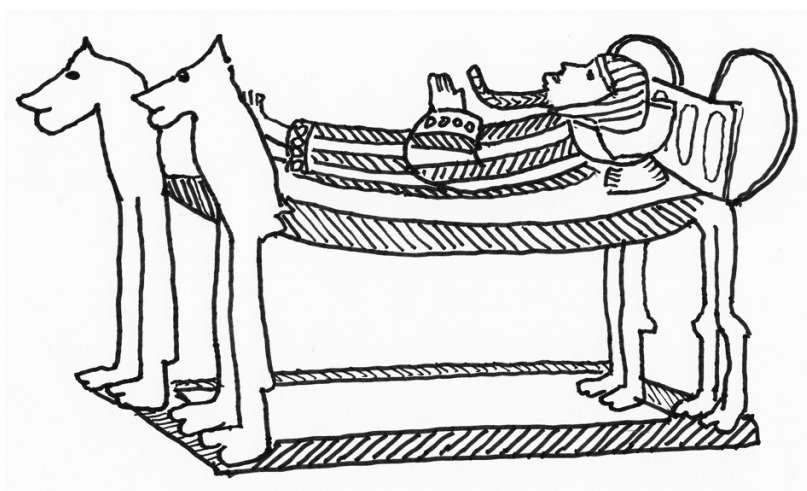


Geoffrey Gibbs

My Inner Sanctum

a peak into a most private life

February 2021



One of King Tut's beds, guarded by carved lions or are they cheetahs? It looks terribly uncomfortable. I suppose the ferocious cats were guarding him in both life and the afterlife—no wonder he reigned so briefly. Never had a face been covered with so many golden masks, each looking a bit more like the actual man-boy until the inner most revealed a rather ordinary teenager. Below that mask was the mummy—a brittle brown carapace with empty space within. What is the realization?—that Egyptians had such superb but decadent taste; and that there was a hollowness to it as is true for most despotisms.

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Although the theme of this issue of my journal is not the natural world, I still want to start with some observations about my relationship with the outdoors which has become indispensable for my happiness. During February 2021 I found it quite difficult to take my usual walks because the muddy earth became very frozen and extremely slippery. I actually went skidding through the air and fell at least three times yesterday, and I was only going out for my mail. I am a skilled walker and know to allow my body to react like a floppy doll and not tense my muscles as I fall into the powdery snow.

The brain is a rather strange contraption. It can view imagined vistas of springtime and superimpose them upon a spartan winter landscape. My hope for this year is that I might educate myself to be able to identify plants and know some of their characteristics—such as whether they have medicinal uses or folk legends about them. When May arrives, I want to be able to look with some intelligence at the rich cornucopia of nature. I have no trouble with the obvious beauties—the rhododendrons and azaleas. I had not realized that invasive species, and there are many of them, often can't support native animal and insect life. I love the names given to them—buckthorn, swallowwort, knotweed, and loosestrife. Our habitat through the marvels of evolution is all interconnected. The interlopers are here to stay.

When I was a child, my mother would pour me a cup of Chamomile tea (I hated it and the taste irritates me even in memory). Supposedly it would confer on me a more relaxed disposition, not at all what a musician wants. When you play Beethoven, you are railing against all the injustices of the world. Strong emotions are essential. Daisies (coneflower or echinacea) reduce inflammation—but it is only my brain which is inflamed and it is my normal condition. Violets (the state flower) seem to have all sorts of medicinal uses. I have violets right in my own yard. Violets can be applied to treat varicose veins. But I am too lazy to pound out a poultice. If I ever need some natural compound, I will buy a bottle of it. For cosmetic purposes my grandmother had her varicose veins operated on. I consulted a physician and was so horrified that a poison had to be injected into my right leg, that I decided if nature wanted me to be this way—so be it!

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My inner most sanctum is of course my mind which goes its own way as it guides me through life's journey. Its workings and motivations often remain a complete mystery. Eighty years of existence have not made this interior space any less perplexing. On a more tangible level, another sanctuary is my home and particularly my bedroom where I spend 1/3 of my existence. In trying to summon up inspiration for this chapter of my pandemic journal, I reviewed the subjects I had already covered. Mostly they had been nature essays limited to the nearby areas where I take my daily walks. A few days ago I almost reached the vernal pool, which I recently discovered exists in the almost inaccessible southernmost tangle of Potter Wood. As I walked in the vicinity of where I thought it was, a neighbor told me that it could be reached just beside the nearby stone wall. He would take me to it. But we got half way and decided that the briars and ticks had won. It would have to be put off until another day. But at least I then knew exactly where its water sprang out of the ground, perhaps fed by some subterranean source from the vast caverns which I had been told exist under the granite crust of Kingston Hill.

My neighbor had only moved on a few feet when he looked back with a serious gaze and said to me that a month ago he had had a heart attack—the “widow maker,” a 95% block of the left anterior artery. I responded by saying that it was the exact same heart problem that I had developed twenty years before. And here I was with my triple bypass still going strong and continuing my daily walks. I remembered seeing him only a few weeks before, chopping large oak logs in his front yard and stacking them up to the height of his head. He was angry then at the stupidity he had observed at a town meeting. The school budget was not being utilized properly according to him. I was impressed that he had even taken on some civic responsibility—more than I had ever done. My justification was that as an artist, I must keep my head in the clouds (a poor excuse at best). What makes the “widow maker” so named is that it sneaks up on you with no symptoms and is quite deadly. I had been lucky—my general physician had thought my reasoning that my shortness of breath was because of all the exhaust from vehicles on Rte. 138, was a lame excuse and ordered immediate heart tests which had saved my life. So my advice to my neighbor was that these things had to be taken in stride. Many ailments were programmed into us by our DNA and there was little we could do to avoid them.

Thinking again of the vernal pool, a perfect breeding ground for countless life forms from one-celled creatures to insect larvae, a few days later when the sun was particularly bright and at just the right angle, I caught a glimmer. I was again gazing in the direction where I expected to find it. I saw a sliver of brilliant cerulean blue (just a thin slice against the brown background). Also there was a reflected glow on the surrounding bushes. But a thicket still thwarted my efforts to approach it. This made the pool all the more special—something gorgeous but unattainable.

I negotiate the way through my yard to the road. With my snow shovel I clear a narrow path utilizing a technique suggested to me by a gourmet friend—“slice it like cheese!” This marvelous advice relieves my back from any sourness or stiffness. Then I walk carefully in the road, since the small tar sidewalks are never cleared of snow. Modern neighbors just do not have the time or energy to shovel in front of their houses. I trudge along to campus, mostly to just walk familiar paths which now in the Covid-19 period are somewhat empty. Icicles, sparkling rainbow colors in the sunlight, hang from roofs and tree limbs. I quickly duck under them, afraid that I will be speared.

In the first week of February we had one of the strange ice storms which occasionally come to South County; perhaps the result of being near the bay. Damp snow rather than just accumulating on the ground, weighed the branches of trees down with thick chunks which were heavy enough to break limbs. The snow in the upper boughs fell to the earth so hard that it shook the house—at first I thought it was another earthquake. For some reason, this year does not have as many tracks of deer as usual. But already a woodpecker attacked my house again (rat-a-tat-tat); attracted to my decaying sixty-year-old redwood siding. The snow the snowplow had piled became so hardened that I had to chip it away chunk by chunk. Somehow, walking carefully and slowly, I again reached my mailbox where a tax penalty was waiting for me which had been sent over a month ago. The very same day was delivered a follow-up letter charging me interest. Both arrived at the same time.

It was too much trouble to not just pay the penalty. My daughter is having difficulty with her mail in Norway too.

The next morning the weather channel was filled with reports of the coldest day on record in Texas (2°F and lower). These new extremes are just part of the destabilization of our planet's atmosphere brought on by increased carbon emissions. Each year seems more outrageous, but our politicians never wake up. Their rationale for inaction is that they will be dead before the catastrophe—but what about their children?—they don't matter I suppose.

At least, even if a cataclysm is on the horizon, I can curl up in my favorite chair and read the Sunday paper. Usually I come upon one really depressing article, but this last Sunday there were too many of them—my equilibrium began to really suffer. I read that Covid-19 is now spreading to other primates and even some big cats. Human sperm has lost over half its fertility because of exposure to plastics. I ran into my kitchen to look for what plastics I could throw away—*No! I need those containers for leftovers.* On the bright side, I guess with us facing the pandemic and infertility, we really don't have to worry about over-population any more.

Perhaps I could write a book about how to save the planet; it can't be that impossible to do. I have heard that planting millions of trees reduces carbon pollution. Yet it appears that China has already done that—and still Beijing is so polluted that you can't see beyond your nose. Perhaps seeding clouds to encourage rainfall might reduce summer fires. But if it would work, why hasn't it been done? Siberian tundra is melting and huge potholes are opening up, swallowing homes. But warming means that Canada and Russia will soon replace California as the perfect locale for wine production. Elon Musk wants us to relocate to Mars—however have you ever looked at those Rover photos of Mars?—nothing but endless red-tinged desert. But enough of this! I still haven't gotten to the theme for this month's pandemic journal entry.

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Having pretty much exhausted any nature subjects and not having any expertise as a naturalist anyway, it is incumbent to search for a new topic. I recently wrote about my house—not a spectacular example of architecture but beloved by me. A friend thought I should try to stick to things more down to earth. Just as my creativity was moving in that direction, another acquaintance scolded me for only being interested in myself; and boring others with stories about my personal life. What am I to do? It isn't as if I have had an expansive life's experience, especially during this pandemic era. I gave some thought to the matter while I was lying in bed, attempting to summon sleep. Then it dawned on me that I spend a lot of time under the covers. Why not write about it?

Sleep is the subject for this journal entry which I will spin out for as many paragraphs as come to mind. I may be grasping at straws—relying on this ridiculous topic for an essay. Back in the 1940s I remember my rather hard crib. At that time I spent more of my life asleep on my stomach than alert. And then I graduated to my first bed without guardrails on the sides. I felt so grown up, knowing I was old enough not to fall out. At that time pillows were still stuffed with bird feathers and quite frequently the rachis (the quill) would stick out and poke me in the face. I would grab it and pull the feather out. I had quite a fascination for quills, perhaps a vestigial memory from my

Gibbs ancestors who had been 18th-century quill cutters in Surrey, England. Washing the sheets was quite a chore for my mother. They hardly would fit in our old round washing machine. It was hard to put them through the ringer. And then they had to hang on the line, attached with many clothespins. If a wind developed, the sheets might go flying to the muddy ground or into a tree. And mother would have to start the process all over again. The blankets after having been stored all summer in the camphor chest, had a strong smell which really tickled the nose and lasted for a month or more. The mattresses in the old days were made of metal springs. When you bounced on the bed it would sing back to you with a zingy sound. One had to be careful of not bouncing too much or too hard, because the springs might pop through the cloth. Then it would be necessary to stuff them back inside and keep them there with much masking tape. But of course children, such as myself at a tender age, loved to treat the bed as a trampoline—and mother would be furious if she found me doing this.

We associate beds with romantic ardor. I must admit that I have never made love out of bed. I have had no impromptu sexual encounters in a meadow somewhere. When I married Sona Aronian in 1972, we tied our two separate beds together. It worked pretty well for a few years. My mattress was too soft—while her mattress was too hard. We knew that something had to be done eventually. I can remember reading that in the Middle Ages, the peasants slept on mattresses stuffed with straw. They would stay drunk in bed all winter—and only venture outside for spring planting. This must be an exaggeration. Surely not everything I have read is necessarily true. But I sort of like the idea of human hibernation—why not? And on a trip which Sona and I took down the Rhine we slept one night at an inn which must have not updated its accommodations for hundreds of years. The bed was less than five feet long and it was shaped like a couch and elevated one's head and chest. It was definitely the most uncomfortable bed I have ever attempted to sleep on. No wonder the Germans were so irritable that they could fight a "Hundred Years' War!"

I can't remember when in the early 1980s Sona and I went to a Scandinavian-style furniture store near Boston, searching for furniture which would blend nicely with our redwood and pine house. We ordered amenities for the living room, dining area, kitchen, and bedroom. The bedroom ensemble was splendid looking. The bed was a substantial wooden sculpture—king sized. But there was a problem with it. Swedes prefer to sleep on thin mattresses over wooden slats—much too uncomfortable for American backs and behinds. The salesman said, "Nothing to worry about. We can have built for you a made-to-order mattress which will sit on top of the slats." The price for the mattress was not too terrible, so we agreed to have it constructed. The day arrived when all the new furnishings were delivered. They looked perfect as if designed especially for our house. After the bed was hammered and screwed together, an immense object was brought into the bedroom. It hardly fit through the doorway. It was the largest and heaviest mattress we had ever seen. We would never be able to lift it ourselves. The workmen could hardly lift it. But once placed over the slats of the bed, it looked fine. That night after struggling to get the king-sized sheets to fit, we climbed in, expecting to at last enjoy our new mattress.

But the mattress was hard as a rock. There was hardly any give to it at all. "Sona this just won't do. We will never be able to sleep comfortably again," I whimpered. But Sona was endlessly

resourceful and indomitable. Nothing could phase her. And as I have written before, I had to reconcile myself to the fact that I would never be able to win an argument with her ever. “All we have to do is order a thick quilted padding to place over the mattress to soften the feel,” she said with reassurance. After a week of nightly aches, the padding arrived. It worked tolerably well. I must admit that I had to then give up ever placing an arm below my body. It would just be crushed. So for the forty years since I have never been able to lie in a casual way. I sleep as straight as I can. The result is that my back remains in great shape. The posture is obviously to my advantage. The other amazing aspect of the mattress is that it never gives out. A rock is a rock—it isn’t about to change shape. One of my nieces told me she has to replace her mattress about every two years, “They just don’t make them the way they used to!” Now that my dear wife has passed away, I alternate and sleep on her side one month, and on my side the next month. The sturdy mattress will certainly outlive me.

I have always prided myself about my good sleeping habits. Every morning I wake relatively refreshed. Of course, it doesn’t matter anymore since I don’t have to go to work. And in retirement I have never designed a schedule for myself. Schedules are impediments for artists (for composers). When inspiration comes, all other activities must be put aside, and the muse be allowed to take over. Some days nothing of interest emerges from the imagination. On other days the mind is burning bright and many hours go by to allow creativity full reign. I tell myself, “Can’t stop to cook dinner, the *Andante cantabile* is almost finished,” and I end up not eating at all. So this is an artist’s life—not debauched but just a little bit irregular.

Would you believe that my sleep persona has a conscience? Just the other night, I was in the middle of a dream and I started to tell a friend some very personal things about myself. I got carried away and was revealing intimacies which were none of their business. Suddenly I felt someone or something pinching and pulling my left ear. The more I revealed in conversation the harder and more painful became the pinch. Eventually it woke me up with a start! So I said to my conscience, “O.K. you have made your point!” I thought that I had experienced it once and that my conscience would be satisfied, but just a night ago, I was showing some cruelty to a dream person, and my conscience began slapping me on the behind.”

Being a musician, I have a pretty good ability at gauging how much time has gone by. But my time sense is beginning to falter. A number of my friends who are my age have confirmed that they *too* are experiencing a loss of the interior body clock. A few nights ago I woke up at 2:30 AM. I was fully awake and ready for the day. So I had my breakfast with the moon shining into the dining room picture window. I listened to the news which was only repeats of the previous evening. Nothing new of course had happened yet. I went through my emails and fiddled with what I had been writing. Then I began to feel tired and went back to bed. Soon I was in dreamland again. Sometimes I even go back into the same dream I had been having earlier—like a second act so to speak. Last night, in dreamland I had to climb a wall in a house which had not been finished as yet. There was no stairway. I would grab at exposed beams and pull myself up. But once I had eaten my early breakfast and returned to bed, I had to climb the wall all over again. Even in the dream, my inner arbiter complained, “Didn’t we have to do this before?” When I woke up at 7:30

AM it was time for a second breakfast—just a bit more toast and coffee. This doesn't seem to bother me all that much. So I am not going to worry about keeping strange hours.

I do have some strategies to aid me with going to sleep—telling myself the same tedious story over and over. It puts me to sleep every time. And I can only hope that this essay puts you to sleep eventually too. It is such a stupid subject—but for now it is where my brain is taking me. Recently I heard on the PBS news that recent research has confirmed that human beings have always awakened during the night. It is a survival strategy. If a dangerous predator is creeping up stealthily on us, we will wake up in time to defend ourselves. Of course these days the only predators are those obnoxious callers—“Grandpa, I am stranded in London. Could you send me \$1000?” I know it isn't my grandson Roland who has a Norwegian accent. But one of my most brilliant professor friends fell for one of these scams and sent money off to Europe. It was an exceedingly clever ruse. The conman used a name of one of the professor's friends—but how had he been able to do this? It is all part of hacking which appears to be able to pry into every aspect of our digital existence.

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When my wife and I were in Egypt we were amazed at how excellent ancient Egyptian furnishings were—superbly crafted from wood, ivory, colorful inlays, and gold—hardly looking over three thousand years old. One thing really bemused me—it was the Egyptian wooden headrest. Rather than a soft pillow, the pharaohs and royal wives rested their heads on curved wooden buttresses about four inches above the bed. They looked terribly uncomfortable. But then it might not be so bad since the head definitely requires support. They are still used in mortuaries. My neck is rather floppy and weak anyway from stretching forward to attempt to read music on the piano stand. Once when I was suffering from a terrible headache, a doctor had me lie flat without a pillow for a few nights to relieve a pinched nerve in my neck. Those were the most painful nights I can ever remember. The cure was much worse than the complaint.

I do like my new sheets which have a very silky feeling. I always put the heat down to 69° and often open the window by the bed a crack. My nose is so little that I almost always breathe through my mouth which quickly dries out my throat and sinuses. So up I go for a drink of water every few hours. I suppose that I might be snoring. Occasionally when I wake up I hear a stuffy snarl for a moment. As mentioned before, I try to remain flat, but eventually find myself sleeping on my side—invariably my left side (since I am left-handed, I suppose). Overall my night's activities are repeated ad nauseam.

Having the right pajamas takes quite a bit of effort. The Chinese just do not understand how to make clothes for my bulbous shape. The crotch is too shallow and the pantlegs are not wide enough for my ample hips. I took the pajamas to a local seamstress and the result was not to my liking. About all she did was shorten the legs too much. After a few washes, the pajamas were even less comfortable. But what is one to do? Nothing is perfect in this world. My body is shaped for sleep in animal skins and sheltered by a cave in Northern Europe. Like a bear, I take on extra weight in the winter to ward off the extreme cold. I am also allergic to all scents. I realized this as a young adult when I started to shave and developed a rash every time. I am irritated by the scents of hair

shampoos, shaving creams, and underarm deodorants. Over the years I have found products including laundry soaps which have no perfumes in them. I am allergic to all the oak trees in my yard, making it imperative to have the leaves picked up each fall. I am also allergic to flowers as was my father; and one year I ripped two beautiful rose bushes out of the ground when my wife was not looking. Once one understands all the peculiarities of ones self, life becomes tolerable. But quite obviously I am designed to live in a tundra-like area (Northern Scotland or Iceland)—devoid of flowers or trees. But I certainly am not planning to go there. I am reminded of a famous British composer who wanted complete isolation to write his very complex works and bought his own island off Scotland. He put his estate in the hands of his best friend who gambled it all away. The now poor composer, having already written enough for a lifetime, had no choice but to continue to turn out more and ended up completing 10 symphonies, 10 quartets, and 10 concertos (enough for three average composers like me). He invented a new technique called “dirty 12-tone.” I will not bother you with an explanation.

Once in bed, the sheets and blankets must not have any creases. I am like the princess with the pea. Almost any irregularity will drive me crazy. So I squirm in this direction or that until everything is evened out. Then I begin to get a blissful feeling and know that sleep is on the way. But as soon as I am perfectly coordinated for the night, I must get up to rush to the bathroom. Then when I flush, I forget that the knob is getting old and remains stuck. The bowl begins to overflow. I take care of it and then return under the covers and must start the whole process of encouraging sleep all over again. But this time my left arm falls asleep. I feel the prickles as the nerves give out and the fingers no longer open and close. I have heard that for elderly pianists, this can sometimes be permanent. So in a hysterical state, I run around the room in the dark opening and closing my fingers until I can feel them again.

Once more under the covers I find myself coughing uncontrollably. A neighbor is burning oak logs in his chimney and the air around my house is filled with smoke. I must again arise to close the window and put on the air purifier. My life’s attitude is beginning to suffer. And as the night progresses I become more and more paranoid. After all, my house was broken into once before at night. Perhaps the same drug addict may want to try again. I have heard that criminals like to return to the scene of the crime. Since my ears are those of a musician, any knock or opening of a door down the street will wake me up. Tabby is being let out and a few minutes later I hear a squawk as some sleeping bird or squirrel is pounced upon. Occasionally I will hear rock and roll coming from a parked car where young lovers are smooching. And then there are the police cars which now shine bright lights into my yard. I suppose they think the house is vacant since there is no car in the driveway. It happens about 3:00 AM almost every night. The police shine this very bright spotlight all over my house. It penetrates my bedroom and I am abruptly brought out of sleep. But I suppose I should be thankful that the local police are doing their job. I have almost gotten back to sleep when the ice cube maker in my refrigerator decides it is time to make more ice. It sounds like a pinball machine. But eventually all the annoyances have ended, and a good night’s sleep (a bit abbreviated) comes at last.

I have never really needed an alarm clock. Even through the closed blinds, the first hint of daybreak brings me awake. Also I hear the peeps of birds in the yard. My father was always awakened by a radio tuned to “Rambling with Gambling”—the show had a radio orchestra which played the old favorites and Gambling had a way of reporting the news as if it was all positive—“Another hurricane in Louisiana, but the levies held up wonderfully this time. I am sure the people who have lost their homes are being served wonderful Louisiana gumbo.” And I would listen to classical music on public radio with the elegant host Robert J. Lurtsema who would give a complete rundown of each movement of each piece—far superior to anything we might hear now. The new commentators refer to everything as a “song.” How stupid must Americans become in this century of scientific enlightenment? Presently I don’t want melody in the early morning. I have heard the same pieces over and over and my listening habits have become jaded. I would rather write music than listen to it.

Music is as much concerned with time as it is with sound. Beethoven was a great connoisseur of silence. His pauses can be the most dramatic moments in his symphonies—pregnant with possibilities. I learned something significant about time when I was put asleep during a colonoscopy which only proved that I was in fine physical shape. But being put under this way had a very strange effect. When I returned to consciousness, it was as if no time had gone by. The impression was that a half hour of my life had just been spliced out of existence. Now, what did this experience tell me?—that there is NO time. The experience of time is only a human convenience which allows us to order our activities. It makes sense—since Einstein postulated that time is only movement. But this realization has some strange ramifications—what about the hereafter?—will it only be a second before the day of judgement. I don’t want it to come so soon. That doesn’t give me enough time to think up good excuses for not going to church. And if time doesn’t exist, is life worth anything at all, other than just fulfilling a role I didn’t ask for but am glad to have experienced.

In the bedroom are two imposing bureaus—one for him, one for her. But they are not designed for American tastes. Half of each bureau is taken up by three big shelves. I pictured that it was created for the bulky wool sweaters, scarfs, and gloves of Norwegian skiers. I have never figured out a way to use them so that my clothes don’t slip off the shelves onto the floor. And since during the pandemic I am not going anywhere, my dress habits have become a bit haphazard. I have given up on color coordination. If it is clean, has no rips, and still fits, I put it on.

By each side of the gigantic bed are night stands. These are quite delightful—they have sliding tops which can be pulled out and serve as little tables when needed. But since I never read or eat in bed, I have never used them. There are awkward large lamps with bulbous twined wire jars below the shades. The switches are on long cords which in the morning I can never find. Then it is time with my feet to search for my slippers, another hopeless task. Somehow they must shimmy on their own a number of feet from where I put them. Eventually I stagger into the bathroom. As stated in last month’s issue, the bathroom is no wider than the hallway. I am always bumping into towel racks, knocking over the tissue basket, and bruising my thy on the toilet paper holder. But by this time I am thoroughly awake and ready to shave—except with my poor vision, I see double

and must choose one of two faces to shave. I invariably make the wrong choice. I get completely used to all these incumbrances which just become second nature. Thank goodness for habits. I return to the bedroom to get dressed. Because of my heart medications, my feet considerably swell up. With a great struggle I force the socks on and cram my feet into shoes. Now I am ready to face another day of retirement! On Sunday morning the *New York Times* is waiting for me on the driveway. But I don't read it while I eat. That is only done in old Hollywood movies with food served by wise-cracking maids while the bitter wife sits grimacing at the other end of a long table. This marriage will never last, as is proved in the film "Citizen Kane." And have you noticed that these make-believe socialites don't eat with normal kitchen utensils or plates. It is all silver, crystal, lace napkins, and cigars. And you seldom see these sophisticates actually putting food in their mouths. They are too busy insulting each other. I once read that the movies of the 1930s were designed as wish-fulfillment at a time when Americans were living with great insecurity. Family homes in the movies were entirely fantasy—thank goodness.

But of course, I must prepare my own breakfast (my favorite meal). I give quite a bit of attention to preparing the coffee. I pour beans into the grinder and then measure the amount of water for the coffee maker. It has to be just right. I am reminded of Beethoven who knew exactly how many beans were needed for that perfect cup of coffee which would stimulate his genius enough for his next symphony. In fact there is a wonderful painting of Beethoven perspiring profusely with eyes bulging. The painting is titled, "Beethoven Under the Influence of Coffee." Along with my coffee and orange juice, I especially like large shredded wheat biscuits (also my mother's favorite cereal seventy years ago) with some fresh blackberries. It is important not to wolf down breakfast. Take it slowly and try to figure out what one is going to do today. Presently I am attempting to finish this paragraph.

I must state that it is not the occasional adventure that is most satisfying in life. It is the everyday activities which have a wonderfully comforting sameness to them. It is true for animals too. Did you ever see a dog get tired of fetch? I bet Rover would continue the game until he dropped. Dogs and cats love to lounge around and remain asleep for hour after hour. Then suddenly the ears lift and the animal comes alert with a jump onto my lap. Thank goodness for habits—those activities which have been repeated so many times that the mind doesn't even know the body is doing them. But with old age there are problems. The brain circuitry is not what it used to be. I find myself pouring water into the coffee grinder. How could I be that stupid? Where did I put the coffee creamer? Why did I pour out two orange juices? Of course this is not the result of memory loss—no!—it is just a mind concerned with loftier things—like remembering where I put the mobile telephone last night.

When I was a young adult, the Beatles were the rage. And I was quite impressed with their music and could play by ear a number of their songs. The chair of the URI music department assigned me to rehearse and conduct a choir up in the Providence Extension. I chose choral arrangements of Beatles songs and gave a concert of them in the URI Memorial Union. My chair was horrified. He was an authority on baroque religious music and my choice of rock-songs was absolute sacrilege. I was never assigned to conduct a choir again. In about 1967 I decided it was

time to look like a Beetle. I stopped going to the barber and shaving. My chestnut hair was mildly wavy and once it reached my shoulders, it gave me a knight in shining armor or a Christ look. My mustache had cute little curls at the end (which you can still see). But my beard was quite a disappointment. It was very bushy. I remained hirsute for a number of years until it began going grey. I soon looked like a monk who had escaped from a hermitage. So it was time to shave it off. I only kept the mustache. I didn't like the idea of dyeing my hair which was already considerably grey when I reached 40. I was particularly depressed when a reviewer of a tone poem for orchestra said that the music was "by the greying composer" (surely implying that I was over the hill). And now I am bald and white (definitely one foot in the grave).

I have never been good at sleeping out—in hotels or friends' homes. In the middle of the night, in the dark, I forget which bedroom I am in and disturb a pair of lovers. In my assigned bedroom I go the wrong direction and find myself inside the clothes closet. If I get through the night unscathed, I consider it a miracle. Why did I leave my toothpaste on the counter? Someone else has used it and put it in their kit. How does one turn on the shower? I tried pulling it—that didn't work. I then turned it but it seemed stiff both directions and I don't want to break it. Better not to take a shower at all. Instead I will "sponge" bathe and make a pool of water on the floor. At last, dressed and somewhat cleaned up, I stagger down the flight of stairs, tripping on children's toys and reach the kitchen. But, I must go back up because I forgot to bring my medicines (the six pills which keep me alive or half dead). My host is a gourmet cook, so the coffee is sublime and there are delicious gooey rolls. He gets daily papers. I, at home, only order the Sunday New York *Times*. So I sit there munching, sipping, and reading. No one wants to talk in the morning any more. They are all deep in their own thoughts and computer games. The wife is doing the crossword puzzle. My spelling isn't good enough for that. Being somewhat blind, I never can recognize individual letters very well. All consonants look double to me. Then it is time to take a walk through the neighborhood and try not to get lost.

When the visit is over and I have returned to my familiar haunts, I settle in, feeling rather relieved that I made the train ride this time in one piece and didn't trip and fall on the platform as I did last time. "Home!"—why is it so comforting as I turn up the heat and flip on the lights. No one has broken in—and if they had there wouldn't have been anything worth stealing. Most of my belongings are much too old to be of interest to a young thief. Of course, during this last year of pandemic, there were no trips to celebrate holidays with friends and family. It makes me quite sad—because I know that there aren't going to be that many excursions left to me.

Talking about bed is not complete without mentioning "Oblomov", a Russian decadent aristocrat who is so incredibly lazy that he doesn't leave his bed for fifty pages of this satirical 19th-century novel by Ivan Goncharov. The book was introduced to me by my wife, but as is typical of Russian literature, it was so long that I never finished it. How lazy can a human being be? Ilya Oblomov can get away with never doing anything other than sleeping, because he is a member of a class of people who existed because of serfdom which in the 1850s was still the source of most labor in Russia—just as at that same time slavery was sanctioned in half of America. Never underestimate how devious politicians can be when it comes to exploiting people to benefit the

few. And presently we see lines of cars—hundreds of them—desperate people surviving on handouts in the richest country in the world. A friend who lives in Iowa, says that it isn't the result of strong held opinions. It is caused by brains which are asleep at the switch—like our friend Oblomov who loses out on all the important things in life.

And what of me, in my wooden cocoon? I will continue my life's journey with its small pleasures and occasional victories. Some of the above material is just repeating what I have written before. Please forgive me. I just can't help it—because in music I am used to repeating the same melody over and over. In Tchaikovsky the tunes are so good that eventually you yearn for their return. But then there is Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto. The opening melody is terribly familiar and enthralling. You wait for it to come back, but it never happens—perhaps reflecting the disappointment the composer felt about his personal life. Complete satisfaction in life and love was denied him. For me on the other hand, the agonies of artists are exquisitely entertaining. My life has had no agonies—only occasional inconveniences.

I hardly remember the last time that I was ill enough to be bedridden. I have not had a common cold in six years nor a tooth cavity. I do have some arthritic pains, especially if I go a few days during rainy or snowy weather without taking my daily walks. My only vice is eating too much. And even with that, I am not eating more than I did years ago. It is just that my metabolism doesn't need as much. So my goal is to lose twenty pounds. One year I was successful with this but then gained it all back the following year when I was happier with myself.

Have I missed anything about the aesthetics of beds? When I think of couches in paintings, all the famous nudes come to mind. They are usually draped tastefully in the bedsheets with only enough exposure to not enrage conservatives too much. There must be some famous paintings of bare men in bed, but I can't think of any other than Caravaggio's "Love Conquers All" with Cupid who is hardly a man, emerging from the covers surrounded by musical instruments and a score in disarray on the floor? There are many portrayals of defenseless gorgeous females being ravaged. Usually we only see the attackers' backs (quite conveniently tasteful). One of the funny aspects of nude paintings is that until recently, bare females were much too fat for my taste. Of course all the nude bodies in Rubens and Renoir paintings are awfully voluptuous (to find a nice way of putting it). It may be just an aspect of the oil medium, that thin doesn't offer enough width for gorgeous pink. But for modern lovers, we usually are busy in the dark. I wonder why that is the case—some relic of modesty, even during sex. Discomfort with being naked is a holdover from our Puritanical past. The Romans were perfectly content to bathe together naked in the Baths of Caracalla. But there was a drawback to this. By not preserving the mystery of disrobed beauty, the Romans had no concept of romantic love. Sex was a matter of conquest and satiation—nothing more. Romantic love only emerged in the Middle Ages when people wore much too much.

I can't think of a way to explore this subject any further—no revelatory thoughts. But if I were to revive the memory of the epitome of bedding, it would be in the Ingmar Bergman film "Cries and Whispers" about three sisters—one on her death bed. Never have the drapes of bedding been so beautifully filmed in color. The bedroom scene is meant to be akin to a great painting and the

director achieves his goal. I must say that I have seen all the Bergman masterpieces when they first came out (since my parents were such film buffs and always took me with them).

Nature bequeaths to us such wonders that no matter how jaded our tastes might become, it continues to fan inner flames—bringing us back to ourselves and to whom we are destined to be—our uniqueness and the infinite variety of existence which can even be found in something as mundane as a bed.

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I kept revising this essay so many times, that eventually the impeachment trial was over. President Trump got off scot-free as one would have expected. Avoiding any retribution for his actions seems to be his most successful attribute. But he was not fully exonerated even by the Machiavellian McConnell. So we must expect another run for the presidency. Thirst for power once satisfied can never be set aside.

Biden has comfortably transitioned into his new role as president—he certainly waited enough years for it. Legislation still moves through Congress at a molasses pace, as it always has. Some senators embarrass themselves almost every day, but their supporters don't care. I am not as interested in it as I used to be.

Now that I will be receiving the vaccine soon, I feel more confidence about returning eventually to live music. I must admit that I hate socially distanced performance. I have absolute pitch and I find that performers who are 6 ft. or more from each other can't stay in tune. For me an out-of-tune musician is like a toothache. I dislike remote performance, again for the same reason, that the musicians are not hearing each other. Coordination becomes ragged. But live performance may return by 2022. I must spruce up those compositions of mine which are waiting patiently for their first performances.

Existence Pending

Birth—Life—Death—
And what is in between?
Wake—Tire—Sleep—
Then wipe the slate clean.

Life has sped by quickly
And memory grows dim.
I might want to worship
But can't think of a hymn
That covers what I'm thinking
Other than this whim.

But again, just when I hope
To make some sense of now,

Oblivion soon approaches
And I forget my vow.

Sleep reveals the fallacy
That life has any meaning.
It is just a Fellini film
With marching oddities
And a comic Rota score;

Handsome actors preening
As plots get tangled up
With divas intervening
As they search the empty villa—
Taking us with them to where
There is no meaning.

I went to see the screening
And came back home depressed.
The direction was a hodge-podge
And the plot was easily guessed.

Entertainment is now over
And critics are no more.
Why evaluate such nothing
Which must certainly bore—
Better to just ignore?

But if nothing is of consequence,
What purpose is my life
Which takes so much effort
During happiness and strife?

And now the curtain lowers.
I clap to no avail.
Why respond to happenstance
Which locks me in this jail?

I didn't ask for life
But wish it had been longer.
With no sense of mission,
How could my will be stronger?

;
 Who is the hero of this tale?
 No epic opens without a quest.
 Instead my valor is to care
 At all before eternal rest.

Yes, heroism still exists!
 It is to grasp at what goes by,
 To invent a reason to strive on,
 And then be fit to die.

Back to sleep—to dream—to naught—
 Curled up in this linen nest.
 Action will come—a cosmic test, a galactic jest.
 Nothing was like what I had guessed.

I failed it daily, but faced no court.
 Retribution could not be brought
 When trial had no judge to rule.
 Instead at the bench was just a fool.

Reality remains a puzzle.
 Only fiction makes much sense.
 I try to reason all this out
 With mind which is too dense.

Dare I write another line,
 A life-line so to speak,
 To pull me out of this despair
 And makes me less oblique?

But gaiety is shallow thought
 Which gravity ignores.
 So off to bed I soon must go
 And serenade with snores.

The “Divine Comedy” of life
 Requires guide to cross.
 Alone I now have lost my way
 And fall from gloss to dross.

But abject failure requires a goal,
Unrealized though it may be.
The reach is worth the hopeless grasp.
At least I have this plea

That hope need not result in deed
And I will reach the finish line
With speed. Victory or loss—
Who cares about result?
Even with abject failure I exult.

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Surrection Time (March 2020)

Walking Kingston Hill (April 2020)

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My Constitutional (June 2020)

Summer Fixation (July 2020)

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