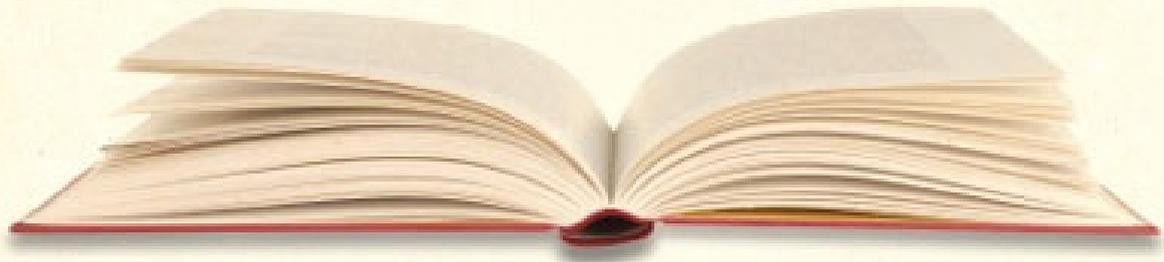


THE



OF



IMPROVISATIONS ON
A CRAZY LITTLE THING

Roger Rosenblatt

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
MAKING TOAST AND KAYAK MORNING

The Book of Love

IMPROVISATIONS
ON
A CRAZY LITTLE THING

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Dedication

*For Ginny—
Dedicated to the One I Love*

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THE CHINESE INVENTED THE CLOCK and gave it to the emperor, who stored it away in his palace. Eventually it was lost, and everyone who knew about the clock forgot about it. Four hundred years later, the French sailed into China, bearing a new invention of theirs, the clock. The Chinese, including the current emperor, were filled with amazement. They murmured and gaped, turning the machine this way and that. They said they never had seen anything as wonderful as a clock.

I THOUGHT OF YOU TONIGHT, as the moon was turning its knowing face, the way you turn away at one of my contrived displays of wit. Embarrassed for me, who lacks the wit to be embarrassed for myself. Why is that? Why are you prepared to bear my slightest burden? I, the tropical ceiling fan, wheeling in my faux aristocratic self-confidence. You, with the serene sense to look beyond the slats of the casa shutters to the mango trees, the bougainvillea, and beyond those, to the sea. So steady, your eyesight. But tonight was different. The past had changed, as it does sometimes, and instead of the self-regard I have worn like a white linen suit, I saw only you, and the strawberries, and the windfall of light on your hair.

The story I have to tell is of you. It was related to me by a priest who had read it in an Icelandic saga memorized by an Irishman who recited it on a road packed with flutists and soldiers, where he was overheard by a young girl from Florida who transcribed it in a language no one speaks anymore. So I need to tread carefully. Stories like yours tend to slip away, if one is not careful. And I have been known not to be careful. A dead language is like the ruins of a great civilization. It glows as it is excavated. I shall tell your story in that language, whose power derives from not saying everything, like a poem. Or a song. Maybe a song.

The story I have to tell is of you. Of others, too. Other people, other things. But mainly of you. It begins and ends with you. It always comes back to you.

SWONDERFUL, SBLUNDERFUL, SROMANTIC, frantic, logical, biological, whimsical, flimsical, writerly, golightly, puppy, yuppie, durable, curable, erratic, ecstatic, erotic, robotic, national, passionate, powerful, flowerful, ephemeral, dilemmal, musical, abusical, tragic, magic, mawkish, New Yawkish, ubiquitous, insickuous, loyal, cloyal, fleeting, cheating, parental, demented, beautiful, dutiful, diurnal, eternal, sawfullynice, sparadise.

THE PIANO BAR PLAYER is trying to express his fondness for the brunette standing near his bench. She has requested “Someone to Watch Over Me,” and has pointed out the song in the fake book that the piano player keeps propped up on his music stand. But the fake book is itself a prop. He cannot read music. He cannot tell her that. He wants so for her to like him, and she does. But “Just the Way You Are”? He was riffing on that tune when she entered the lounge. She seems above him, superior to him who never learned to do anything the right way. He is just a piano bar player. How he wants

to please and impress her. So he fidgets with the page of music, flutters it, and peers in, as if he were actually studying the chord progressions of “Someone to Watch Over Me.” She watches over his shoulder, then touches him on the arm. “Love songs are desire,” she says. “Why don’t you play it the way you feel it?” At once he relaxes and fails to exist, just as one fails to exist in water lights at the harbor, or in that first bite of a plum, in the summer, on a boat. “Why don’t we ride the song like a rainy road at night?” he says to her, courage mounting and the fingering flowing ahead of him, clairvoyant. He recalls the ecstasy of his years of failed instruction, and thinks, I never needed lessons, after all.

SOME ENCHANTED EVENING, you will meet a stranger and call it love at first sight, but it won’t be. We say that, love at first sight, when in fact we mean the opposite. In order to love someone you’ve never laid eyes on before, you need to have retained an impression of the person you would fall in love with once that person materialized. An amalgam, perhaps, of the best features of those you nearly loved. A composite image, like a police sketch. Finally, after many years, when that impression becomes a reality, and that person comes into view, across a crowded room or in a piano bar, or whatever, then somehow you know, because you always had known. Your imagination has preserved a picture of the love of your life. And look at *that*, she appears. So, when you think about it, the expression *love at first sight* really means “love at last.” Now that you know that, you can run to her side and make her your own. There you go.

THINGS I CAN TAKE, things I can’t.

I can take a punch. Maybe not two punches or three. But one, to the belly or the face. I can take a punch.

And a snub. I’ve been snubbed a lot, so I know that I can take a snub. Walk past me here. Don’t invite me there. I can take it.

I can take extreme heat and extreme cold. The heat was overwhelming in Lebanon and Israel. I climbed the Rock of Masada in a hundred degrees, which was no fun. But I could take it. And the cold, too, in Vermont and New Hampshire, those winters when the gas froze in the tank.

And a slur. I can take a slur. Call me kike, Hebe, Jew-boy. I can take that, too, though I’d probably want to find out if *you* can take a punch.

Gossips. I can take them, as well. I don’t like gossip, but I can live with it. And the company of fakes and tyrants and traitors and amiable accommodators—for brief periods. I can take it.

Disorder. It’s difficult for a Virgo. But I can take it. And shocks, I can take shocks. And I can take a joke.

And ingratitude; I kind of expect it. And cheapness and pettiness. Even rejection. I can take that. And an unlucky streak. Treachery, if you must. It gets me down, but I can take it.

Things I can’t take: your pain, the children’s pain, the verdict of your glance.

FROM TIME TO TIME on the *George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, a character, perplexed as to how George could be with a scatterbrain like Gracie, would approach George and

begin, “I hope you won’t mind my asking—” At which point, George would cut him off and say, “I love her.”

Jack Benny reported that when Gracie died, hundreds of friends filled George and Gracie’s home. George greeted them with a smile, and told jokes to make them laugh. Every twenty minutes or so, Benny said, George would go off to a room by himself and weep. Then he’d return to his company, and make them laugh again.

“I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING to be there when I died,” says the husband in the movie *Take This Waltz*, just as his marriage is about to expire. A morose variant on the cliché “you’re the one I wanted to grow old with.” The remark is effective, as it comes from this particular husband, who is one of the world’s nicest guys. He cooks chicken, and writes cookbooks about cooking chicken. His first published success will be a book called *Tastes Like Chicken*. But that will come after his spritelike wife of five years runs off with another. She has loved her husband in a safe and solid way, because he is safe and solid. He views the future as death. “I thought you were going to be there when I died.” But she is neither safe nor solid. She dreams. And when the guy across the street (this is Toronto) catches her eye, she falls in love at first sight, which, as we know, means love at last. She is sort of a writer. He is sort of a painter, who transports citizens of Toronto in a rickshaw to earn a little money. He, too, is a nice guy. There are no villains in this piece.

If the movie is about anything, it is about gaps. Every life has at least one gap. And the choice every husband, wife, and lover makes is to live with one’s gap, or try to fill it. When the gap is filled, inevitably a different gap is revealed, just as gaping. “The Folks Who Live on the Hill,” that sweet, hopeful song about the safe and solid. How perfect would life be were we to love and wed and have some kids and see our children play and grow till we were old. And we would be called what we have always been called—the folks who live on the hill.

Take this scene in *Take This Waltz*: Before the lovers become lovers, physical lovers, body to body, they take an early morning swim together in a health club pool. They are the only ones in the pool. We watch them move toward and around each other, and away, and close again, but never touching. In an earlier scene he tells her how he would make love to her, up and down, if they were free to do what they wished. They do not touch in that scene, either. After their long aquatic ballet, the guy breaks the spell and grabs her ankle. Her expression changes, hardens. The swim dance is over. And, in fact, when they finally get together after she leaves her husband, they don’t last as a couple, because all they really had between them was their swim, a gap of their own, where nothing could go wrong. Only in the pool could their interplay be mistaken for life, the best life available to them, with no marriage vows broken, no taboos violated, and no disappointment. Forever would they be known as the folks who live in the water.

ON GAPS? First, a coffee cup is between you. Then a swimming pool. Then an ocean. Then everything. Keep your eye on gaps. They tend to grow when you’re not looking, like orchids, except they’re not as pretty as orchids.

ADVICE TO THOSE ABOUT TO ACQUIRE a Vermeer: Always look at it as it might appear in its average moments—not as it might glow in the light-dance of the fireplace, or burn from within on a fall Sunday morning when the amalgamation of the sun’s rays blasts red upon those fat Dutch cheeks, or as you would make it glow when you return home flushed with the one victory or another, or with wine. None of that.

Rather think: What will this masterpiece look like at 2:45 on a February afternoon when you have run out of toilet paper and the roof leaks and a horse has just kicked in your kitchen door for the fun of it. And a dead badger is wedged high in the chimney, stinking up the house. Consider moments such as these, when you are about to acquire your Vermeer. But yes. She is as lovely as a Vermeer.

THERE IS SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW. Uh-oh. I went and said it. There is something you should know. Your face stiffens. Your lips go dry. You seem certain that you are about to learn something painful, a terrible secret. Another woman? Another man? There is something you should know. One might as well say, I am about to ruin your life.

But think on it a moment. Just because the announcement usually is dire does not mean it has to be. Every time, I mean. There is something you should know. Say you are about to journey to an unknown place. And I, who have been to that place, would like to prepare you for certain contingencies and customs. At the dinner table, for instance, these people you are about to meet toss their food in the air and let it fall in their mouths. They all are quite good at this trick, and never spill a drop or a morsel. Do not be put off by this, much less horrified. It’s just their way. You might practice the trick yourself before you start out on your journey. Something you should know.

Or, the climate plummets below zero in the summers, and cornfields grow so red hot in the winters the corn rises just like that. Or polar bears run wild in the streets, and are deceptively affectionate, often appearing at your door and posing as houseguests. Or the women who live here insist on fornication as a gesture of welcome. Something you should know.

When it comes down to it, there is a lot that you should know if you do not already know it. Thus the announcement may be proffered at face value. If you are about to take a course in trigonometry, you should know algebra. If you are about to perform a quadruple bypass, it helps to know how to do it. Arcana you should know: You should know that the expression “the devil and the deep blue sea” has nothing to do with Satan, but rather refers to the line where a boat rests on the water, called the devil. You should know that “the lion’s share” derives from a fable even earlier than Aesop’s, in which the lion goes hunting with a cow, a goat, and a sheep, and claims all the spoils. So the phrase means not the largest portion, but rather the whole thing. You should know that the Chinese invented the clock.

And even this: The announcement may augur a delightful piece of news. People are speaking well of you. You should know that. You are about to inherit a fortune, or be awarded a prize. You should know that. You are beloved more than you ever can realize, in all the ways that someone can be loved, from every angle, from every way of looking at you or into you, for every quality of mind and heart that you possess. And for your frailties, too. And insecurities. And for your failings and stumbles. And

your sins, for those as well. You are beloved for being, and you need not lift a finger to earn it. Love is yours. My love is yours. Even this is something you should know.

JACK CALLS PAUL A NIGGER FAG, and Paul says the same thing of Jack. Whenever they fight, which is every fourth or fifth day, they will not speak to each other for one whole day afterward, and will fume and seethe and stomp around their railroad apartment on Bleecker Street, murmuring “nigger fag” as they pass each other in the hall. In bed they will roll to the outskirts, back to back with most of the bed in the gap between them. Yet all their friends know them to be “the happiest couple in New York.” And much of the time they are. Theirs was one of the first same-sex marriages in the state, and that makes them proud. And basically they are compatible, peas in a pod. They both like cooking and classical music. They like Vermeer. They like reruns of *Burns and Allen*. They like chess. They like baseball. They like pop, too—Blossom Dearie, Barbara Cooke, and Dean Martin, especially “Ain’t That a Kick in the Head.” And they both like fighting, which seems to come naturally to each of them, as Jack was reared in the South Central district of Los Angeles, and Paul in Bed-Stuy. You can take the boy out of the hood, says Jack, and Paul completes the axiom.

Which is why it was a near-fatal mistake for the six skinheads on Harrison Street one night, when they surrounded Paul and Jack, and called them nigger and called them fag. Both men were dressed in identical powder blue pullovers, and they were returning home from the ad agency that employs them. They must have looked like easy marks to the skinheads who, after a brawl that lasted no more than two minutes, limped away with fat lips and shiners (one with a crushed nose), while Jack and Paul bore hardly a scratch. On the walk home, they whistled “Ain’t That a Kick in the Head.” Tonight, they are side by side on the couch, watching *Mad Men* in peace and comfort, and holding hands, until Paul drives Jack up the wall by saying he’s got a man crush on Jon Hamm, and Jack calls him a nigger fag. Paul says the same thing of Jack.

SHOULD WE MIX IT UP this Valentine’s Day? I mean, a knock-down-drag-out, no-holds-barred, mano a mano donnybrook? Tell you what. Let’s make love instead. Let’s do both, and fight between the sheets. Does that make sense? Does anything about love make sense? Love is irrational, delirium, which is why neither of us would want to be one of those gods graced with eternal life, because if you have eternal life, why panic? Where’s the fire? But if you’re mortal, and are we ever, carpe diem, carpe whatever frantic impulse comes charging through your heart. So, what is it to be, baby? A shot to the kisser, or embraceable you? (I like a Gershwin tune. How about you?) Plant one on me.

The safest place to be in a tornado is a storm cellar. The safest place to be in a tornado is a railroad apartment on Bleecker Street or a Motel 6 or Williams-Sonoma or a bank vault or a North Korean prison. The safest place to be in a tornado is in your arms, you said, and you thought you meant it but you didn’t. Love is no safer than a bread knife. Take the storm cellar. Tea for two and two for tea and me for you in a cottage small by a waterfall? I don’t think so. Embrace the peril. If we’re going to pick our song, let’s make it “That Old Black Magic” and revel in the spin we’re in.

How do conservatives fall in love? Conservatively, I suppose, like porcupines. Love may be better suited to liberals, for whom disorder is a work of the imagination. Within the blink of a black eye, you can be enthralled by me, disgusted with me, appalled, enchanted, smitten, bored (*Bored? With me?*), forever mine, forever through with me. Analyze that. The trick is not to forget that we love each other, because couples do that. They forget to remember. As if love were keys to misplace or a purse to leave in an airport. What? Did I slip your mind? Did you slip mine? My irreplaceable you. My sweet erasable you, you'd be so nice to come home to. That is, you or Tracey the waitress with the boobs I glimpsed in Applebee's last Tuesday. Unforgettable, that's what you are not, unless I concentrate on you.

Pope Francis wants a church "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets" and not "clinging to its own security." Does that make sense? Is the pope Catholic? Francis embraces life as a holy mess. Love is a holy mess. You were not meant for me. I was not meant for you. Yet there we were in the snow, our first night together, the quiet luster of you, composed like a Gershwin tune, like "Embraceable You," while I, a whooping rhinoceros, stomped about in boots, a rhino in boots, until we stopped, stood thigh to thigh, looked up and caught the moon between the tangles of the clouds. My heart fell open like a knot.

Be my valentine in a blizzard, where the air is so thick, we cannot see two feet ahead of us, and we flail about snow-blind, without a GPS. Be my GPS to the tundra, the Klondike, and I'll be yours. The outer world of fanatics hates at the drop of a hat. Let us love as fanatically, unhinged. O promise me nothing. Is that you standing before me in the whiteout? Come to Papa. Do.

THESE DISTRACTED LOOKS OF MINE drive you up the wall, I know. I wish I could help it. No, I don't. Distracted is where I live. For weeks I have been turning a line over in my head—On first looking into Homer's Chapstick. Nothing good can come of such falderal, yet falderal is how I ral. How I roll. A Tootsie Tells How She Rolls. Did you know that Van Gogh's love song was "Call My Ear Responsible"? See? It is unthinkable that a noblewoman such as yourself should stoop to my level.

I talk to birds. Out loud. I talk to birds. In the early morning, when I am at the kitchen table writing, and a bird lands on top of the hedge outside the glass door to the deck, I talk to it, greet it, often with the single word "Bird." Stirred by a bird. I talk to squirrels, or to one particular squirrel (is it the same one every morning?), who skitters across the deck, sometimes from left to right, sometimes from right to left. In midskitter he will stop in his tracks, distractked, rear up, and turn to me, as if to say, annoyed, "What?" On the other side of the kitchen wall, you are watching Charlie Rose on *CBS This Morning* lead a discussion of whether or not we should invade Syria.

What would I do if I invaded Syria? Even if Syria deserves an invasion, I'm not familiar with the terrain. I wouldn't know where to go. Out of things. I'm too out of things. I wish I could be more with it, but then I might be conscripted to invade Syria, and how would that be? Who am I kidding? I don't wish I were more with it, neither does it, whatever it may be. You've known me since I was a fledgling distractee. Now I'm a pro. The distraction game can get out of hand, I hardly need to tell you. But on

the whole (who sits on the whole?), it's not a bad way to live. And, distracted as I may be, I always turn up, like the bad penny. The bad penny.

The good penny and the bad penny went for a walk. We may be different from each other, they agreed. But neither of us needs change.

OH, I WONDER, wonder who, mmbadoo-oooh, who Who wrote the Book of Love.

—THE MONOTONES, "THE BOOK OF LOVE"

WELL, AS LONG AS YOU'RE ASKING, it was Andreas Capellanus who wrote the book of love, at least the first of the lot, called *The Art of Courtly Love*, around 1184. Curious little treatise, it defines love in terms of the "inborn suffering" someone endures when thinking about one's beloved, which is sensible enough. But then the book goes off the rails in a section that condemns homosexuality, while recommending hitting on nuns. Capellanus was a monk. His main theme, courtly love itself, declares that the most satisfying love affair exists between an unmarried man and a married woman, like Troilus and Cressida, and he advocates stealing another man's wife (felonious monk). Then there's a kinky passage comparing a woman's "upper half" to her "lower half," in a bodily exploration similar to the young man's in *Take This Waltz*, but without the heavy breathing. The passage sails into a lengthy dialogue involving a woman who offers two suitors a choice of the halves of her body, and a debate ensues between the suitors as to who gets what. The woman does not ask, why not take all of me? And by the time you finish with all this anatomical chatter, you want no part of any of them.

Yet *The Art of Courtly Love* does offer two things worth holding on to. Love, says Capellanus, tracing the Latin, gets its name (*amor*) from the word for hook (*amus*). Someone in love is hooked, poor fish. The more he tries to wriggle off the line, the tighter the line. Finally, our odd little monk comes to something you and I might recognize in his prescription for courting a woman of superior social position. He writes: "Where a man is of lower rank than the woman, he must not ask permission to sit beside her, but he may ask to sit in a lower place." I'm down here, babe.

MY BEAR IS OF THE POLAR VARIETY. He squats at the other end of my kitchen table every morning, and he stares at me with his black, black eyes. He does not move, but I hear his even snorting. *Gnnn, gnnn, gnnn*. Like that, in a low guttural snort that is neither threatening nor amiable. If my kitchen window is open, the breeze will flutter the tips of his white fur. He is seven or eight feet tall (I haven't measured). There is nothing immediately alarming about him, yet once I sit down, I am afraid to move.

He has something to do with embracing my fears. Anyone can see that. And with my mood swings. Once I suggested to him that he might be a bipolar bear, but he showed no amusement. I cannot recall when he first appeared—some years ago, certainly. It was not in the morning that I first saw him but rather one midnight, when, for lack of sleep, I came downstairs for a snack of Jell-O, and there he was, glowing white in the light of a full moon. I sat and stared at him, as he stared at me. I blinked first. He did not blink at all. Eventually, I got sleepy and retired.

Lately, he has stirred from the kitchen, where he spends his days, and has moved up to the bedroom at night, where he sits Indian-style at the foot of my bed. He seems

to wish to be with me night and day. I do not know what it is about me that attracts him. If he wanted to kill me, he could have done that long ago. Bears may look cute, but they are ferocious. One swipe of the paw, and I would be scattered around the room like so many pieces of paper.

One night I decided to flatter him, but it made no impression. One night I presented a philosophical monologue to him—something that yoked the fates of bears and men together in harmony. I sang him “Can’t We Be Friends?” He demonstrated no interest. One night I read him *The Art of Courtly Love*. Ditto. One night I cursed him out. I don’t know where I got the courage, but I even raised my hand to him. I hardly need tell you that there was no reaction.

Here’s my problem: If he establishes his influence in my household, as he has pretty much done already, how long will it be before he follows me outside? How long before he accompanies me to the newsstand or to the grocer’s? How long before he takes over my life? Think of the awkwardness, the embarrassment. He is not Harvey, after all; he’s not invisible. And he certainly is not sweet natured or wise. And he’s bigger than Harvey. Too big. I could swear he’s growing.

I am thinking of phoning the ASPCA. Perhaps tomorrow, or the day after that. My bear is an unwanted animal, is he not? It is the business of the ASPCA, their duty, to take unwanted animals and treat them humanely. I would not want him hurt. Yes, I will definitely call the ASPCA by the end of the week, or early next at the latest, and tell them please to rid me of my bear, my beloved big white polar bear.

SHELLEY SAID, imagine what you know, or something like that, in his *Defence of Poetry*. Imagine what you know. The point implied is that there are different kinds of imagining. The first is to imagine what has never been. This is mere invention. Like the clock. Then, too, one may imagine an improvement on an existing situation. Makes a cloudy day sunny. But the best, most far-reaching use is to imagine what has been there all along, to dream into it as no one has ever dreamed, and to see what is there that never was so there. If one is inclined toward mere invention, one creates a Mr. Ed, a horse that talks. But if one uses the greater imagination, then that one, that Jonathan Swift, comes up with the Houyhnhnm, talking horses that bear the burdens of civilization. Or perhaps bears that bear the burdens of civilization. Or Quasimodo, who bears civilization on his back.

So what am I getting at, you ask, as you stand in the archway, with your dangling ringlets, and a plate of sliced melons in your arms, and wearing that green and yellow sundress we bought you when we were in Puerto Rico way back when? I’m getting at you. Imagine that.

QUASIMODO, MY LAST DUCHESS, and the guy who left Miss Havisham at the altar went for a walk. Phew! said the guy who deserted Miss Havisham. That was a close call. But the truth is, I hadn’t intended to run out on her, and had it not been for a broken carriage wheel detaining me that morning, I might have made it to the church on time. But man, am I grateful to that wheel! By the time I arrived, the now-famous Miss Havisham was three sheets to the wind and nutty as a fruitcake. Speaking of cake, did you get a load of that monstrosity? In any case, I got there four hours late. The guests

had gone home. And she was still in her bridal gown, clearly bonkers. I watched from a safe distance, then took a powder. A few years later, I'd heard she'd had a baby. (Adopted? Right.) Mine, no doubt. Who else could have done it? So I went to the house to get a look at what my child had grown into, and she was as loony as her mother. A regular bitch. Funny thing is, I loved the Havisham dame once, especially when she was pregnant. She looked great, expecting.

I looked great, period, said the duchess, who refused to go last. And he had me killed because, according to him, I liked whatever I looked on and my looks went everywhere. The asshole duke. If he'd bothered to look at anything but the mirror, he would have seen that I only had eyes for him. But he didn't care. He was crazy with jealousy, baseless jealousy. When he had me pose for Fra Pandolf, I had no idea that the portrait would be the only thing left of me in the house. Had I only known that at the time, I would have fidgeted, prolonged the sitting. Now Ferrara calls my portrait a wonder. Asshole. If he had seen me, really seen who I was and how I worshipped him, he wouldn't have been so eager to hang me on the wall. Well, good luck to the next duchess is all I have to say.

And all I have to say, said Quasimodo, is, are you *kidding* me? I don't want to get all bent out of shape or anything. But will someone please tell me what is so goddam appealing about gypsies? I'm a *Frenchman*, for Chrissake. A *Frenchman*. Okay, I may not look like Maurice Chevalier, but I'm a hell of a lot smarter than that gypsy. And more sensitive. And heroic. And sweeter. Not to mention the fact that I'm strong as an ape, and can climb up a wall like one. Not to mention the fact that I was the prize resident of the greatest cathedral in Paris. They called me by my body. Why did they not call me by my soul? My devotion. And *she*, Esmeralda the bitch. Why could she not see past my appearance? Why could she not hear me when I whispered, *Je t'adore*? Instead, she gave her love to—I barely can speak the word—a *gypsy*. Gets my back up.

SORRY TO HEAR ABOUT YOU and Janet. You and Janet seemed so right for . . . Oh, why do I say such a thing? You and Janet were wrong from the start. Anyone could see that a mile off. Oh, why do I say such a thing? Why do I say a word? What do I know about the inner workings of you and Janet? Or the outer workings, when it comes to that. You always seemed happy enough, I guess. But to tell the truth, I was pretty busy with some breakups of my own, with Lucille walking out on me barely a month after I walked out on Marlene. Nonetheless, you're my buddy, my best bud, so I want to find the words to comfort you at a time like this. She wasn't worth it. How's that? Or: You'll find someone else. Better? Or: Maybe you can work it out and get back together—you and Janine, that is, Janet.

THE TROUBLE WITH LOVE . . .

Is there only one trouble?

The trouble with love is that it comes with hysteria, and it ought to be calm and under control.

But how is control possible, since love means delirium, passion? Didn't you just say something like that?

You confuse passion and love. Love requires the long steady view.
What if they cannot coexist, passion and the long steady view?
The long steady view is a kind of passion, only subdued. More pewter than silver.
That's just your rationalization, an excuse for not feeling passionate enough. I'll
take passion over calm in love any day of the week.
Have it your way. But you should acknowledge what you're doing, deliberately
opting for hysteria.
And how does one do that? Opt for hysteria.

LOVE REAL? GET REAL. Chemical weapons in Syria, that's real. Rows of kids' bodies not
asleep. The killer of school children, the antigay thug, the drive-by shooter, the hit-
and-run drunk. If they are real—and are they ever—love can't be real. And you can
take that to the bank. The bank is real.

So now are you going to tell me about Saint Kevin in Ireland, on his knees,
praying in his monk's cell that was so small he had to poke his right arm out the
window? Along came a blackbird, which nestled in Kevin's outstretched hand, and
laid a clutch of eggs. For days, weeks, Saint Kevin kept his arm outstretched until the
eggs hatched. Then bye-bye blackbirds. A parable of love, of loving creatures great
and small, including the lowlife blackbird. Remember, we're not talking about a robin
or a lark or a bird that never wert (imagine that, Shelley). It was the ominous, creepy,
cackling grackle for which Kevin gave his right arm. Kevin was for the birds. What
about this story?

So now are you going to tell me about Saint Lucy in Rome, the highborn girl who
strove to give her money to the poor? But her mother, Eutychia, wanted the dough for
herself, and arranged an advantageous marriage for Lucy. To a pagan, if you please.
Lucy was not pleased, and rebelled, the upshot depicted in later paintings of the saint,
showing her holding a plate with a pair of eyes on it. Seems that soldiers tortured Lucy
before knocking her off. They gouged out her eyes, or choked her until her eyes
popped from their sockets. Yet the paintings show Lucy with her eyes intact, as well as
the pair on the plate. If the tellers of the tale are to be believed, God restored sight to
Saint Lucy—Lucy the light, the original four eyes, who died for her love of the poor.

Enough already. Who could possibly be taken in by such holy bunkum? How can
love be real if its existence is illustrated by cock-and-bull stories of faith and
martyrdom? Not real. Never real. Its crowning feature.

AN EARTHENWARE PITCHER OF WATER, a plate of brown eggs, a geyser of blackbirds, a
rock formation over a canyon simulating a bridge, you, good-byes in a Paris airport, an
upright piano and the tinny echo of a damaged middle C as one knocks out "Someone
to Watch Over Me," a gleaming wooden kayak tilting on wet rocks, you, a red cross on
the top of an ambulance as seen from a roof in Athens, reruns of *Burns and Allen*,
Blossom Dearie singing "I Walk a Little Faster," you, that green and yellow sundress,
the puckered skin of a riverbed, the silence of a polar bear, flowers that come alive
only at night, the awakening of orchids, a parade of Sikhs in full costume, reds and
golds, a cracked jug in the corner of a cabin in Vermont, dusk light on the jug, a field
bleached white by moonlight, the clamor of a keel on stones, you.

WHO CARES WHO SLEEPS WITH WHOM, except in those elevated love stories where everyone dies? The courtly loving Troilus and Cressida. Pyramus and Thisbe. Romeo and Juliet. That pair of nitwits in *Elvira Madigan*, who make such a to-do about their ill-fated affair, while Mozart diddles in the background. Tell you how I would have ended that movie. The two of them go into the forest for their suicide pact. We hear two gunshots. A moment passes, and one of them walks out. There ought to be a couple of ill-fated lovers called Sturm and Drang, whose whole story consists of shouting arias and tearing their hair out before leaping off a cliff. Bye-bye. Boo-hoo.

I'll take my lovers with a little more moxie, thanks. Hold the Mozart. Give me Frankie and Johnny. Or those kick-in-the-heads, Paul and Jack. Give me a dynamic duo called Fuck and Hugh, who refuse to knuckle under to familial pressure or social custom, and lived to tell about it. Or, if they don't live, at least they give life a shot. For my money, and that of most of the banks in Texas, the best couple in history was Bonnie and Clyde, who went down on each other for as long as possible, before they went down in flames.

The trouble with the exalted stories is that they're exalted. He's too good and she's too good. And when they run out of virtue, they kill themselves. Give me a break. Why do they care a plug nickel, whatever that is, about what others think? Oh dear. Oh dear. It's just too much. And the dumb-ass world that approves or disapproves doesn't give a shit anyway about who sleeps with whom. They just want to cluck about it. A chick I knew wasn't a widow three days before she went down for half the city of Hackensack. Did anybody call the cops?

Would you be an angel and unbuckle my belt, take down my pants, and suck my cock right here on Forty-second Street and Fifth? There's a good girl.

MR. SCHOEFIELD, in love with solitude, built himself a cabin high on a hill in the northern Vermont woods. The year is 1849. For heat he chopped logs. For water he dug a well. For food he had berries, squirrels, rabbits, and the occasional duck. He did not read books. He did not play music. He neither sang nor hummed "I'll Go My Way by Myself," because it hadn't been written yet. He did not carve or whittle. He did not practice taxidermy or make ships in bottles. Memories of his family life back in Connecticut, he had a few at the beginning, but over the years the memories disappeared. Thoughts he had none, unless they involved the quotidian concerns of managing the cottage. An intruding fox or wildcat. Once in a while, a bear. When he took walks he paid only passive attention to the sights and sounds of the woods, neither collecting nor making note of plants or butterflies. In the summer he dealt with the heat. In the winter he dealt with the snow. That is, until the winter of 1851, when one afternoon, he was carrying an armful of logs from the woodpile to the cabin and heard two blasts from a double-barreled shotgun reverberating off the rocks studding a distant field. Then Mr. Schoefield collected his things and moved to Canada.

I READ OF A PEOPLE who lived in a neglected corner of Africa, and all they ate was clay. No crops grew on their land, no grass or apple trees, or papayas. But lying in the soil there was plenty of moist red clay. So one day a man, weak from starvation, bent down and took the clay in his hands, and bit into it, and swallowed it. And the next day, a

second man, having observed the first, did the same. And then a dozen men, women, and children followed suit. And then a thousand, until everyone in this neglected corner of Africa was eating clay for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and for snacks. And though the people grew ill from the clay they ate, and many died very young, whenever someone would ask them—someone from a different place, where crops grew, and grass, and apple trees, and papayas—whenever such a person would ask why it was that they continued to eat clay, the people from this neglected corner of Africa would answer, often in unison: It's all we have.

It is to say, people will do anything if they are desperate enough. Or even if they aren't. People will do anything. The Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire in the public squares in Vietnam. The girl in my high school who bit off the pinky of another girl in a locker room brawl. The murderous savage at the Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. Syria. Weapons made from a chemistry set. My, my. Hard, hard. The open wounds of the world. And the choice: bandages or salt.

What was I looking for yesterday? Car keys? I don't think so. A cathedral town in Belgium—the name of it? The name of Saint Kevin? Or Andreas Capellanus? Or the name of a Jesuit I knew at college? Good guy. Was I looking for his name? I doubt it. A shirt? A little-known fact about Mars? The minor chords in "Dancing in the Dark"? Every year, the eroding ice in the Arctic makes less of itself, so that eventually the world will be cold water, and the artists will have to create the polar bears from memory.

I stroll past the dead bushes and the stone-faced kids shouting obscenities at a woman in uniform. Oh, I remember now who I was looking for.

I HAVE NOT LOVED the world nor the world me—Byron, not Schoefield. Byron at his touchiest. I give to you and you give to me—nothing. Yet something insincere about this famous yawp. If the poet hadn't loved the world, why did he give a damn if the world loved him back? He would have omitted the second part of the line. Why would anyone in his right mind care if the world showed its love? That sort of display only turns your head, and gets you nowhere. Loving without expectations of reciprocity, on the other hand, well, that gets you everywhere. What's more: In the following stanza, Byron backs off, conceding a little here, a little more there, until he winds up hoping "goodness is no name, and happiness no dream."

But never mind all that. Isn't the world just too damn big to love? Unwieldy. Who could get his arms around the bloated bastard, with all its floods and quakes? Who could go for that? Better to love the world for its towpaths, weeds, and blackbirds. Your slightest look easily will unclothe me—Cummings at his loveliest. Love the world not for its bigness, but rather for its slightest looks, its smallest gestures. A wave, for instance. I'm talking strangers waving to one another, hands raised briefly, making a fraction of an arc. On a towpath, say, past some weeds, beneath an umbrella of blackbirds. From your sullen arms I extract a wave.

One heart we have with poets. One memory of the world. One wish for the world. They forgive us everything.

"AS WHEN WE COME TO LOVE a thing for no better reason than that we have found it, and

find it wants for love.” He’s on to something, Carl Phillips, though the sort of loving he names is not easy. The fact that someone or something wants for love says volumes. If you are not loved, by anyone, you may be sure that you are doing everything wrong with your life. You may have made yourself unworthy of love, objectively I mean, even hostile to love. That was Scrooge’s principal flaw before his eleventh-hour conversion. He hated love. Come to think of it, his nephew loves him for no better reason than that Scrooge wanted for love. Would I have loved Scrooge? Should I love you, whoever you are, simply because you are unlovable?

A man I knew a long time ago was unworthy of love, mine or anybody’s. He reveled in the misfortunes of others, used what power he had to feed his dried-up little soul. I never heard him say a generous word about another human being. Not having seen him in years, I am happier for it. Still, once in a blue moon he comes to mind, always in a bad light. It disturbs me to remember him, and his lies, and gossip, and treachery, and cowardice. I think I’ll love him, for the hell of it.

OH, HELL. I’ll include my ailments, too. Why not? They’re family. And not just my family, either. If you think of the entire history of human experience gathering in everyone’s body—the basic genetic code passed down through thousands of generations, millions of years—then our ailments and infirmities are as much a part of us as our healthy organs.

Love me, love my shoulder operation to tighten ligaments stretched out of shape in a basketball game, in my twenties. Love my two lower back operations for slipped discs that refused to slip back into place in my thirties. Love my missing thyroid gland and its synthetic replacement. Love my prostate cancer, radiated out of existence. Love one-fifth of my face below my right eye, which was removed to dig out a melanoma, and then put back. My plastic surgeon told me, “Roger, you’ve had all the discomfort of a face-lift, and none of the benefits.”

With these residents of my body controlled or under control, you’ll forgive me, doctor, if I cancel Tuesday’s appointment for a checkup. At this stage, I’m content to live with what I’ve got. I’ve got the sun in the morning, and a couple of dead nerves from the second back operation keeping me awake at night. But it’s all good. These ailments are mine, part of me, nearly all of me. So why not take all of me. Come to think of it, doc. I’m canceling all my future appointments, not just Tuesday. And if my PSA creeps up a bit, and you discover another rhomboid-shaped brown stain on my face, the odds are that all my diseases will outlive me anyway.

After I’m gone, where will my ailments go? To others, I suppose, as the species continues to accumulate features of its own frail evolution. Getting this, getting rid of that. My miserable body contains the history of the race, baby. I can’t give it anything but love.

LIKE A PATIENT CONVALESCING from a long disease, Esther leans on the bannister as she descends the stairs, and watches Michael walk toward the front door. He does not turn back to look at her. He is filled with anticipation of his new life, his new chapter, as he puts it, on his journey, as he puts it. He’s only just begun to live, as he puts it. He has forgotten that he ever loved Esther. And Esther? Well, she is the old life. Thirty-two

years of the old life. Out on the street, he quickens his step, his shoes clicking like a revolver misfiring on an empty chamber.

Now Esther is alone with the choice: to obliterate Michael from her thoughts and love him no more, or to continue to love him in his absence. She chooses the latter. And whenever one of her friends will deride him in front of her, she will protest, and will mention his good points. And when pressed as to why she does this time and time again, when she knows perfectly well that Michael is a shit, Esther will reply that she'd rather be lonely than happy with somebody else, and that as long as she loves Michael, nothing will have changed. And nothing has.

PEOPLE SOMETIMES GET MARRIED for the same reasons poets sometimes write sonnets. Form rescues content.

O. BLUSHING BRIDE, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Parents of the Bride, of Whocares, Rhode Island, and Breathless, South Carolina, was married yesterday to Handsome Groom III, son of Mr. Father of the Groom, of Boston and Maine, and Mrs. Mother of the Groom, of Baltimore and Ohio. The ceremony was performed in No Standards Church by the rector, Canon Dearly Beloved. Miss Sister was the maid of honor; Mr. Brother, the best man. The bride, who made her debut at the Desperado Cotillion, is an alumna of Small College. The bridegroom, a graduate of Large Eastern University, is with Substantial National Bank. The couple will reside in Bestchester.

Or so it reads.

Yet now he rails at her for thinking Vermeer was a Yiddish expression. And she throws a raving fit in Costco, of all places, because he waltzed in late tonight and spilled rye on the Cuisinart. He hums "Love Me or Leave Me." She hums "Here's That Rainy Day." He picks up the latest *Oui*.

That, of course, comes long after the stripping of the wallpaper, the staining of the floors, the exposure of the beams. *When those beams are exposed, we're going to have some joint here, baby, I'll tell you that. Look at those beams. Did you ever see such beams?*

Of the six marriages announced on page eighty-three of the Sunday paper, 2.2 will fail, 2.3 will last, 1.5 will fail and last. The lovely faces fill their squares; young women with clear, glinting eyes and miraculous teeth. *Miraculous, nothing! Cost us a mint to get those teeth in line! When she was twelve, we thought she'd wind up marrying Bugs Bunny! Ha-ha.* Ah, Mr. Wedding Photographer, you catch them in the pink. These are action shots, are they not? The ball at the crack of the bat; the sail blown full; the trout in a pirouette, all splash and color. You sports photographer, you.

The truth is that Blushing's folks did not, when it comes down to it, really "announce" the engagement of their daughter. They could barely spit out the words, so dismayed were they that their little princess should throw herself away on a wimp like Groom. The truth is that Handsome's dad said the boy was marrying beneath him. The truth is that Sister is sick with envy, and Brother red with hate. The truth is that no one thinks it will work.

Do you, Blushing?

I do.

Do you, Handsome?

Oh, very much.

Go to it anyway, Bride and Groom. Damn the statistics. Full speed, deliberate speed. Strip that wallpaper, expose those beams, expose those hearts. Take this waltz. There is no good reason on earth why you should reside happily ever after. At the same time, there is no good reason you should *not*. And if the truth is that your goose is cooked at the altar, then the truth can be made wrong, too, you know, can be made to look like a dope in a single, spur-of-the-moment decision to be gentle and patient—against the jeering mobs and the hoots outside. Are you game or “Just Married”?

In the morning, in the Plaza, the two of them in bed prop up their iPads against their knees and address the wedding pictures. Between the melon and the sweet rolls, they agree they both photograph exquisitely.

ON THE OTHER HAND: Good evening. We are gathered on this beautiful beach, as friends and family of Genevieve and Max, to witness and celebrate their marriage. My name is Roger. Genevieve was my writing student. She turned out well, nevertheless. I am happy to be a friend to both these wonderful people. Recklessly, they have asked me to officiate at this ceremony, though I have no official title or authority to do so. For this, I apologize to you all, and for those who believe in God, to God.

At this time, Genevieve and Max would like to thank everyone for being here at this celebration. To their many friends, they are forever grateful. To their parents—Carol and Phil and Michael and Laura—they thank you for the sacrifices you have made, for the unqualified love you have shown them, and for the lives you have opened for them, and inspired. One feels the special presence of Phil Crane this evening, who would be so proud of his daughter and so pleased about the man with whom she is about to spend her life.

Max and Genevieve met at Oxford, in a study-abroad program offered by UMass Amherst. Upon seeing Genevieve, Max asked [quote], “Do I know you from somewhere?” Genevieve dismissed his approach as a lame pickup line, but it turned out to be true. The two of them had lived two floors apart in the same freshman dorm.

As boring as this anecdote is, it illustrates a difference between Max and Genevieve. I learned the story when I asked each of them to answer a number of questions about their life and ideas. Well, I can’t say that there were a lot of ideas. But they each described their how-did-you-meet event characteristically. Max wrote a dutiful, straightforward businessman’s paragraph relying on the facts. The writer Genevieve wrote about Max’s blue eyes, and of feeling [quote], “There is too much handsomeness here.” In answer to other questions, Max noted how kind and caring Genevieve is. Genevieve cited Max’s self-confidence, his deadpan humor, and his terrific sense of judgment. Also his love of baseball. [To him] Which team, Max? [He says, the Red Sox.] So much for judgment. Max is a neat freak. Genevieve has the habit of losing her phone, wallet, and keys. Still, Max takes comfort in the apparent chaos of the universe. They both take comfort in each other. And they give comfort to their friends, young and old. It’s comforting to see how solid these two good people are together.

Genevieve and Max: People often think love’s simple because it arises naturally, in

one's nature. But love is no simpler than nature is simple. It makes demands. It requires corresponding actions. It takes concentration, patience, trust. It asks for attentiveness and creative listening. For a will toward understanding. For a willingness to live with discomfort and self-doubt. Perhaps, above all, for kindness—not only toward each other, but toward others, toward everyone. Philo said [quote]: “Be kind, for everyone you meet is carrying a great burden.” If you live in an atmosphere of kindness, it will enhance your love of each other. Love insists on kindness.

In return, love gives you the strength to endure the whims of fate and suffering and cruelty. It teaches you that you can give yourself to someone and retain yourself as well. Love is a world you both have entered and discovered. And though others have experienced it before you, it is entirely your own, and original to you. Your piece of writing. Your work of the supreme imagination.

For love is the most powerful force in the world—more than killing, or zealotry, more than hatred, war, more than death. And yet it does not exist without recognition, active acknowledgment. Strange as it sounds, you need to remind yourselves constantly that you love each other. Couples get into trouble when they forget that they love each other.

He loves, and she loves, and they love together. Let your future be suffused with love, and be guided by it. Let you love each other as your parents have loved you. And speaking of parents, and for the world that needs more people like you two, it would also be nice if you started producing a few small, future business-oriented writers. Not a moment too soon.

So at last it has come to this. Since marriage requires a leap of faith, it is time to leap. [Take rings from Michael (father) and Eddy (best man). Give them to Max and Genevieve.]

Max, do you take Genevieve to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death parts you? [Max: I do.]

Genevieve, do you take Max to be your wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death parts you? [Genevieve: I do.]

Kiss away, kids. Ladies and gentlemen: the perfectly married, Genevieve and Max.

ON THE OTHER HAND: This is a hearing test.

Can you hear this?

Sounds like church bells, people laughing, glasses clinking.

Can you hear this?

Is it, “Our Love Is Here to Stay”?

Can you hear this?

What? The baby's cry? Yes, I can hear it.

Can you hear this?

A door slamming, I think. And china breaking.

Can you hear this?

It's faint. I can barely make it out. It sounds like the wearing away of the inside of a tunnel or a universal joint or maybe the melting underside of ice on a frozen pond.