

*One*



## 1.0

Before a light breeze and on the flooding tide, a heavy wooden schooner slipped into Long Island Sound with remarkable speed. Pushed up by a flat stem, the bow wave crumbled into the confused water rolling down the boot topping. We were fishing for late season stripers off Orient Point and had anchored the open launch mid-channel in the morning fog. The engine was off. Led out through the port chock, our anchor-rode went slack and taut by turns as the skiff bounced in the steep chop kicked up by the tide. Horsing against a four knot current on shortened scope, our light ground tackle had to have been dragging across the uneven bottom.

In the Gut, the channel formed between Plum Island and Orient Point, the stripers can be huge. The local paper has reported them as large as eighty pounds, and every year one over fifty pounds gets taken. These big bass tuck themselves into the rocks and wait. Protected from the force of the tide, they feed on what gets swept by. Trout are also prone to lie just outside the fast water, behind a rock or at the end of a riffle and wait for the current to bring them insects and little fish.

The schooner's eighty tons glided by us so quietly that if I had been looking the other way I might have missed her. Surely we had been taking a risk anchored as we were in the fog. But from the moment she first ghosted into view, it was clear she was going to pass close down our starboard side. I was never afraid. As if in slow motion, I found myself to be in the midst of all that was happening. Her showing up unfolded with and like the folding of the bow wave at her stem. I am not sure if it is possible to be struck by the uncanny and be afraid at the same time.

The sense of the strange that rolled over me with the schooner's appearance did not interrupt what I was doing. I kept fishing. As I held to my pole, my attention remained attached to the tension in my line let out on the stern. All activity

continued without pause even if not quite as before. For things felt different than they had. Caught up in a conspicuous sense of being there, I had run up on a set of circumstances that had somehow been there all along. The situation was in this sense familiar. I had been there all along fishing from the skiff but in a certain modality of not being there. If I am daydreaming and thinking of other things, this is yet another way I may not be there. But I had been not been lost in thought or far away. I had been lost in fishing. As the schooner materialized in the fog, what began to loom was a sense of mystery concerning a darkness that usually keeps from sense both the whence of coming and the whither of going. This strange and yet familiar shadow is usually washed out in the light of the obvious.

### 1.1

Last year, north of Wilcox, Arizona, on a hillside flanking the long wash running down to one of Stuart's favorite tanks a singular Gambel's cock broke cover and fixed in the deepest part of memory. I had already killed him: a shattered wing, the other beating in disordered pulses, his eyes faintly giving back the desert sky, the winter image of clouds and of clouding. A magnificent bird, he was the largest I had seen that year: a "real chicken."

It was unseasonably warm, too warm for the young dogs to gather much scent. I had bumped up the bird myself. After I shot the cock and took him from Nora's mouth, I looked at him a little longer than is probably usual, reached blindly and settled him down with the other quail in the game bag hanging from the back of my vest. But when that bird had broken cover and I had pulled the barrels of my double-gun along the path of his flight, just before I pulled the trigger, I was there in the midst of swinging my gun to the track of the bird. The sense of catching myself at hunting this bird was not quite the same as catching sight of myself; it was not as if I suddenly

saw myself from afar. I had not been watching myself hunt. I had just happened upon myself. Intent on killing that bird and for no obvious reason, I had emerged from a kind of wholeness: the landscape and bird all bound up together in the act of hunting. The bird was the center of this feeling: a bird, not so much different from any other bird I had killed that afternoon. This encounter with myself was thick enough to hold the hunting of the cock in place. My awareness never broke. I squeezed the trigger, watched the cock fold up, hit the ground, flutter and die – all within a pervading sense of what was familiar and what was strange. Drenched in the real.

## 1.2

When I was ten years old we lived in a shingled house on top of a steep hill that overlooked Flax Pond. Beyond the tidal marsh, Long Island stretched away from what was at that time the end of suburbia and the beginning of exurbia. Eighty years before the whole neck had been a horse farm belonging to one of the robber barons. The estate lost its way sometime between the wars and was broken up into separate holdings. A couple of huge beech trees were all that remained of the landscaping around the main house then lost to the encroaching woods: shade trees on what was once a vast sloping lawn. The industrialist's house was a big affair with a long sweeping stair situated a couple of hundred yards or so from a collection of horse barns and a series of corrals. All these buildings were slowly falling apart, full of pigeons and feral cats. We lived in what had been the caretaker's house a couple of hundred yards away on a hill above the barns. In the early sixties, just as this part of the world was starting to get expensive again, there was still a lot of open space in which children could play.

Some of the neighboring kids were there. We were involved in a military game that included a lot of running around the house. I was in the process of ambushing a group of my

playmates with a wooden machine gun, which I had made in the basement from scraps of wood, bits of hose and the like. Quite in the middle of everything, or perhaps equivalently, out of nowhere, I was met by the odd experience of being who I was. I abruptly encountered myself as I was; a feeling of contingency anchored to a sense of having to be was upon me. I had shown up from nowhere as the one who was involved in what was going on and, just as I became interested in this strange feeling and without transition, I continued to machine-gun my little friends running madly on the lawn. Feelings lapsed into memory. The uncanny sense of myself being vanished the moment I reached for it. The whole of things was everywhere, and then nowhere at all. A twinge of disappointment flashed as the explicitness of myself waned back into the excitement of our game, and I was left with a subtle sense that I had encountered a truth that had evaporated before I ever quite saw it. The fragility of the uncanny is palpable. Yet after close to forty years, I continue to call upon an impression of how I had felt on that hillside as a child: both when I emerged from my game and when the feeling disappeared.

### 1.3

If there are seams or transitions between my moods and feelings, I never experience them. When or if I check myself, I already have a mood, am already disposed towards the world in this way or that. Mood is not an intrusion into how things are. It is synonymous with how things are. My dog chewed up my shoe. I was momentarily surprised and then, without transition, I was in a state. Dismay flashed into anger. My mind wandered. When I returned from following down the stream of thought and feeling, I was only mildly irritated. I formed an image of the dog chewing my shoe. I had been angry but when I looked again the whole episode, myself included, seemed ridiculous or even amusing. When I investigate, I always find

myself to be precisely as I am: surprised, dismayed, angry, irritated or amused. I never find myself to be partially as I am, or on my way towards being as I am. That 'I am precisely as I am' is what I have in mind when I speak of the wholeness of my mood, or simply the wholeness of my way to be. The wholeness of who I am is not merely an idea. It is something felt.

The phenomenon of wholeness is experienced when I emerge from a complete or perfect absorption in activity. 'I' becomes who it is in its emergence from the undifferentiated wholeness of happening. Wholeness is a phenomenon that is never faithfully reproduced or fully ascertained in a proposition. Every attempt to articulate the sense of unity that is felt in the emergence of self from its utter engagement with the world must run the risk of becoming a positing and as such changing the kind of being that belongs to the unity of what is whole.

A whole may have parts, but wholeness or unity does not. To articulate something means to move it at its joints and so in this way to make present how it is going. This 'it' is something like the it that snows in winter when it is cold or rains in the spring when it is raining. Because wholeness has no components – no knuckles – it is moot to speak of bending wholeness at its joints. Every expression of wholeness is a feat of imagination that grows from a projection of, or an idea concerning, the unity that constitutes the phenomenon. Every view of wholeness has already posited something outside that wholeness from which the phenomenon is seen. But since wholeness includes everything, there is no place or vantage belonging to wholeness from which the rest of it can be seen. When I imagine wholeness, I imagine it as something over there and away from me. And so in gaining a view of wholeness, that wholeness fails to encompass the position from which it has been imagined. As something imagined, wholeness fails to comprehend the one who is trying to comprehend it. Wholeness becomes contextualized in the very act of being posited. But the whole is precisely that which exceeds or exhausts every

context. Wholeness has no context. So in every articulation of the whole of things, the very being of this wholeness is in danger of being taken up as otherwise.

By way of analogy, nothingness has a relation to expression that is similar to the relation wholeness has. Just as wholeness cannot be articulated without opening up the possibility that what has been posited will contextualizing itself and so depriving itself of its most essential character (something like a lack of boundary), nothing cannot be posited without changing what it is supposed to mean. To utter the word 'nothing' points nothing out in the sense of making nothing present. And so in the act of being pointed out, of being posited, nothing becomes all too much like something. This is not a problem but a fact.

The mood of the familiar-strange is the uncanny sense of the obvious. In the unexpected emergence of myself from the wholeness of engaged activity within my environment, I encounter myself. *I am* and *the world is* familiar in an obvious way. But it is this obviousness that is strange. How is it that I am struck by the fact of myself? Who else was I expecting? In being caught within the mood of the familiar-strange, I do not run into an alteration between something that is familiar and then something else that is strange. Familiarity and strangeness, which permeates the explicit sense of my being caught up in contingency in a way that cannot be otherwise, are manifestly inseparable. Neither do I mean that the distinction between the familiar and the strange either fails to constitute a real distinction or that the distinction is not useful. I only mean that there is a difference between the experience of the familiar-strange and the positing of that same experience as familiar and then strange. In the familiar-strange encounter with myself in which I am taken over by a dynamic sense of an impossible wholeness, I feel as if all of what I am has been given over to the incalculable and logically diffident unity of that which is contingent and that which is necessary.

The dynamic sense of the impossible unity is felt as a kind of bewilderment or wonder. I must place ‘impossible’ in scare quotes because the wholeness manifest in the dynamic belonging-together of the contingent and the necessary is manifestly *not* impossible to experience, even if the conjunction seems to have the character of a logical impossibility. The experience of the unity that seems both contingent and necessary is just another way to speak about the uncanny existential encounter with myself that I have been describing. Impossibility pertains to this unity only insofar as the unity seems to be a logical impossibility. But a dynamic being-together of the possible and the necessary can be felt in a mode of being in which *I am not there*. This kind of not being there may occasionally and explicitly occur and is marked by what I have been calling the mood of the familiar-strange.

Love, or at least erotic attachment, is one name that has been given to the miracle of the ‘impossible’ unity that belongs to what is contingent and yet could not be otherwise. Death is another.

#### 1.4

Sensation is not well calibrated. Pain. I cannot remember if it hurt more to break my foot when I was thirty-three or my hand at forty-one. I know which of these accidents was more serious. I remember the costs; but I cannot compare the experiences as to which hurt more. Anger is just as rough in marking some of the big differences between the situations in which anger obtains. Erotic desire is no better. Eros may have a priority over other moods or emotions – and I think it does – but not because it is any more discerning than other feelings or moods. Eros is always something of an embarrassment.

I am unable to discern the difference in the desire I felt during a one-week romance with a complete stranger in the south of France many years ago and the desire I felt for my

wife when we were first courting. It is an embarrassment that erotic desire (which has, at crucial moments, reorganized my life, confused me, lifted me towards heaven and even left me close to despair) cannot or will not honor that one of my lovers has been vastly more important to me than the other. It is shameful that my desire is so blind. I have even thought that every urge that serves or leans towards survival is ultimately an embarrassment, and that every assertion of my right to survive is as shameful as the heroic context has always found it to be. I say this because the heroic is a system of social relations that barely tolerates self-preservation. All the while Eros remains nearly irresistible.

I am familiar with every inch of her: her body, her response to my touch, her generosity, her hunger and her greed. At times I cannot even tell her arms and legs from my own. But in most of my erotic activity, which is to say almost always, I do tell our limbs apart and I have not mixed myself up with my lover. I seem to operate her body, as she does mine, for the sake of giving and receiving pleasure. From time to time, I fall into the unified activity of lovemaking that is free from thought and so free from fantasy. This selfless erotic bonding is a miraculous occurrence. Despite my intense, even overwhelming familiarity with her, in the uncanny emergence of the 'I' that may happen in the midst of a fully unified act of lovemaking – an emergence that is inevitable – there also manifests an unbridgeable gap: I recognize that I cannot be certain that she feels about me as I do about her.

Not only is it impossible for me to be certain about how she feels about me, Eros seems to demand that I *should not* be certain about her love. In dissolving into her, I find that I have completely surrendered to uncertainty; to be defeated by Eros is not merely *to be uncertain*. The ultimate defeat is to want to be uncertain. Caught up in the erotic, I want to give freely, which means foregoing expectation of return. It is crucial to notice and to remember that the love of one's beloved is not

a small thing to put in play: wars have been started over less. In being taken by Eros, I am delivered to a certain kind of freedom. Under erotic unity, I am free to let go of my efforts to secure myself from my uncertainty concerning the object of my desire and relish my vulnerability to the pure dynamism of the circumstances in which I live. 'I' am not there at all. Eros makes possible a choice that is perhaps always available to me even if this choice is precisely the one I normally shun. For the most part, I endeavor to minimize my exposure to the vicissitudes of my needs and desires and even congratulate myself for making myself and my loved ones as secure against chance as I am able. But in the pull of the mind-bending mass that constitutes erotic attraction, I *may* be drawn towards my vulnerability to her, surrendered to the uncertainty that is somehow natural about how it is I am to presume upon her love for me. It happens that my uncertainty and vulnerability appear as desirable.

Even if desire has long been said capable of desiring only what it lacks (that erotic desire is at bottom negative), I want to say that Eros is ultimately not privative. It arises out of the blankness of selflessness that relishes its own ignorance. I am in love with her not because I trust her. I do not seek to put myself at risk. I am not the agent in any of this. In the heat of erotic desire, I trust her because I am in love with her. Only in the emergence of the 'I' from the all-too-rare unity of erotic passion do I explicitly notice that the lack I desire is she; she is the lack (of certainty) I want. This insight is always uncanny even if it is also obvious (at least in a certain register). Eros frees in that it allows. Eros allows me to want to be uncertain and to crave being vulnerable to her. Eros does this against almost all reason, and so it does not insist that the nature of this desire become explicit. Mostly, the explicitness of my vulnerability does not obtain.

It is possible for me to believe that the lack desired by Eros is not the negation or the loss of something I want or need,

not because I can figure Eros out or because I can calculate that there is not actually a loss incurred in desiring my own uncertainty, but for two related reasons. First, my desire for the uncertainty of her love is attested in the fact that I am actually driven to bind myself erotically to the one I love. Second, the nature of this drive has, from time to time, been made explicit to me in a direct encounter with the uncanny fact that I can never be sure her love is mine. I experience what I cannot calculate when I want to be in love. And I want to be in love, not because it feels worse, but because it feels better (to be uncertain and vulnerable).

In speaking about wanting to be vulnerable, I have been speaking about a state of being, a kind of unity that is selfless, that exists at the extreme end of passion where erotic attachment is indistinguishable from erotic un-attachment. Despite the natural wholesomeness of erotic union, I am unable to profit from our lovemaking because I am unable to sustain myself within the openness that Eros both promises and demands. Passions cool as suddenly as they flare. Erotic attachment, like every other mood, is not only impermanent but also mostly beyond my control. Perhaps there is a more reliable way to embrace my vulnerability and uncertainty? Not only the uncertainty of her love but all the uncertainty that surrounds the business of living? Perhaps not. But I do know that the possibility of desiring vulnerability and uncertainty can actually happen. I have experienced 'wanting to be uncertain' and 'wanting to be vulnerable,' no matter how fleeting or how incomprehensible these desires may have been. Erotic love in its fullest form is existentially pleasurable even as it takes its bearings from one of the strongest physical imperatives that may call to the human spirit. Such pleasure comes for free and is fleeting. Unable to maintain a tolerance for uncertainty – except when opened up out of unity in the heat and humidity of erotic attraction – perhaps I should let go of too much lovemaking

and get back to work? It seems that I should get back to my study, sit at my desk and work through the morning.

### 1.5

Death is another name for the unity or belonging together between the possible and the necessary. Death is contingent. I might die, but I do not know when. It is necessary because I must die. I cannot escape this possibility and, in this way, as something necessary and possible, as ultimate, death is unlike other possibilities I have.

Death is not like being a father. I became a father. My brother did not. It was possible for me to be a father. The very fact that death is mine prohibits me from taking it up in the same way I inhabit the possibility of fatherhood. If I achieve death, I am manifestly not there. I cannot reach far enough to touch my death. It is not even clear what I mean when I speak of my death, if I mean it in the sense of its being mine. Does not 'my death' belong more to others – the ones left behind – than myself? Death keeps me from the experience of my death because there is no moment at which I am dead now. As soon as I am dead, I am no more. Necessarily beyond my experience, the death of my body is not mine as other possibilities are mine to inhabit. Experientially speaking, my death seems to be as impossible as it is certain. It is not clear how death is mine if death itself makes it impossible for me to be there for it.

Neither can I get past the fact that my death seems to be inevitable or that it really seems to be mine. I do not believe my death is not mine or that my death cannot really affect me even if I know otherwise. Death has a kind of availability that is different from the availability that belongs to logical possibility. Logical possibility is both contingent and not necessary, whereas death seems to bind the contingent to the necessary. To say my death is locked away from me in the future and that it is certain to be sprung on me at some time fails to do justice to the sense

in which my death looms for me at all times. Death haunts me in its absence. Time, in my usual understanding of it, does not seem to be able to contain the unity of death's possibility and its necessity. I cannot get past my finitude no matter how much or how loudly I declare that I am not dead now or that death will never really be mine. Death is never here now yet is nevertheless always about.

The indeterminacy of my certain death suggests that my death, in some manner or other, is and has always been here with me from the beginning. Death seems to be a way in which I am not here. What if I only think I understand what being in the mode of not being here means? Maybe death is not just a mass of stinking flesh? Because death is always around anyway, it must have some way to be that is not identical to the death of my body. If death is mine in its persistent absence, then it might be possible for me to experience this modality of death much as I have experienced not being here in the uncanny emergence of myself from the dreamless and thoughtless engagement I have had (from time to time) with my activity? I might even find that I am capable of desiring death not as the end of body but in explicitly taking up the body's way to be in the same strange way in which I have desired the uncertainty of my lover's love and my own vulnerability in the context of erotic unity. But such hopes and aspirations remain mostly speculative or at least somewhat out of reach in that I do not seem to be able to enact at will the sense of contingency that belongs to the familiar-strange.

## 1.6

Why do I bother to write about feeling weird or strange? What is important about this sense of the familiar-strange? Much as I do when I suffer *déjà vu*, I am likely to acknowledge the uncanny feeling that belongs to an encounter with myself and then, quite sensibly, get on with my life. I take note of the

familiar-strange manifestation of myself to myself and pass on. And why not? These moments in which I find myself within the pull of the familiar and the strange are notable but they seem to have no practical force at all. Having been caught up in the experience of the strange unity of the possible and the necessary, having somehow managed to stumble over and past the fences of language and antinomy, I find, if I check, that I have just tasted something very much like the real and stumbled upon what feels like the truth.

The truth. Any contact with the real or the true is compelling to me in the face of a life that has always been more difficult than I expected it to be. Practically speaking, my life has been a sequence of promises, disappointments, failures and achievements. I take myself to win and to lose. Moreover, my life is apparently building madly its elaborate past for the grave. In the cold draft that flows from the certainty of a death outstanding, the meaning of my existence is threatened. Whatever this life of mine is, it is surely bound up in activity and meaning. Activity requires an end to be what it is. Activity has no meaning without a *telos* towards which it reaches. If life is an activity, the *telos* of life seems to be death. What sort of meaning belongs to this ultimate end? Death seems to threaten meaning in the same manner in which death threatens life: utterly. To live without meaning is to despair. But the despair that belongs to living with the indefinite and yet certain *telos* (of death), does not feel as absolute or as final as I calculate it to be. How despairing am I when I walk my dogs? What does it really mean to forget death and live? I cannot (because I do not) accept that life is as meaningless as it adds up to be – and not because I know something about life that I am not sharing with you. I simply do not *believe* my life has no meaning and, at the same time, I do not know why. In considering my life, it seems as if I have always just forgotten something.

In encountering myself in childhood or in hunting or fishing, I sometimes remember myself in a way that is altogether unlike

other modes of recollection with which I have experience. I remember myself as emerging from a certain mode of not being there and so as something other or something more than a past that is failing into the future. This something other is an indefinite contact with something more than my opinions, understandings, my dreams, hopes, accomplishments and failures. In the uncanny experience of self-encounter I sense that I am more than an unfinished existence that must struggle with despair.