white guys, clearly out of place, chased inside by a dust devil and bringing with them all matter of trouble and refuse. The store was a mess. Items blown off the shelves littered the floor along with the debris and dirt; a door hung askance on its hinges; and the front of the station now looked like a dump site.

When Ben Barney arrived, Paul and I were waiting for him sheepishly in the shade of the parking lot where we could do little harm (we didn't feel

particularly welcomed inside, with the women cleaning up and all). When we told Ben what had happened, he shook his head slowly and said, 'Not a good sign.' He went inside the Thriftway, without us, and we could see the Navajo women, shaking their heads now, explaining what had taken place. The conversation was not difficult to imagine. 'We've told you, Ben, these white people come and cause trouble.' 'Yes, I know, but what could I do? They called and asked if they could visit.' Navajos are hospitable and would rarely say 'no'. But they are also honest, and so is the land that embraces them.

In this case, the land let us know in no uncertain terms that we did not belong there. I am not suggesting that we should not have travelled to the Navajo Nation to study with Ben Barney. Apparently, however, it was necessary at the start that we receive a forceful reminder that we were travellers in a foreign land, short-term visitors and we should not feel at home. The dust devil was a sober counterbalance to the generous ecumenical spirit of Lorain Fox Davis, the Cree and Blackfoot healer with whom we had just spent three days. In the company of Lorain, Paul and I might have been tempted to think that we could somehow become Native. Having studied with Lorain, we might have come to believe, at some level, that we had earned the spiritual right to travel self-assuredly among American Indians, regardless of tribe or place. Yet within five minutes of our arrival in the Navajo Nation, we were quickly – and categorically – put in our place, reminded we were out of place.

Ben Barney is to the land of the Navajo as the Victory of Samothrace is to its Greek marble: material and form – body and soul – having become one. Like the character of the land he perfectly matches, Ben is open, exacting, unadorned and relentlessly honest. There should be a field of study, if there isn't already, that explores the relation between human psychology and the natural environment. I think I once read that this issue was important to classical Greek and Roman philosophers. Perhaps because families used to stay in the same place for generations there was much interest in how a particular place shaped a population. I don't know, but I can't help but think that Ben's strong, deep-rooted, no-nonsense character was shaped by a terrain that demands respect, attentiveness and endurance if one is to cope with its extremities – its heat and cold, droughts and floods, its austerity and indifference. To survive in the desert one cannot permit oneself distractions; Ben is the most focused person I have ever met. When he looks at you, you can't help but think he is looking through you – through your masks, over your walls, and into the depths of your heart. Such insightfulness is disarming. It made me squirm as if I were being dissected under a microscope. His judgments are almost always right and even when they are not, they are worthy of careful consideration.

Ben speaks of what he knows, and his knowledge is deeply grounded. Grounded in what? The easiest answer – and perhaps the truest – is to say that his knowledge is rooted in his people's ways and traditions and the land that holds them. This is not to deny that Ben's beliefs are cosmopolitan; and since they are universal in scope and nature, some might complain that I have relativised his perspectives by so firmly locating them in Navajo traditions. I wouldn't want to embark on an epistemological discourse here, but I do want to suggest that Ben's perspectives, while emerging from and rooted in a particular place, are nevertheless connected to enduring and broad universal moral stances. I'll leave aside the question of justification, that is, of where or how those universal moral stances are grounded. Except I will say that even if Ben justifies his judgments by making reference to his Navajo ways, this in itself need not relativise the *truth* of his judgments; rather, it only points to their *origin*.

Now what I am about to say will surprise many, but I believe it to be true. Knowing the origin of his beliefs brings Ben more certainty, not less. This can be probably stated as a general principle: the more we are aware of the specific traditions that inform our way of life – assuming those traditions are fairly stable and enduring – the more assured we are in our judgments. This is surprising insofar as it goes against most modern Western philosophical thinking. The Enlightenment project – in almost all of its various forms – sought to escape the social and moral influence of *specific* traditions. This great escape was motivated precisely by the desire to gain certainty – a certainty that supposedly only came from grounding knowledge in that which transcends the local, that is, in the universal. Now that most philosophers have abandoned this Enlightenment quest, almost all agree that with the discovery of the parochial origin of our beliefs comes moral relativism and uncertainty. Yet in Ben Barney the opposite is the case: awareness of origin of belief brings certainty in judgment. Ben Barney seems to pose a challenge not only to the Enlightenment, but to the standard postmodern response to it.

What interests me here, again, is not the philosophical twists of an epistemological argument, but the correlation between Ben's confidence in knowing what he knows and his tight bond to specifiable traditions, in this case, Navajo. Ben's certainty is unusual in our midst. It stands out and can cause puzzlement. After Ben visited my classroom at Vassar about three years ago, one student commented to me, 'It seems strange to talk to someone who really *knows* what he's saying.' Trying not to take the comment personally, I asked my student for clarification. 'It's just odd to bump into someone who really believes to know how things fit together – to know that something is right or wrong.'

My students are both attracted to and wary of people who are so secure

in their beliefs that they don't show a hint of moral paralysis. Most of my colleagues and students are not rooted in a specific place and set of traditions — in a tightly knit educative community — and this is why we do not usually *know* things in the same way, with the same certitude. Our way has its advantages. We tend to be broadminded, morally flexible, and suspicious of dogmatism. But we pay a price. We live with much uncertainty and irresolution in our lives, especially about who we are — about our identity.

During his classroom visit to my course, 'Love: the Concept and Practice', Ben told my students about a man waiting for a train. Looking over his heavy load of assorted baggage, he decided to discard one bag and then another, until eventually he boarded the train with one small, light carry-on. That man was Ben, and his train took him from the Navajo Nation to Germany where he lived — and danced — for about two years. As Ben described the process of unloading his past to travel into his future — in this case, to Germany — my students and I inhaled his every word, as if a fresh breeze had blown into the classroom and our lives. In Arizona, Ben left behind his language, family, traditions and nation. Courageously, he discarded his baggage — all those personal belongings that one clings to and that provide comfort, security and identity.

So much for my Navajo example of one who is firmly embedded in tradition and place. Ben's flight to Germany is rather inconvenient for the sake of my narrative. But what am I to do, leave it out? Better to learn from it. To cross to safety we sometimes need to hazard risks and give up what is safest and dearest. Jettison one bag and you might end up throwing out the whole lot. Our relinquishment may only be temporary; we may eventually receive everything back; but we never know in advance. There may be times in our lives when we need to set our house on fire in order to continue the journey home.

## II. IN SEARCH OF A POEM

I once saw a billboard that boasted, 'ADVIL: STRONGER THAN PAIN'. Imagine. A tablet mightier than pain, a pill to overcome your darkest night, your deepest fear, your most tender wound: the night your child never came home; the day your spouse left you; the nights and days of abuse by the one who was supposed to protect you. Stronger than pain. Imagine.

Our search for a course led us to Shiprock (actually, it was more like Shiprock drew us as filings to a magnet). Shiprock is a massive geological formation known as a volcanic neck or plug — the remains of a solidified lava core of a dormant, 40 million year old volcanic pinnacle. It rises out of the Colorado Plateau — the Land of Room Enough and Time — in a shape and manner not unlike that of the cathedral at Chartre. Located in the

Navajo Nation, in the north-west corner of New Mexico, it is a sacred site to the Navajo and to many others as well.

Early white settlers in the 1870s saw a resemblance between 'the rock' and a windjammer under full sail. I don't doubt it. It looks like a ship because it's floating — floating on the high desert sea. Yet take away the undulating, oceanic desert and the ship vanishes. It becomes something else.

It is something else to the Navajo. In their eyes it was never a ship. I suspect this is because to the Navajo there was never an ocean, either. Why would the desert look like an ocean to a people with little exposure to oceans and with much exposure to deserts? To the Navajo the desert looked like the desert, and not empty and boundless as in the city-dweller's imagination, but occupied and encircled — home to animal, plant, and human communities. And the rock, that magnificent igneous intrusion, what did it look like? It looked like *Tsé Bit' a' i'*, Winged Rock. For the Navajo, *Tsé Bit' a' i'* is a place that speaks of loss and deliverance, of painful endings and promising beginnings.

While at Shiprock Paul and I went in search of a poem. Paul had visited Shiprock without me a few years prior to our South-West trip. On that occasion he climbed up high, wrote a poem and inserted it in a small crevice above a narrow ledge. Later he recited the poem at one of our weekly lunches. As it was almost my birthday, I asked him to write the poem down for me. Inscribed on a paper napkin, 'Lines Left at Shiprock' hangs framed in my office.

Westward, wings of rock  
enfold the setting sun  
as the world tilts  
towards the edge of night.

You have come this far  
and still you think  
your life will endure.<sup>1</sup>

What endures? We talk about enduring friendships, marriages and memories. We talk about enduring pain. Pain with staying power. Then we visit a place like Shiprock, a place that ages not in years or decades but in centuries and millenniums and epochs. It makes you wonder, what endures? A bracing breeze can sweep by and wake us up to a larger reality, reminding

1. Paul Kane, *Drowned Lands* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), p. 74.

us that we are particle among particles travelling on vast winds of time and space. Shiprock sweeps, too. It sweeps and temporarily clears the illusion of egocentrism – the doctrine of the Enduring Self – and thereby blunts our pain. For it is painful to cling to a self that is forever clinging to its pain (probably as painful as the attempt to permit no pain at all).

And a poem – what is its longevity? How long can 'Lines Left at Shiprock' survive? Paul and I wanted to find out, so we searched for the poem. We had our doubts. Would Paul be able to remember its exact location? It had been five years since he wrote the poem and placed it in one of Shiprock's ten million crevices, those pores through which it breathes. And even if we did find its resting place, would the poem be intact?

It was not an easy climb. The rock was dangerous. I have had some rock climbing experience, and my first climbing instructor had drilled into me the lesson, 'Trust the rock.' But this rock was not trustworthy. As Paul remarked as we clambered up the rock, 'Don't take anything for granite.' The rock, however, was not the only hazard. During the climb I realised that Paul, too, is dangerous. He is not a tame poet. I can say with complete certainty that Paul Kane is the most thoughtful and mild-mannered person I have ever known. All who meet him note his salutary, calming presence. Yet it was none other than this gentle man who alarmed me as I trailed him nervously up Shiprock, searching for the route he had once travelled alone, the way that led to the hidden poem.

Why does it surprise me that the gentle – the givers of comfort – can also be takers of risk? Perhaps there is a connection. Perhaps the same inner confidence that enables a person to assume risks also makes possible a spirit of generosity, acceptance and kindness? Climbing a mountain can be like piloting a life. You need to be able to face obstacles and quandaries, note if there is an easy way out, yet not flinch from the more difficult route if that is what is required. And regardless of the route, self-possession, skill and equanimity must take the lead.

We found the poem. During our climb we had joked about the possibility of discovering that the poem had been marked up in red by an anonymous reader with the final comment, 'best work to date', followed by the letter grade, B-. No joking took place, however, when we did pull the poem from the tiny fissure that for five years had enfolded and sheltered 'Lines Left at Shiprock'. Quietly we retrieved the poem, read it to ourselves and stood in silence. In that silence we both felt held and sheltered by something greater than ourselves and even greater than those wings of rock that enfolded us. In that moment, we surrendered.

'Contemplation is no pain-killer.'<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, who wrote that line, knew of what he spoke. In his lifetime he contemplated and suffered much, often at the same time. I read this line only this morning; I wish I had read it earlier. It explains my initial, and perhaps abiding, failure as a contemplative. For I turned to contemplation to ease my pain, not to stir it up and contend with it. Evidently I collaborate with a culture that goes to great lengths to escape pain. Remember, 'ADVIL: STRONGER THAN PAIN'. Pain has been declared unacceptable. Pain has been classified unnatural. Some pain, I noted, is unacceptable and remedies should be sought. There are just lawsuits, helpful drugs, appropriate divorces. The imperative 'Grin and bear it' is seldom good counsel. Yet the opposite counsel, 'smile or else get out of it, for life should be free of all suffering', is equally difficult to bear. When pain per se is presumed unnatural, we carry the unnatural burden of attempting to escape the inescapable. This burden is even heavier than learning to accept pain.

Paul and I stood high up on Shiprock, with 'Lines Left at Shiprock' at Paul's side. Much could be said about that moment of surrender. Looking back, my most accurate report would note with confidence that we met a mystery that held us – in our entirety, every aspect, every moment, past and present, joyful and sad, bright and dim, confident and insecure, calm and anxious, wise and rash, willing and stubborn, caring and callous, reverent and glib – our personhood in its full breadth and depth was for a moment quietly, and unmistakably, held.

In that time and place I glimpsed what it meant to admit pain and not be overwhelmed by it. To consent to it and still feel at home in the world. This acceptance was neither cheerful nor gloomy; slightly melancholic, it was mainly peaceful. Consistent happiness, I now understood, would not and could not be my lot. I would need to seek something else – not something less, but something different. A different course.

Shortly after a calamity smashed into my life in the summer of 2000, I read one of Paul's poems. 'Acceptance' was the title, but not my response to it. I loathed that poem when I first read it.

#### Acceptance

Grey across the bridge, the bridge  
itself silver, shining in the dull air,

the grey mist and water below  
pale, obscuring any view but

2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 13.

the prevalent neutrality. Grey, then,  
with splashed colour, lights moving

slowly, the bridge trafficking in  
anonymous lives, sequestered worlds –

it could be this way always, sombre  
and yet not sad: washed, toned down,

quiet, even serene. It would be  
all right, with much still to praise.<sup>3</sup>

The poem, it seemed, was speaking directly to me, gently admonishing me. It spoke of what my life had recently become – ‘dull air’, ‘grey mist’, ‘water pale’. When I looked to the future, back then, I could see for my life no more than a ‘prevalent neutrality’, a ‘washed, toned down’ existence in my own sequestered, lonely world. Paul’s poem seemed to confirm this bleak future, adding – softly, yet firmly – that such a prospect ‘would be all right’. It would be enough, and ‘with much still to praise’.

Yet I wanted, oh, so much more! The poem’s Wordsworthian ‘lonely cheer’ seemed to me too austere. For this reason the poem stung. I wanted community, not ‘sequestered worlds’. I wanted joy, not a life ‘toned down’. I wanted love tender and yet ardent, not days ‘somber and yet not sad’. Not sad! Becoming satisfied with ‘not sad’ was my fear and, I imagined, my destiny. Paul’s poem had named both and pinned me down just as surely as his words held the page.

I understand the poem differently now. (Words in time, we know, can shift within the same page or person.) First, the poem, it seems to me now, isn’t altogether dreary. In it, Paul invokes a shining, silver bridge, moving lights, splashed colour and serenity – yes, much to praise. As much could be said of my own life, which I am also now beginning to understand differently.

The greater interpretative shift, however, lies not in now noticing the pleasant facets of the poem or of my life. The shift is not quantitative. Acceptance, in Paul’s poem, is not about identifying one’s blessings, or even about being satisfied with less or knowing when less is enough (although this talent is needful in our consumer culture). Acceptance, rather, is a graceful stance, a receptive disposition, toward every particular – every event, person, creature, or thing – that is present, or notably missing, in one’s life. Acceptance pertains as much to how we hold people or things as to how we lose, or never receive, them. When each particular in

3. Paul Kane, *Drowned Lands* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), p. 6.

our life is continuously received as a gift, an impermanent gift, we can hold it gratefully and release it gracefully. Pain, too, can be held and released skilfully.

Understood as such, acceptance is a practice, a discipline, that requires daily application and cultivation. Although the capacity to accept may be most evident when we encounter privation, it is also in effect in the face of plenty. It brings, then, not only the freedom to do without, but the freedom to receive gifts of splendour and delight – health, romance, family, vocation, avocations and enduring friendship. To accept these goods aptly is to respect the autonomy and fragility of each: none belongs to us absolutely, even if each is, in some sense, in our care and responsibility.

Paul’s poem, as I now understand it, is about a way to experience life as ‘quiet, even serene’. It is, however, only a poem. That is, it is one poem only: one meditation on one aspect of life. It is not St Paul’s Gospel. That gospel, if there is one, is found in the vast, open space between the words, between the verse lines, between the poems – the open space that gives shape to a life.

In Robert Frost’s early poem ‘Reluctance’ he explores the sense of loss that comes with change, in this case, the transition from the season of flowers and warmth to that of withered leaves and crusted snow. Having climbed the ‘hills of view/And looked at the world’, he then declares matter of factly, ‘lo, it is ended./The leaves are all dead on the ground./Save those that the oak is keeping . . .’ He seems to accept the loss stoically. The final stanza, however, suggests otherwise:

Ah, when to the heart of man  
Was it ever less than a treason  
To go with the drift of things,  
To yield with a grace to reason,  
And bow and accept the end  
Of a love or a season?<sup>4</sup>

In this honest poem Frost reminds us of the role of defiance in human affairs. There is a place in the human heart for recalcitrance, for refusing to accept that which is inexorable, for trying to keep a season or a love that can’t be kept. A sentiment more contrary to Zen or to ‘acceptance’ is difficult to imagine. Yet there it is: reluctance – vivid, veritable, undeniable.

4. Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, Ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt, 1975), pp. 29–30.

Have I, then, committed treason by endorsing acceptance? Have I been disloyal, as Frost might say, to the human heart? Has Paul?

The philosopher in me would like to offer some dialectic, some middle term, to reconcile Frost's 'Reluctance' with Paul's 'Acceptance'. But I want to resist that urge, at least for the moment. The human heart is big enough to hold both poems, both modes, without much trouble. Consistency is not only the hobgoblin of small minds, but of tiny hearts. Human existence, while not entirely shapeless or haphazard, rarely conforms to a neat, orderly system. We practise acceptance, we experience reluctance -- this is who we are. To deny it is to betray the human heart. This condition -- this humanity -- we need to *accept*.

Ah, have I stumbled on my reconciler? Was it within 'Acceptance' all along? Can we think of reluctance as a gift, even if at times a taxing one, for which to be grateful? Perhaps. Yet tension between acceptance and reluctance will often remain and we mustn't flinch here from admitting as much. There will be times, for example, when we know the wise course is to bow and accept some ending, but instead we will refuse to yield gracefully. In quiet moments of reflection and cloudless perception, we might know to yield. But when we return to the life of clamouring emotions, profound attachments and dreams once spoken, we quickly abandon our recent pledge to accept and vainly fight for a prize never to be won.

The ways of acceptance and reluctance, I said, I cannot harmonise and fit into a tidy system. Yet with another poem by Frost, 'The Road Not Taken', I can capture a bit more of their manner and tension. 'The Road Not Taken' is one of those complex poems whose significance is commonly reduced for easy handling. I read the poem yesterday and I was surprised. I had always thought there was something triumphant about the poem. It had been a long time since I read it, but I would often hear, out of context,

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that made all the difference.<sup>5</sup>

In these words I heard, 'I, the hardy American -- I, the brawny individual -- took the more challenging, almost virgin path, and that heroic choice has made all the difference.' But yesterday when I read the poem it struck me more as a poem of loss than of daring accomplishment.

The first clue was the title. It is not 'The Road Taken'. Our attention is not directed to the way travelled, but to the way not taken, to what was left

5. Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, Ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt, 1975), p. 105.

behind. And so the poem begins, 'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood./And sorry I could not travel both...' This is not the boast of one blazing trails, never looking back. It is, rather, the sigh of one who has come to a stop -- at crossroads, of a sort -- and who is anticipating the loss of having gone down one path and not the other. To console himself, Frost tells himself he would keep the relinquished path 'for another day!' Honesty, however, immediately nudges him and thus he continues, 'Yet knowing how way leads on to way,/I doubted if I should ever come back'. With these words we are prepared for the poem's concluding prophetic gesture, 'I shall be telling this with a sigh/Somewhere ages and ages hence...'

Both reluctance and acceptance have a place in 'The Road Not Taken'. With great reluctance at the crossroads we leave behind a path -- a love, a job, a home, a hope, a belief. Like Frost, we may try to convince ourselves that loss can be avoided, that we can travel both ways, perhaps both at the same time. This wishful thinking is also the work of reluctance and is an attempt to minimise the anguish at these moments of decision. The anguish will be especially disquieting if the two ways have different yet equal appeal -- one way appealing, for example, to our desire for continuity, the other to our desire for change and each way claiming for itself merits of a moral, aesthetic, and erotic nature.

Back and forth we mentally pace -- debating, deliberating, consulting -- over the way forward. Later we may tell ourselves the path chosen was clearly the better way. This is natural: we want to reassure and be reassured. Yet if it was crossroads that brought us to a halt, then candour, given a chance, will assert the evenness of both paths. Frost initially justifies his chosen path as 'having perhaps the better claim,/Because it was grassy and wanted wear'. Yet immediately in the next line he recants with the confession, 'Though as for that, the passing there/Had worn them really about the same'.

A juncture of incommensurate paths of equal appeal -- this is where Frost found himself, this is where we have been and will be again. At such junctures we would like to be decisive, confident, and in the end resolute. And some are like that. Yet for most of us the heart, with its ways of attachment, longing, wonder, and imagination, does not let us proceed so easily. We suffer a little. We pay a toll at the crossroads. And that toll is frequently heaviest not during the pondering and debating, but at the moment of our first step down the chosen path, the first step away from the forsaken path. For until then, both paths remain open. Hope clings to both. Yet after the first step, while hope for the chosen path abides, for the other path hope turns to mourning. There is no return. The step, like an atomic clock, will not be turned back. Everything is now different. 'Way leads on to way.'



Letting go of the forsaken or neglected path is the work of acceptance. Acknowledging that way leads on to way, that where we are today is due to the path we journeyed on yesterday, this, too, is the work of acceptance.

This, I have said, is difficult work. And our movement toward acceptance is not usually linear: we zigzag between acceptance and reluctance, between letting go and hanging on. If this motion is reminiscent of the movement of mourning, it is because this process, or procession, is itself a form of mourning. In time, we increasingly rest near acceptance. Yet even long after the forsaken path is buried, it may resurface and bring with it an episode of grief. This is natural. This is human. This, too, is to be accepted.

And some day we may say,  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that made all the difference.

We would not boast, we would not shout these lines. We may utter them, like Frost, with a sigh. Not a sigh of lament, but the gentle release of breath and speech that seems to say, 'yes, this is how it is: I am here and not there, due to paths chosen and paths neglected; and here — in this place, on my course — there is much to praise'. The mood of our speech could be unaffected and temperate, even chaste. And yet gratitude would have its place, as if to say,

it could be this way always, sombre  
and yet not sad: washed, toned down,

quiet, even serene. It would be  
all right, with much still to praise.<sup>6</sup>

It would be as if gratitude found its voice in 'Acceptance', as if Kane and Frost conspired to point to a route of satisfaction and equanimity regardless of paths chosen. This, too, would be part of the search for a course. Some courses are not contingent on this or that choice, this or that path, but on a deeper route that runs the length of our character and spirit.

Some journeys take us away from home and some lead us back. But there is still another kind. To leave and return in each moment: to be always at home on the earth, always a visitor encountering something new.

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6. Paul Kane, *Drowned Lands* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), p. 6.

### Part III

