

*The Age of Tenderness*

*for Walker Percy*

I

I once read somewhere, perhaps in a dream, that if we are ever to crawl out from under the greatness of our desires, we would do well to believe that genius consists not in making great discoveries, but in uncovering the connections between small ones.

Morning. A palpable shape to the air and the effect it has on my reacquaintance with the sky. There, in the garbage can, sure enough, a very dead rat with a drop of blood hanging like a ruby from its nose.

For all its waiting, the hospital refuses to wait for me. When I enter her room, or when she awakens to my presence, she monitors her eyes carefully. A look from her is never a casual thing. Am I mistaken, or is there not a sort of horsewoman's swagger as she kicks her legs under the covers? Each cough feels like a hoof in the chest, a blow nothing will heal.

Who invented the openless window? Even the eyes close, and listening from the porch, the cicadas start up in the high rooms of the live oaks, fuguing one upon the other.

If one could prescribe a chemical taken from their song and overnight turn a haunted soul into a bustling little body, what allure would remain in taking on such a quixotic quest as pursuing the secret location of one's self?

Each person this side of psychosis, and even a psychotic here and there, has the means of obtaining what he or she needs, with a little help from you.

There is no map over my head. My sense of direction has always been hard to pin down.

Neither inside of my head can I locate a discernable I, an utterer, a self—whatever one chooses to call that peculiar trait of humans by which we string together sentences and which makes us curious about how we look in a mirror—when a chimp will look behind the mirror for the other chimp.

It crosses my mind that people at war have the same need of each other. What would a commie liberal or bible-toting conservative do without the other? Is it not the case that something is better than nothing, be it argument, violent disagreement, even war? Which is worse: the loss of a limb, or the loss of story?

An abyss wants to open. I try to let it and fail. We no longer meet for drinks, though we bump into one another on occasion.

My child doesn't know what to say to me. She's a swift brown blade of a girl. If only she knew what her words did, she'd know that even the worst of her does me more good than harm.

We watch the reflection of the late-afternoon sun bounce off the bayou. She points out how it makes parabolas of light that move and intersect each other on the ceiling. I had never noticed before. Some small genius she is.

Why do I suddenly remind myself of an ungainly German executed fifty years ago?

The silence wraps its arms around something noisy and squeezes. A tear moistens the corner of my eye, but no so sadness has tagged along.

We open the windows and listen closely. There is only the ring of a kingfisher. The evening sun clears the cypresses and strikes its shafts into tea-colored water. Mullet jump. Cicadas take a break to retune their instruments. A dust of gold filters its impurities through the fog. The cypresses are so big their knees march halfway across the bayou.

We lay next to one another and I tell her Azazel is drowned here. A jinn of the desert, formerly an angel. The palpability of morning has arisen with the stars.

## II

Small, disconnected facts, if you take note of them, have a way of becoming connected.

Beware of women poets who write about spindrift and the men who idly entertain them. There is a certain peril in this enterprise. She could easily shoot herself down.

All doctors should spend two years in prison. They'd treat their patients better, as flawed fellow humans, not reproduction gone awry.

I've discovered that it is not death which terrifies people. It is that they are stuck with themselves, not knowing who they are or what to do with the creatures inside their hides. It is a question of being or doing, of which you wear on your sleeve and which you hide under the stones in your kidneys. And which will be your undoing if you leave it unattended.

My observation is that neither pursuit succeeds very well. I've seen that people who set their hearts on either usually end up having heart attacks or climbing into a bottle, seeing a shrink or needing one—or worse, being a shrink who attempts to enlarge his patients, and ends up enlarging their problems.

*If only I could be.* Such a person is a bluebird in my book.

*The object of life is to gratify oneself without getting arrested.* True jaybird wisdom.

But what has happened to all the bluebirds and jaybirds I've known so well? They've turned into chickens, pigeons, rats with wings, feathery scurrilous half-beings—in other words, cocks and cocksuckers fighting each other to death for a piece of moldy bread.

We've bred an entire race of good for nothings, a tranquilized mass stoned out on ideas and what ideas lead to, a bunch of lusty louses grinning and patting one another, grabbing ass and presenting rearward. Their preoccupation and complacency makes the issue of our extinction a non-issue. They say why bother?

What ever happened to the cardinal of concern or the darting sparrow ruckus? It's a mystery to which I've given up trying to find the answer. Maybe next life I'll make a better seeker

and leave the pecking to the birds. Or maybe the answer will find me and I won't have to wonder.

### III

There's a click and a long, hissing exhalation. She smokes, was usually the one to be on fire. A sly grin plays behind her tight-lipped, squinting shadows. I notice her teeth aren't as white as they used to be, and wonder what else has changed her.

I call up her doctor for the diagnosis, an old friend whose opinion I tend to trust.

“A cortical deficit, probably prefrontal. I knew those toxins would catch up with her.”

“Okay, let's skip the metaphysics. You get into the prefrontal, you get into metaphysics.”

The old Columbia joke which has become almost a password between us: "Just keep in mind, the two most overrated things in the world. Sexual intercourse and—"

"A fucking favor."

“You and I might just be the ones to achieve a meeting of minds over the old mind-body problem, that ancient senseless quarrel.”

“If the river don't rise, I think we'll make it, and if you can get her to quit, she might too.”

### IV

High and dry at the ridgeline, intact, its two thousand acres intact. So little else I can say that for.

So much that's cracked or fractured to bits. Like the memory of crushed glass and seat stuffing stinging the nostrils, radiating up into the brain which gathers itself into a forgotten world, bits and pieces of recollection, faded snapshots scattered over the floor of a house where no one lives. No one except for transients from time to time.

Father has his troubles. He wants to give them away but nobody will rise to take them.

He takes me aside. “Listen doc, I'll serve the good Lord and his people as long as I can, but they 'bout to run this little priest into the ground. I'm not going to be much help if they have to peel me off the wall and sweep up the pieces, eh?”

Now I remember. I used St. Michael's sword to escape during the riots. Sliced my way through a bunch of dharma bums looking for handouts. Managed not to lose her to the savages on the run.

The road we took wound through a longleaf-pine forest to a gentle knoll perhaps fifty feet above the surrounding countryside. Half a dozen Holstein cows were grazing, all facing away from the bright afternoon sun, all showing us their fly-infested asses. Our own asses were lucky, we knew, and theirs were some of the most beautiful sights we had ever seen.

## V

The air is yellow with pollen. *The valley of sickness*, they used to call it. Precisely not the sort of country the doctor would prescribe if you and your body were at odds. Greens grow well here, so do infections of the lung.

We know what smoke is a sign of. We see it, and we act accordingly. We inhale it, and so does the body. Blood in the sputum, that's a sign for you, unlike the smoke signals words send.

Jew. Nigger. Cracker. Spic. Chink.

Race: the only sign of god which cannot be subsumed.

Enter the melting pot: despite the furtive aversion, something begins to give.

Tenderness, a softening of the mind in favor of the heart, opens the path toward inclusion, and also toward the gas chamber. It is the first disguise of a plot to do someone, or something, in. Anything can be justified as an act of faith or passion, a purging of sin or an eradication of evil.

A heart set on the wrong thing empowers the mind with the will to fight its way to *and through* it.

If you are a simple lover with misguided notions, or if you are an introspective theorist with too much time to think, you will probably do no harm, may even give some pleasure and contribute to human understanding.

But if you put the two together, what you've got now is Robespierre or Stalin, Hitler or the Bush administration, millions dead for the good of mankind, a mongoose and a cobra rolled into one.

As Freud might have said, Jung's gold teeth peeking through his lips, once the dividing line has been drawn, and the sides have begun to organize, it's too late for tough love:

the age of tenderhearted spite has begun.

## VI

A fleet of Michigan jalopies head west from the cold smokestacks and dried-up oil wells.

The road smells like a crankcase, looks like a dead animal indecipherable from the pavement.

Looking aside, out of the hills, the river widens into a gulf where the English landed, their slaves from the Indies in tow. They took up Indigo farming and lived happy, free of the seditious Americans to the North, the corrupt French to the south, and in the end, free to get rid of the indolent Spanish and form their own republic.

It lasted seventy-four days. Jefferson bought Louisiana and that, as they say, was that.

A couple some odd centuries later, the morning greets two hundred acres of tobacco. Straight, clean rows spread in full leaf, heavy with dew, gray-green as new money, each stalk trembling, awaiting the slice of the scythe.

The alley of great oaks which used to run from house to landing now ends in the middle of a field. The water doesn't taste like it used to, no longer quenches a long day's thirst. Not much does once a day holds half a century's worth of troubles.

Still, the little pleasures abound, if you know where to look for them. An old-fashioned chest freezer, big enough to hold a steer, hums away on the porch. I catch its drift—something about grandma's hands—and join in. Uncle—everyone's uncle of questionable relations—takes a break from his pipe.

“Ain't been a bluebird in these parts for forty years. I shot six pair this summer.”

“You see those handles? Not a white hand touched those handles until the war. All you had to do was walk to a door and it would open; go through and it would close. The people around here were thick as fleas.”

“You know what they're always saying about war being hell? That's a load of horseshit. I never had a better time in my life than in World War II. At Fort Benning, I lived with the sweetest little woman Georgia had to offer. At Fort Sill, I had two women, one a full-blooded Indian who pert' near clawed me to death. At Trier, I lived with a German girl for three weeks. They were putting out for anything you'd give them. Fine women by all accounts.”

“You remember when you was little I showed you the woodcock—the dogs had brought him to the house and he had worms coming out of his mouth?”

I did, though I wished I didn't, wished that little of what happened stuck with me. When everyone goes to bed, I have a few drinks in the dining room, standing in the dark. It has been twenty years since I stood here.

Even with the freshly polished furniture, there is the old smell of the house, of scoured wood and bird dogs, of women doing their best to keep the place from going to ruin, women working their magic so that hard times seem easy, pleasant, lovable, worthwhile.

It is not bad to stand in the dark drinking, or to drink, for that matter. There is this to be said for it: it frees one from the necessities of time, like now it is time to stand up, now it is time to sit down. One would as soon do one thing as another. Time passes, but one need not tell oneself: take heed, time is passing.

Three drinks later, I don't feel anything but the ache of memory and alcohol conspiring against me.

## VII

We were hiking through the Black Forest, using our noses as our compass and looking for a meeting ground on which we could heal our cultural rifts. Though we had just met, we both wanted the same thing—to touch, laugh, be easy with each other, dirty ourselves with something to twinkle at in our old age.

Like a native, she feels her way through the willows, right shoulder leading, creeper and potato vines singing and popping around her wide, sidling hips. I grab her wrist and her mouth is on mine. She, Alabama-German Lucy-Alice, is a sweet heavy succubus not quite centered. Her hair is still damp.

She needs nothing more than to be thoroughly centered.

Her short heavy hair tickles my cheek as she turns to and fro in her kissing. I move her a bit to center her. After this, she will always have been centered. The weight of her is no more or less than it should be. Wake. Groan. Get up. Groan again.

I have never been to Germany. Or so I would like to believe.

IIX

As we approach the valley, the ground softens beneath our feet. The river is not as low as we thought. The rise from the northern rains won't take long now. I get the feeling she will be swept away soon, and so I turn toward ancillary considerations.

The hypothesis is that human consciousness is not only an aberration of evolution, but also the scourge and curse of life on earth, the source of wars, insanities, perversions—in short, those very pathologies which are peculiar to *Homo sapiens*.

Think of it as a regression from peaceful animal existence to stressful human existence, though I'm not sure animal existence was ever all that peaceful either. As Vonnegut put it, "the only trouble with *Homo sapiens* is that parts of our brains are too fucking big." He was on to something. Too bad it left him behind.

Which reminds me, did you ever notice that the great controversies are never settled, they are simply left behind? All great scientific breakthroughs are simple. Somebody has a new idea and the old quarrel becomes irrelevant.

The subject for today is overpopulation. This will also be the subject for tomorrow. And the day after that. And so on until we thin out the ranks of the listening audience. A society has a right to protect itself against its enemies, even if its enemies are an overabundance of its own species. A society, like an organism, has a right to survive.

If it has to chew off one of its limbs to do so, a missing arm proves less problematic than a missing leg. Or does it? What demographic comprises the arm of the world, I don't care to say.

IX

It is getting on to early dusk. Nothing could look less sinister than the gentle golden light of Louisiana autumn, both sociable and sad. The shaft of sunlight turns off in the oak like a light in a room. It will soon be dark.

Dark is what I'm waiting for, dark, drink, and anything but a reminder of her. Once the light retreats, I move to the door. A dry talon of a hand holds me back. A lock of her hair slips out from under the refrigerator.

The fridge is empty. Did I already drink the beer or did I forget to pick it up? The landscape of memory shifts all too easily for my liking. The time a priest came to get me out of a classroom and tell me my father was dead. I shudder because a rabbit runs over his grave.

The talon of a hand falls away, fingers bunching, curling inward like a burning leaf.

X

I wonder: is there something a thousand times more vivid than a dream but which happens in broad daylight when you're wide awake? I am thinking of spells, psychotic breaks, extraordinary hallucinations that transport us to another world.

It was a complete return, real in every detail—as if I were experiencing the same moment in time—recapitulated in sight, sound, touch, even taste and smell. The only thing out of place was that I spoke in an odd, flat voice, like a person awakened from deep sleep. They asked if I was okay. Clearly I was seeing something that wasn't there.

I took three sleeping pills and dreamt of Germany. The Black Forest with its dark firs. Church bells, a high-pitched silvery sound, crystal struck against crystal, a smell like the cutting room of a florist's shop. Flashes of red, like wrists the stems of broken flowers.

A short in the fuse, then a girl lying in a heap, jerking in the throes of a seizure, something about her off-center, another short, then an oath at the ancient castle of the Teutonic knights, a sense of betrayal and an avowed vengeance, a lightning-bolt shoulder patch, a military belt, end reel. Or so I thought. As time would tell, it was merely the recess between acts.

Creepy this play, inaccessible yet inescapable, a dream which is not a dream. A *wanderjahr* for which I remember leaving but from which I don't remember having ever returned.

XI

1930s, Mussolini was the New Caesar, fascism was thought of as bundles of sticks, as fasces, harder to break than one stick and not necessarily a bad thing.

A silken-haired Kraut somewhere between thirty-five and forty-five who recited Rilke and Schiller by candlelight. He had saber scars on his cheek. He seemed proud to display them but reluctant to say how he earned them. He swore by two things: belief in the flag, and death. He was ready to die. I had never met anyone ready to die for a belief.

After the ceremony, he took me aside and told me with that special gravity of his, "You are leaving tomorrow. I wish you well. I think I know you. We are comrades. I wish to give you something." He gave me his bayonet. Withdrew it from its sheath and handed it to me with both hands.

On the blade was etched *Blut und Ehre*. It had obviously been used. I took it in silence. We shook hands. I left, decided not to stay in Germany after all.

Only later was I horrified. We've got it wrong about horror. It doesn't come naturally but takes some effort, or if not, at least some time to mature. Then, once we've got the hang of it, it makes faces through us easy as pie.

No fires tonight. No drink. I think I deserve to shiver.

## XII

Rows of cotton, mostly picked, stretch away into the bright morning light. From all around, murmurous as the breeze, comes the start of a song.

*Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home.*

A south wind from the gulf pushes up a dark, flat-headed cloud that looks like an anvil. An anvil hung by a spider's thread, a promise of punishment waiting to fall.

Walking the levee in flatlands has the pleasant feel of traveling a level track between earth and sky. The dirt is quiet underfoot, but presently there is a roar in the air. The top of a poplar moves fitfully as though jerked by a human hand. It must be the river, high now, snarling, rearing to rip through anything that stands in its way. Like the pitch of her voice when one of the children went too near the edge.

There's a noise ahead like the suck of floodwater down a drain. Uncle removes his pipe again.

“All it takes is one little trickle across the neck, then another little rise, a little more water, and before you know it, here comes the whole river piling at you and ain't nothing in the world going to stop it, not you, not your house, not nothing.”

Sure enough, as we round the bend and look below, the river's on the boom, is already up in the young willows, a mile wide, slashing and sucking, blowing a cool, foul breath. The dark green of the oaks seems to grow even darker, then whitens, as if you had closed your eyes, the retinal image reversing, light going dark, dark light. My nose runs. My eyes water. During the great crises of my life, I develop hay fever.

I turn the pages of my brain back to one of my college essays. *The whole point of conflict resolution is to accomplish one's objective without violence. Conflict resolution by means of violence is a contradiction in terms.*

We head higher up into the hills, find a cozy spot and sit relaxed as lions on the plain. Like a pile of poorly stacked firewood, the river sweeps my house away. This time, she isn't in it, but a piece of me is, or was—is ripped raw.

I turn to history for comfort. The casualties at Antietam spring to mind: Federals 12,401, Confederates 10,316. That leaves 121,283 of the original 144,000 places in heaven. I think. I'm getting mixed up in the head, but the numbers seem right, so I won't question the math until my number comes along.

## XIII

There is something to be said for having no choice in what one is. *Who* one is, what one *does*, whether choice is anything more than a mode of interpretation through which we filter our experience—these are matters that only concern me on my better days. One look, and I know that she *knows*.



*Nobody knows the trouble I seen,  
Nobody knows but Jesus.*

Martyred, eyes closed elegiacally, attending closely. My little girl almost nods. On the front page of the newspaper, there is an article citing scientific evidence that the human infant does not achieve personhood until eighteen months. This is serious. Did I, or did I not, lose a child?

In either case, if this evidence becomes assimilated into common belief, it does not seem that far of a stretch to assume that the law of the land will not require euthanasia of pre-personhood infants, but it will permit it under certain circumstances.

Circumstances such as a dangerously accelerated rate of reproduction. I wonder how far it is from permission to preference.

#### XIV

With the hush money the government gave me for the house (little baby don't say a word), Disney World is the last place on earth I would choose to go. *The place for all ages.* As were the chambers. As are mass graves. Because of the kids, the wife, and for the sake of my sanity, I relent, though I'm not sure about that last part.

At the campground, our neighbors for the evening come ambling over, offer beer. I have a drink, three drinks. Nobody seems concerned. The air smells of boudin sausage. One of us begins an infectious humming. I'm not partial to infections, so I step away into the dusk and take three more nips like a country man. Suffering from bouts of nervousness, I take a nip for each bout.

Tiring of a vertical view on the world, I lie back in the Florida barrens, not quite drunk, head-to-toe straight as an arrow. If I could strike the heart of the matter, I might give archery a go. A mental archer, I try my hand at contemplating freedom.

Free is the man who has not yet been ossified by his word, or tricked by the allure of authorship into writing his autobiography, or writing at all. The additives in the language tend toward ossification. Creation in the form of reproduction. An odd, disagreeable, succubus-centering movement. You don't know the harm it is doing you until it is too late to do anything about it.

And by then you've got a miracle on your hands, a little girl and the horror that goes along with keeping her out of harm's way. The harm that begins with your indelicate form of protection, your promises of safety that will all too swiftly stifle her thirst for freedom.

#### XV

My wife isn't quite herself lately, but then, neither is my idea of her. Last week she was baptized in the Holy Spirit. Now she speaks less often in English than in tongues. I try to learn her language, but I'm too old to start at the alphabet, especially the alphabet to a language that forbids the word *sex*.

She seems to have forgotten the fruits of our fornication, how devoid of joy our life would have been without them, though the rift rent by the loss of a fruit may be precisely what has driven her to seek escape from its cause. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Even when she was a fair-weather Presbyterian, she was disgusted by the Eucharist.

“*Eating* the body of Christ, how pagan and barbaric,” she’d say.

What she meant was the mixing up of spirit and things, religious trafficking in bread, wine, salt, wheat, spit, blood—things. What does the Holy Spirit need with things?

Something to experience, for one. A warm body against you, for two.

XVI

While she's taken up with an ascetic sect of the Pentecostals, I've taken up with my right hand. I've nothing against charismatic Christians, but her group gives me the creeps.

She also enrolled our children in the Christian Academy, which teaches that the world is six-thousand years old and won't allow *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Catcher in the Rye* in the library. I sneak them Potter, the Greek tragedies, Walker Percy and Edward Abbey to add some spice to their biblical boredom. Wanting to understand, to see what had claimed her passion, I went to one of their services.

*Tenderness*, I thought, *everyone here is creaming in his drawers from tenderness.*

But beware, tender hearts. Never in the history of the world have there been so many civilized, tenderhearted souls as have lived in the last century. And never in the history of the world have so many people been killed.

The Turks killing a million Armenians, Stalin killing five-million Ukrainians, Hitler killing most of the Jews in Europe, and how many Iraqi kites untethered when Bush's little baby is put to bed?

I feel a bit unstable pursuing this line of reasoning, but I sense something basic, something in the pit of my being beginning to rise that in one sense I want to ignore, but in another, I know that if I don't face it now, once and for all, it will come back to haunt me.

As if I weren't already well acquainted with the pitiable sadness of feeling haunted, or hadn't made countless attempts to conjure likenesses that are more projection than apparition. A vision of a daughter does not a daughter make. Desire is the greatest liar I know.

It is as if I am trying to tell myself something of which I am suspicious, something that my instinct tells me not to trust. Is self-suspicion an inflammation of guilt, or does the truth have an appreciable quality about it that requires no analysis for recognition?

What I mean is, a part of me I don't really know, yet the deepest part of me, the part of me that has kept silent until now, the part of me that was there before words, is trying to speak:

*Let me tell you where tenderness leads...*

I'm not sure I want to know where it leads, but if they have ruined her mind, at least they got her to quit smoking. And if I had to make a choice, I would rather keep the mother of my children than try to resurrect the woman I once loved.