Story of My Stories

My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows
Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
a dedicated spirit. On I walked
in thankful blessedness, which yet survives.
-William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*

And Jesus began to speak unto the people, 'What went ye out
into the wilderness to see? A reed
shaken in the wind?'"
-Luke 7:24

I was born a preacher's son, the third of four given my parents, and probably the worst. I possessed an unflinching contempt for school. I got into fights, constantly, set off a smoke bomb in the girls' lavatory, and pulled the fire alarm more than once. Inevitably, I was sitting in the principal's office feeling greatly ashamed, for half the teachers in the school attended my father's church. Some sang in his choir.

We lived in northern Pennsylvania in a town called Smethport, where loggers, coal miners, mill workers, along with those teachers, made up my father's congregation. The town was nestled in the quiet foothills of a final range of the northeastern Alleghenies. The mountains crowded the horizon of the houses and buildings of the town, even shadowing the steeple of my father's church.

Below Smethport ran Potato Creek, where my older brothers Rick, Jeff and I, along with my sister Julianne, did our playing. The creek lacked depth but was swift and clear. Rainbow and brook trout ran in its humble currents. Visible on its bottom lay lime, shale and slate, stones brown as the creek's name, being washed down from mill run-offs miles upstream. We pulled mud puppies—hell-benders they were called—from the creek's silt-sunken banks. The creatures hid in the clay earth, and were mottled and gray, ugly really, blind as moles, their slick bodies longer than our forearms.

For years we didn't own a television; but we had the woods—our woods—the grand and forever forests of McKean and Elk counties, an area of the state north and west known as the place of a thousand hills. North of town rose a hill two miles up. We made forays into its woods, searching out the dense underbrush and steep trees all the way to the summit of an old quarry, where we lighted upon leavings of black bears, tracks of bobcats, and now and then the heart-shaped prints of a doe and her fawn. At night, we'd lay outside the parsonage of the church, listen to the infinite

crickets, and watch moons so big you could detect canyons in them rise in a lake of stars over those hills.

That was years ago in my childhood, and now I live in a sprawling suburb of a main-line American city. Yet I still can't rid myself of the memory of that town, its people, and the hills that defined its vistas.

Some say writers are made by place: where they grew up and lived, the roads they walked, or the alleys of tenement apartments through which they ran. Others, that writers aren't made at all, but make themselves, somehow, through the sweat and crafting of years. I don't know. I can't imagine Richard Wright as Richard Wright without his growing up in Mississippi, or Baldwin without Harlem or his Paris. Did Faulkner discover Yoknapatawpha, or did it discover him? Remove O'Connor from Georgia and what stories would we have? Or, say, Hemingway never went to war. Say there never was a war.

But there was. And he went.

I write stories, novellas, and novels, and I wonder what makes a writer. Kurt Vonnegut described writers as loping around like gut-shot bears. I like that. Barry Hannah has said writers observe everything. That they stare, like cows. Many writers have talked of the importance of place in their work and in their lives. The land they dwelt in ends up dwelling, somehow, unavoidably and deeply, in them as well. The soul of a writer absorbs it all, even if unconsciously.

Maybe it's simple as our childhoods: Those temporary Edens, such as they were, the good and the terrible, that we once knew and had to leave but that never have fully left us. We carry them, and then are driven to write either toward or away from what they were and who we are.

You can't go home again, wrote Thomas Wolfe. Then, for the rest of his career all he did was write about home. American literature itself rises and falls on the simple story of the search for a home. Twain's Huck Finn, Hawthorne's Dimmsdale and Hester, Melville's Ishmael, Hemingway's Nick Adams and Jake Barnes, Fitzgerald's Gatsby, back to the pilgrims themselves coming ashore encountering myth as reality. One of the most profound of our epics in Western literature reduces itself to a very elemental story: A man named Odysseus, after twenty years at war, just wants to get

home. *Nostos*, the Greeks called it. *Return*. It's where we get our word nostalgia: the longing to return to a familiar wound.

Wounds, like brands, are what make us. And it is out of such wounds that many of this country's best stories have been written.

My father preached against rebellion, maybe on my behalf. He said it was a sin akin to witchcraft. Then he told of Ezekiel, God's prophet, seeing the fiery chariot and the four living creatures, their eyes sharp as scorpions, their faces alike unto man's, coming in judgment against his own people. Then the Almighty told his servant to eat the words of the scroll.

When I heard that, I remember I couldn't sleep. I had to find the passage.

"And I looked, and behold, an hand was sent unto me; and, lo, a scroll was in it. Moreover he saith unto me, Son of man, eat what thou findest; eat the scroll...So I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat of it."

The words seared themselves into my dreams.

My parents required we memorize long passages from the King James Bible. At six, I was made to stand on an old oak pew in front of our congregation—all 150 of them—and recite the entirety of Psalm 1. I shook when I said the words aloud.

It is strange that I should be a writer of stories and novels. My parents prayed earnestly, especially my mother, that each of us would end up a preacher or missionary. None of us have. As a child, I dreamed of flying a single-engine Cessna above thousand-mile jungles of green and veiny river channels delivering food to peoples who'd never seen civilization. That one day my plane would go down in some swift but heroic flight. Then I'd be borne aloft by the spirit into the very heart of God.

I never became that missionary pilot. The closest I came was when I was fifteen and met Brian Brown, a year older than me, who grew up along the Amazon River with his family as missionaries. He spent his life on the river until his father was bitten by a bushmaster snake and nearly died. They had to move back to the States, permanently. Brian was in culture shock, rebelling

against all he'd known. As most teens, I was having my own stint of rebellion, against my parents, the church, God, everybody. We met at a church youth rally. We were a missionary's kid and a preacher's kid desperate to drive a stake through the soul of God.

This is when I became a quadriplegic.

One July, Brian and I camped at a nameless creek in the deep woods of western Pennsylvania. We sat on the clay bank at night listening to the creek's waters, the crickets humming in the dark trees. We stared at the moon, passed a joint, and talked of what God must think of us. The next morning, I took a swim. Above the trees dawn purpled the east. Dew still lay on the willows of the banks.

I dove too shallow and crushed the fifth and sixth vertebrae of my neck, paralyzing me from the collar-bone down. I was performing a dead-man's float and didn't know it. I couldn't breathe. I figured then God was letting me drift into his unlit eternity the old prophets called Hades. Sunlight filtered through the cloudy water. I heard a splash. And soon Brian was pulling me to the bank to save me. He laid me under a sycamore, my arms flopping at my sides; the rest of me, numb as stone. I no longer knew my body.

I spent four months in a hospital by the Ohio River on the eleventh floor in a traction bed. They drilled holes on either side of my head and, into each, fastened an iron arch, rather like a halo, from which a cable ran over the bed's edge holding fifty pounds of weight to stay the vertebrae, allowing them to heal. Lying flat for four months became my life. One window was in the room, showing me a piece of the sky. Some mornings a sparrow lit upon the window's sill.

There were those of a particular evangelistic fervor who prayed, anointing my body with oil, telling me it was the will of the Almighty that I should walk and He would do it.

He never did.

People died on that floor. Every two or three weeks past my room they wheeled a gurney, a sheet drawn like a shroud over it.

One evening I believed I saw the Christ shadowing the doorway of my room, his love-fierce gaze telling me I wasn't alone. Then I became convinced it was the death angel informing me it had

been wrought in stone from the beginning that I was to be born, live fifteen years, and then, here and now, die.

A line runs down each of my arms defining the boundary between numbness and sensation. My hands are still. They are drawn up like eagle's claws and feel as if asleep, possessing no more notion of a touch of hand or feather than that of pins and needles. I've burned them on coffee mugs unknowingly, until later, when preparing for bed, blisters the size of leeches well-up on a thumb, a forefinger.

I spent six months in a rehabilitation center where therapists tried desperately to teach all of us (others like me) how to live with what we had left.

How do I write? I cup a pen between my numb hands, forcing them to clasp, and, well, what you might call scrawling ends up on a notepad. Then I translate to my computer. I type, sliding the pen backwards through my hands, hitting one key stroke at a time with its blunt end. It is a hectic and harried course of composition. Prolonged and chaotic. But it seems to work for me.

No pity here, please. There are many of us. I know a man with severe cerebral palsy whose mother strapped a band around his head, with a stick and bulb on the end of it attached to his forehead. When he types, his head dips, the bulb tapping the key strokes. He is miraculously accurate. He has told me sometimes he feels like a pigeon.

I cannot pretend to know what I'm doing when I write. I only know that I must strive for what is most true and pure and hurt in the people I'm writing. And I know I must write people, not ideas. Maybe I owe that to my father, who insisted I ride with him out to the homes of coal miners, loggers, and strip-miners in the deep corners of Elk and McKean Counties. "Unto the ends of the earth," he used to say.

Poverty in abundance dwelt in those hills, along with harsh but beautiful winters. These families resided in homes no larger than gas-pump houses; some nailed oak and ash boards to cover their glassless windows.

Some of the kids at my school lived in those houses. David Kimble was one of my best friends. We shot pellet rifles at scrawny crows in the woods near his home. His father fought in Korea and, I think, Nam. Late at night when I'd sleep over, I'd hear his father drunk outside, cursing the moon as though it were God telling him how much he hated himself.

Anne Brookens and her six children lived in a one-room abandoned schoolhouse in the middle of a forlorn valley. It was so far into the hills I couldn't believe a soul would stay alive in such depths. Some Methodist missionaries had built the school eighty years before but then a plague and too severe of a winter had taken everyone. I don't know how Anne came to it. The room was so wide and cold I could taste the winter outside the walls. She didn't own a car and couldn't attend church. I don't even know if her children went to any school. She asked my father to baptize her littlest, Anna Bell, a baby of three months. "Before it's too late," she told my father. I watched him cradle the baby in his big arms and dip his hand in a pail of water, blessing her. Then he prayed over her and all the children.

There were as many stories as there were hills out there. I will forever try to write them.

"Better is it to dwell in the house of mourning than in the house of mirth," says the sage of Ecclesiastes. "For by sorrow is the countenance of the heart made purer." I hold to that sentiment.

I have failed twice in love and marriage. Writing, I pray, will be the final grace to save me.

I'm on my own again living in an apartment. A lake spreads below a tall window of the living room. During warm afternoons, geese and goslings trail in the mild water. Turtles crest the surface. A crane or great blue heron, a wingspan as if out of a primal forest, shadows the lake in the evenings.

A couple next door prepare my meals, and each night, they lift me into bed, turning me if necessary. Other friends too come to help. Every morning, nurses' aides bathe, dress, and transfer me back into my chair. They are all good to me.

Wrestle with it until it blesses you, Richard Bausch, my friend and mentor tells me. He quotes the passage from Genesis: *"And he saith, Let me go; for lo, the dawn breaketh. But he said unto him, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."*

Was not the sign of that blessing a wound?

Homer, *whom the Muse cherished*, wrote of his own calling, *By her gift he knew the good of life, and evil—for she who lent him sweetness made him blind.*

When writing stories, follow the pain, says Robert Morgan.

I owe as much richness to the poverty of those hills as I do to that nameless creek which took my body.

It is far, far past midnight, and I sense the spirit of my father upon me, heavily.

Behold, all ye writers! We are all writing one story! We are all so many veins of one Body! Follow yours until it bleeds.

Yes, all of you, I'm here with my numb hands and pen. I believe even the moon, pale as an eye on the lake, senses dawn. Wordsworth, Keats, and others are about. I'm thinking of David Kimble's father and Anne Brookens and the Coulters and Sweanhearts and all the so many others.

The geese are bedded in the firs. The crickets are silent. Even the bullfrogs have ceased.

I know I'm risking a decubitis ulcer, a sore orbing outward from beneath my skin due to my sitting up so long. My feet will swell enough to fill a pair of boots twice my size. My nurse will rebuke me.

But I'm here and I've got my pen clasped between my hands. I sense Christ in the room. Whenever I go to put ink to paper, a burning rises in my chest as it did in that child reciting the Holy Writ. My father preached the Almighty and my mother prayed, desperately. I know I am bound to this chair and pen by God, the Muse, fate, everything, to write these stories, and I'm asking, praying, for words, like manna, to fall.