

A LONG AND INDETERMINATE PERAMBULATION

**a novella by
Robert McGowan**

October 7, 2009

For a few years, until she disappeared only some weeks ago, I would watch from my front porch, where in pleasant weather I often sit to read, a really quite elderly woman, obviously infirm, shuffling along on her daily walks. I would see her pass at halting, deliberate gait, travel only a block or so up the street, and then pass by again, ever slowly, on her return home about a block away in the other direction. I always observed with poignant fascination how her little mutt, on a leash beside her, ambled along at a stride unnaturally slow and measured for a dog, as though the animal were consciously and sympathetically pacing itself so to accommodate its frail caretaker and fellow traveler.

Although I often waved to this woman and, on those occasions when she noticed my wave, she would wave back, I never spoke with her or knew her name. I have no knowledge of what has happened to her and her obliging pet, whether the woman has at last become too feeble to continue her exercise, whether she's at home or perhaps in a care facility, or whether she's now dead.

I remember surmising that this lady's walks, which, judging from her facial expression, did not appear to be pleasurable for her, had been prescribed by her physician as an aid to her staying alive yet a little while longer.

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My own doctor, whom I've been seeing for nearly thirty years and whom I've for a very long time addressed by his first name, Jeffery, or sometimes Dr. Jeffery in order now and then to assure him respectfully that I'm mindful he's my doctor and not simply an old friend, has lately insisted that I too begin walking. Though I should say *resume* walking, because until recently I'd walked a couple of miles or more on three or four days of each week, for good health. And for pleasure as well; I for a very long time enjoyed continually renewing my acquaintance with this charming and comforting, and appealingly modest, neighborhood by means of my constitutionals from one end of it to another. It's true however that I have for a long while now neglected my walks, this for no particular reason I can bring to mind just now, but only because I've been, I suppose, neglectful. And perhaps also because of my painting, with which I am these days deeply preoccupied and which has lately required quite a good deal of concentration and energy, possibly in truth a little more than, in this my old age, I can give it with as much natural ease as I have previously. I'm seventy-five. Not so terribly old nowadays, though I was once, only moments ago it seems, very, very much younger.

So I suppose that now, on doctor's orders, as most likely was so of her as well, I will take the place of that enfeebled lady who once, with apparent reluctance, so regularly strode past my little house. And I will be doing so for the same reason she did, to perhaps extend my life somewhat beyond where it might end were I to remain wholly sedentary. Unexercised, as it were.

And I suppose further that those I'll pass by, my neighbors sitting on their porches, maybe reading, will think of me as I thought of her, as old and feeble and pitiful. Though I will take care that my

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expression not be as dour as hers. I will make sure it reveals I'm instead having a pleasant time, as mostly I will be, however pensive on various occasions might be my mood. The last thing I'd want is to darken anyone's afternoon leisure-time porch-sitting experience.

And I've decided also, as you see, to begin recording here in this notebook—and I will do this by date, because I want what I say here to be a tether to real life and to real days—I will record here some of the thoughts, my wandering ruminations, that happen to mind as I move along down these streets I've known so well for so long. I'm hopeful that both the walking and the writing will do me good. I will undertake both activities in the hope they will help me hold to the world, that they will keep me from fragmenting during this time, which feels to me like unreality, now that Adam has gone.

I want here in the beginning to enter a few essential points of information about Adam, in order that, should these pages survive, then so will he, or some small part of him, for a while, by way of these words.

My husband and my friend, Adam, a deeply sensitive and kind man concerned never to do ill to any living creature in this world or to any part of this world that harbors us, had a smile that would melt the devil's frigid heart. He was as consummately gentle a soul as anyone on this earth has ever known.

Yet as a young man, a boy really, decades before we met—he was eighteen years old—Adam joined the military. In 1950, I think. The Army. An uncle had persuaded him that a career in armed defense of his country would be as honorable and as well-spent a life as any he might choose to live.

He was sent to Korea in the last months of that war, in 1952.

And he would never tell me all of what he'd done and seen

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there. “I don’t want to give further voice,” I distinctly remember his saying, “to evils that have already found in me a place I should never have allowed them to occupy.”

But he did write about those evils, converting experience to fiction. And he was a fine writer. Because he was in fact far better at writing than at self-promotion, Adam was seldom published, seeing to print only a handful of his stories in a handful of minor college literary journals.

Adam ended his relationship with the U.S. Army soon after his return from the war. He went to school and became a counselor, which is how we met many years later in 1970, at the university, he counseling students, helping them decide what to do with their lives, I a teacher in the art department.

We were together for thirty-eight years, married for thirty-six. No children. We’d married when Adam was nearly forty and I was only a couple of years younger. Middle age really. Too late in life for kids.

Even though I’ve lived by now for a bit more than seventy-five years, I think of my life before Adam as only a kind of prelude to the life we had together.

October 8, 2009

It occurred to me to wonder today, as I stepped off my porch to begin my walk, how many times I’ve seen the ends of rain. We’d had steady sprinkling all day long. I’d imagined having to report sheepishly to Dr. Jeffery that I’d sat out another twenty-four hours unexercised. But at last the rain ended and the sun abruptly reappeared, dramatically, the world bright again. I remember as a child waiting in our house for rains to end so that I could be outside.

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I don't recall what my thoughts were then as I waited, how melancholy they were or how untroubled. I do know that I've always felt soothed by the tender quiet of rainy days. I feel enveloped in them. And reflective, more reflective even than usual.

Although I've frequently varied my course on these walks around my neighborhood, my typical route, which I've measured to be about two miles, has been to walk from my house at 5617 Walker Avenue, east to Cooper Street, then north all the way to Central Avenue, where I turn west and walk to Lynndale, which takes me back to Walker. There I turn east again, in which direction sits my house—and how it saddens me now to say *my* house, not *our* house—second on my right. Or sometimes, though seldom—and why I've only so seldom reversed my course, I have no idea whatsoever—I've traveled this same route in the opposite direction. But, whichever direction I've taken, when I've strayed from the route I've described here I've generally expanded it to include two or three blocks farther in one direction and fewer in the opposite so that I've traveled approximately the same roughly two miles in either case, or I've cut my walk shorter by somewhere turning sooner so to take a shortcut back home. Or sometimes I take in an additional few blocks, making my walk not shorter but longer than usual. It varies. And by varying my walks I've over the years come to feel quite at home in every nook of this neighborhood. This the world I inhabit.

And that I have inhabited, as I've said, happily. In great comfort. Psychologically, I mean, emotionally. Aesthetically even. This is as utterly ordinary and wholly genuine a middle-class residential neighborhood as might be discovered in any city anywhere. And these are the qualities I warm to here. Adam and I lived for a few years in a downtown district of this city but felt

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increasingly out of place as the area grew increasingly hip and cool, as has become the hip and cool way to put it: “hip and cool.” Hip and cool and glib and silly. We’d never imagined ourselves remotely either hip or cool. How laughable the thought that we’d ever been that or could be. And we always endeavored never to be glib, though we did admittedly on occasion lapse into silly. We’d moved downtown into, yes, a spectacularly raw and spacious loft, back when property in the district was inexpensive. I had a truly luxurious studio space, all the square feet I could use, high ceilings, perfect lighting, and I was near the city’s best galleries in an area of downtown just beyond our own. The gallery that represents me, and has for . . . I think it’s twenty-eight years now, was an easy walking distance away, The Duval Gallery. My devoted dealer, whom I thank here: Raymond Duval. There existed in those early days in the district a large population of artists, and also a large number of small businesses—printing companies, storage facilities, wholesalers of various sorts, a couple of plumbing companies, and the like—including the people who owned and operated these businesses and had done so there in the district for many years, decades even. Now that the district has become hip and cool, it’s occupied mostly by clever little restaurants and clothing boutiques, mostly rather expensive, and quite a few rather bad galleries selling quite a lot of rather bad art to people who don’t know any better than to buy it. And of course real estate is now wholly unaffordable down there for anyone of modest means, which makes it certainly unaffordable for most artists, but who by and large no longer want to be there anyway because of its phony-baloney hipness and coolness. Adam and I sold out fairly early and moved here to Walker Avenue. I built a studio in the backyard, nothing to be featured in *House and Garden* magazine,

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but ample for what I do. We—but of course I must remember now to say only *I*—have always been content here.

Today I took my usual route in the usual direction, and for the full two miles. Had I cut my walk short I would have felt guilty, which I did not want to feel. I need no additional dark feeling nowadays. And besides, after the rain the weather was pleasant and I was happy to reacquaint myself with my surroundings after being recently so inattentive to them.

Nothing out there had changed. And here inside at home, in my recent no-walking period, I'd only grown a bit older, which nothing can prevent occurring. Of course Adam is no longer here, which also we could find nothing to prevent occurring, though for a while at first we tried.

October 11, 2009

I've missed two days of walking. But then I never promised Jeffery I'd walk every single day. And I don't think he expected that, though I suppose he might prefer it. But I never did walk every single day, only three or four per week. And now that I'm walking again I'm certain there'll be some days when I'm not up to it, simply not in the mood to get out, and I'm going to try not to feel guilty about that. And then also, some days I'll be busy in the studio. I do have my work to do. And my work takes me elsewhere, for at least a few moments now and then while I'm concentrated on it, takes me away from what happened.

The new work. I started it before Adam got sick. Anyone familiar with this new series I'm developing would assume I began it in response to Adam's illness and death. But the truth—and it is admittedly an utterly breathtaking coincidence—is that I started

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painting dead people shortly before we knew anything at all about what was wrong with him and what his outlook was. I do not believe in ESP, or in any sort of spooky precognition hooley—there's simply no valid evidence to support any such notion—but I don't deny it feels very odd indeed that I turned my attention, rather suddenly really and, at least at first, for no conscious reason or purpose, to making portraits of the anonymous dead, this on the very eve of our learning that Adam would soon be one of them.

Not that Adam is, strictly speaking, anonymous, not at present, though of course in time we'll all be in effect anonymous, won't we? None of us, that is, will be long remembered. Our names perhaps on a list somewhere, some census record or the like, but beyond that, after some years, a few decades, a generation or two, who will have any real sense of our identities? Except perhaps in a very general, very abstract and wholly incorporeal sense, the dead are all eventually quite forgotten, each of them. Each of us. I remember talking with Adam about this years ago. We were discussing fame, or the absence of it, a point of concern for any artist of any stripe, writers of course included, anyone doing creative work, wishing it to survive its maker. We were talking about some famous person whose identity I can't now remember—and I suppose my being unable to recall this famous person's name does in some measure illustrate my point here, does it not?—Adam said to me concerning that famous person, “Yes, but his grave is going to be just as cold and dark as ours.” I should make a list of such statements as this that come to me in remembering Adam, his quips often so uncommonly wise and succinct. Economical, I believe he the writer would have said, only the core idea brought forward, unclouded by anything tangential. Though, to be honest, I've often

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myself found the merely tangential as engaging as whatever it's tangential to. But, yes, Adam truly was a brilliant man. I hope somehow someday to find a way to have all of his stories respectably published in book form. They deserve a place in literature, in the literature of war surely, the literature of the foolish horror of it. In a smarter world, his stories would have been provided a place while he lived. Something else I just now remember Adam saying: "Give up, give up, give up, give up, fool!" This concerning of course his attempts to have his work published, the frustration of it. But I can remember this with some amusement because he said it jokingly—with always that beguiling smile of his—yet I'm certain that, more deeply, the matter did not feel to him like a joke. One wants one's work to live. I've always thought that if worldly success is to come to artists it's best it come very late in life lest their productive years be clouded by it. But for it never to come at all . . . that is a cruelty.

I said above that I have my work to do, a commonly uttered expression. But I'd like to enter here a thought to the contrary, that the artist more likely feels it's not really the artist herself needing to do her work but the artist's work needing the artist to do it. This was true of Adam too, of both of us. We talked about it. It's the irresistible, near-palpable sense that the work itself is directing the process, making the decisions, the artist but an instrument of the work's imperatives. And I've always been entirely at ease in this, accepting my role as my work's willing and humble functionary. It's a mysterious *modus operandi*, to be sure, but I do not consider the matter mystical, because it's an altogether real enough phenomenon, as most artists will readily attest, little understood though it is: that our work succeeds to the extent we're attentive to the direction it

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requires we take.

Rain fell all during last night, and it's been dark today, dense clouds hanging near to the earth, still and damp-feeling, a bit chilly. I am at home in days of this somber tone. A lulling gloom. I went for my usual walk today with the comforting sense of being enfolded in a world at rest.

And I am ever fascinated by the objects I encounter on my way. Rubbish tossed out onto streets and sidewalks. An infinite variety of exquisite presences. Paper and plastic cups crushed by traffic—a dizzying range of color and shape—squashed Styrofoam containers, scraps of cardboard, little mangled matchbooks, fruit peels, bits of plastic and glass . . . a phantasmagoria under foot for anyone who will see.

There are moments when I feel so . . . penetrated by everything I behold around me. Penetrated. Years ago I spent some months, a couple of years actually, gathering objects I came across during my walks and using them at home in my studio as individual subjects for paintings. Wee tiny paintings, all of them, about ten inches square, so to provide for the viewer a feeling of intimacy in gazing on them, on the paintings and on the items of rubbish that were my subjects.

Some of us, I believe, are born to be observers, alert to detail typically overlooked. Beauty, I want to affirm here, is free. Beauty, truth, love. All of these are free, if you can find them.

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