

DEAN FLOWER

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## Nothing Will Ever Be the Same<sup>1</sup>

Life-changing events may occur to us at any age, and for any number of reasons—the death of a loved one, a financial disaster, a fortunate marriage, a nasty divorce, a new job, moving to a new home or country, suffering an accident or a disease, falling in or out of love, being caught up by war or politics or a natural disaster—the list is endless and unpredictable. But there is one change we all experience, which occurs when we discover that somehow our childhood is over and it is time to become an adult. Coming of age, we often call it, or simply growing up. It has obvious physical manifestations that we associate with puberty, adolescence, sex, and hormones. Other life-changing events may be avoided, but nobody escapes this one. Emotionally and physically it is probably the greatest metamorphosis we will ever know. But the interesting part is not really physical, as we know when somebody snaps “Grow up!” to an adult who thinks he already has. Coming of age does not necessarily occur between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, although it often does, nor does it ensue automatically from getting a driver’s license, losing your virginity, registering to vote, buying alcohol, or leaving home. Coming of age requires a different sort of discovery and knowledge. It takes place as a kind of revolution in the self, when we learn that who we were—the child, the innocent, the dependent identity—must be abandoned and that who we are or will be—our singular, independent adult self—becomes clear. The experience is usually marked by some intuition of uniqueness or moment of prescience. Things will never be the same, we say. And we know it’s true.

The short story seems particularly well suited to convey experiences like these. While novelists prolong and complicate the coming-of-age experience—think of Charlotte Brontë’s Jane

<sup>1</sup> This essay serves as the introduction to *Writes of Passage: Coming-of-Age Stories and Memoirs from The Hudson Review* to be published this spring by Ivan R. Dee, Publisher.

Eyre or Charles Dickens' Pip, Zora Neale Hurston's Janie or Faulkner's Caddy Compson, Toni Morrison's Milkman or J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield—the short-story writer selects a moment, a critical turning point, and only claims its lifelong importance. But that moment can be more piercingly final than anything that happens in a novel. Novelists devote hundreds of pages to the long ordeal of innocent kids and confused adolescents seeking their adult identities. The short story winnows it down to its essence, seeking an absolute pivotal truth, and leaves the rest to the imagination. By its very brevity and selectivity, the story says that whatever happened later, indeed all subsequent experience, is irrelevant. Emotion, if not fact, demands that no other experience can rival it.

Kermit Moyer's narrator in "Learning to Smoke" tells it this way: "I'm completely stunned, a confusion of feelings buffeting around inside me. But this much I know for sure: something momentous has happened. From this moment on, nothing will ever be the same." It's a nice summation of how the genre works. Note how skillfully Moyer links "moment" and "momentous." And consider too how much rhetoric is involved—rhetoric meaning the art of persuasion, not deceptive verbosity. Moyer uses the present tense throughout his story, as if it were all happening *now*, but the moment is poignant because we know it's being remembered. He tells us at the start that "It's the summer of 1956, a little over two weeks since my thirteenth birthday," and a seventeen-year-old girl, his cousin, is teaching him how to French inhale. So the present tense dramatizes his feeling of its timelessness: the story is really happening in the present-tense activity of the author's memory—just as vividly, perhaps even more so, than it did in the original event. A great many coming-of-age stories work this way. They either announce from the outset that the experience is a memory, or they delay that admission until the end, or they imply it by more subtle, indirect means. Liza Kleinman in "What Went Wrong" uses the direct approach: "Childhood, as I remember it, is a tangle of shifting allegiances. It is a series of passionate friendships, each as heavy as the last with the promise of immortality." Paula Whyman in "Driver's Education" delays it until the final paragraph, in effect reframing the experience as a memory. Julie Keith's "Pneumonia" keeps us in her child-narrator's point of view, using a simple past tense; but when

the little girl, Susannah, turns on a light by reaching up to punch a button on the wall, or tells us that “no cars were being made anymore because of the war,” we know these events were taking place in the 1940s, sixty years before the story was written and published. Think how that increases the impact of Susannah’s closing statement:

Glancing from parent to parent, protected by my lie, I knew too that I must hold the truth of all this and much more inside me forever, the way I would keep my piece of robin’s eggshell hidden forever. The possession made a dark, unholy place somewhere deep inside me, a place where I could keep all that I saw and divined and understood.

Not only did the child Susannah have to lie about her hateful parents, but she had to keep the truth hidden for some sixty years in that “dark unholy place” within her, and only now can she reveal it. It’s a fascinating shock to discover the real narrator is not a naïve child but a troubled and haunted seventy-year-old woman.

At least twelve of the short stories in this anthology purport to be memoirs. The author writes in the first person, trusts us with the most intimate secrets, and recalls the past in such convincing detail it seems to be documentary history. Fred Licht’s “Shelter the Pilgrim,” about his Jewish family’s dangerous move to Berlin in 1937, sounds utterly autobiographical. You would swear that Robert Love Taylor must have taken those accordion lessons described in “Lady of Spain” and that Peter Makuck as a teenager surely had a souped-up car exactly like the one in “My ’49 Ford.” And who can read about James Wallenstein’s basketball dreams at summer camp (“Summer’s Lease”) or Randolph Thomas’ spending a summer with his youthful aunt (“May Prescott”) and not believe that the author has only thinly disguised his own experience? The truth of the matter, however, is a little more complicated. Fiction that sounds like autobiography may well be that, or a form of that. Many writers draw directly, even shamelessly, on their own lives for their material—think of Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, Evelyn Waugh, Philip Roth. But that doesn’t mean they are telling the literal truth. They are all expert liars. If Peter Makuck persuades you to believe that his ’49 Ford actually existed, and was his own—not just something invented for a

story—then his craft and art have succeeded. That is exactly what he meant to do. Perhaps the artistic accomplishment is greater if the story has no factual basis at all in the author’s life. Some writers thrive on that and tell us nothing about themselves. What matters is that the story be believable, that it seem authentic, that it offer a convincing illusion of truth.

And where exactly does this aura of truth come from in fiction? Is it all merely clever tricks and lying? William Trevor suggests a useful, and very eloquent, answer in his memoir “In Co. Cork”:

The pleasure and the pain experienced by any storyteller’s characters, the euphoria of happiness, the ache of grief, must of course be the storyteller’s own. It cannot be otherwise and in that sense all fiction has its autobiographical roots, spreading through—in my case—a provincial world, limited and claustrophobic.

If Trevor is right and all fiction must “of course”—he means “of necessity”—be autobiographical, then it’s an easy step to the recognition that memoirs are a form of fiction too. We may grant memoirs a certain validity by reason of the label itself, which says in effect, “This story is not fiction, it actually happened to me.” But good memoirs rely on all the same crafty strategies that fiction does. They use convincing narrative voices, complex points of view, artful selection of details (too much is deadly, too little is unpersuasive), a sense of drama and discovery, expressive figurative as well as literal language, sharp conflicts, and satisfying resolutions—or at least clarifications—by the end. The memoir writer wants above all to make her experience into a convincing story—leaving many things out, if need be, to gain her effects. Consider how artfully Jocelyn Bartkevicius designs her memoir, “Hat Check Noir,” beginning at the end when her family’s nightclub, The Emerald Room, was demolished in 1996, then going back to 1962 and telling how she came of age there, bringing us full circle at the end to that destruction again. Factual as the story may be, what makes it succeed is how artfully Bartkevicius conveys the tawdry, magical place and the way she once felt about it. Or consider Nicole Graev’s memoir “Tight Jeans,” which is a kind of essay on the power of the male gaze to define and control women. But Graev makes it into a richly personal story with a clear narrative sequence, focusing on a

single central image—those “low-riding, ass-hugging, dark blue jeans”—which defined her new self at the tender age of six, and which remains a symbolic space she still feels squeezed and wedged into. “Tight Jeans” may be an essay-like memoir, but it has all the juice of fiction.

Whether identified as story or memoir, coming-of-age narratives may sometimes strike us as classic—instantly recognizable, easily categorized, mythic perhaps, or even generic, as if the experience were a *rite de passage* that everyone goes through in one form or another. But the stories in this anthology do not support that idea. Jan Ellison’s “The Color of Wheat in Winter,” for instance, might be seen as a typical story of a teenage girl, confused about who she wants to be—a daughter responsive to her mother’s needy emotions, a cool teenager who smokes pot and lets her date use her sexually, a child again to her seldom-seen father, a sexy *chica* to her Mexican co-worker (married, with children). But none of the conventional rituals—dating, learning to drive, venturing into sex, donning her first party dress—helps her at all. If anything, rites of passage *hinder* her coming of age, and she has to defy them completely in order to glimpse her new self emerging, as it does at the end, in risky new territory. There is nothing retrospective about this story either; you can only hope the new Frances will survive. Another story that may seem a classic for males’ coming of age is Robert Schultz’s “Hardball.” For what is baseball, as Schultz learns it from his father, if not the perfect *rite de passage*, which exacts discipline, responsibility, and acceptance of “time-honored conventions”? What’s more, the deeper lesson seems to be that a mature man must learn to play hardball in life: rules are rules, and if someone gets hurt, that’s too bad. But again the real coming of age depends on *rejecting* the ritual’s lesson. When at the critical moment Schultz refuses what his father taught him, he finds “a small coal of pride began to glow” because he “had hit upon a value of my own, subversive and true.” He doesn’t name the value, but it is clearly compassion, and it trumps anything baseball has to offer.

Perhaps the title of this collection is a misnomer. More often than not, coming-of-age stories hinge on the rejection of rites of passage rather than on their observance. In fact, Schultz speaks for many others here in celebrating the subversive value of what

he discovers. In some stories the subversive verges on the aberrant. Catherine Harnett's "Her Gorgeous Grief" describes the truly strange obsession of a girl's mother with the deaths and disasters of strangers. She drives for hours to attend murder trials and funerals, pretending to be a friend or acquaintance of the victims, dressing carefully for each occasion, studying the newspapers for information she can use in the deceit. Yet these shameless invasions of privacy and vicarious grievings—followed by embarrassed and hasty retreats—have their transforming effect at last, when the daughter steps into her mother's fantasy and discovers whose grief it really is that she must share. Again, violation of ritual releases the deeper understanding. James Wallenstein's narrator in "Summer's Lease" discovers how meaningless the rituals of basketball and summer camp are when his father dies, but he comes of age only when he takes action and violates their boundaries—taking his own risky path, climbing that wobbly tower, and bearing the cold alone.

Crossing boundaries might be another, equally useful way to define this generic trait. Finding oneself in foreign territory—figuratively and literally—is clearly a function at least if not a cause of many comings of age. Elise Juska's narrator in "North-east Philly Girls" hungers to cross over into that foreign social territory of Philadelphia where the girls are all brazen, painted, and redolent of cigarettes, hairspray, and bubble gum. Peter Makuck's narrator in "My '49 Ford" only begins to realize what fateful boundary he has crossed when, at his new college near the Quebec border, everyone speaks French. Jacqueline W. Brown in "Willie" leaves the boundaries of Harlem when her aunt dies but finds herself, on the long train journey south, gathered into a larger racial community—her true country. It's her mother who has become the complete stranger. And the most dramatic boundary crossings of all occur in Barbara Wasserman's "Spain, 1948," where an impulsive trip of two rather giddy American girls from Paris down into Spain and back—for noble causes, risking arrest in the aid of complete strangers—leads to the emergence of two women at the end, who soberly recognize the moral ambiguities of their hasty good intentions. That they do not speak the language speaks volumes about them—and about too many not-so-innocent Americans abroad.

The classic boundary crossing, in Western Christian literary

tradition at least, must be Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It's no accident that Charles Dickens' most unforgettable coming-of-age story, *Great Expectations*, marks its pivotal moment with an echo of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. When Pip leaves home, ready to launch his ambitions, he sees that "the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me." For Milton's Adam and Eve, of course, the moment is sorrowful and choiceless. "The world was all before them," but they leave Paradise reluctantly, "with wand'ring steps and slow." Modern coming-of-age stories often retell this fable, that when the mists of childhood illusion dissipate, the adult world turns out to be painful and difficult, a shabby and depressing antithesis of Eden, befouled by human greed and corruption, sex and death. Regretting the natural loss of innocence, we look back to childhood and adolescence *as if* they were paradise. So William Trevor's memoir "In Co. Cork" comments on the way his youthful imagination once colored everything in the rural Ireland where he grew up. Seeing a married doctor and a lady in disgrace, who are having a tawdry affair, he thinks, "They are breathtaking in their sinning, and all their conversation is beautiful; they are the world's most exciting people." Steven Millhauser's symbolic fable, "In the Penny Arcade," follows a similar paradigm. Expecting magic and revelation, "something mysterious and elusive," he is disappointed on closer approach again and again, finding nothing but falsity, dusty and decrepit mechanisms. He is too old now for innocent belief. Wisdom, he decides, must be to resist the "conspiracy of dullness" that adults impose on the world by failing to believe in magic and imagination. So for Millhauser the "only penny arcade, the true penny arcade" is a kind of Paradise Regained by conscious acts of will.

Jocelyn Bartkevicius makes something similar of the once-magical Emerald Room in "Hat Check Noir," and so does Carl Wooton, telling of those wondrous bicycle spinning days in "Ramblers and Spinners." In Wooton's case, paradise lost consists not just in the family's financial disaster and the loss of those expensive bicycles but in the moment when he realizes Bradshaw Morgan's superiority: "He had challenged us with something much more than just the number of spins we thought were possible. He had shown us a grace and ease that we did not know how to measure and, thus, did not know how to achieve."

Similarly affecting is the recognition in Mairi MacInnes' memoir "Porrock." Not that much of her youth was paradisaical, with its disillusioning move to a strange city near London, her cruelly repressive mother, and discouraging voices on every side. But her wonderful dog Porrock—who learned to sneak aboard trams and go into town (and back!) by himself, and who drops in for meals at the houses of strangers—was a paragon of sociability, freedom, and unself-conscious joy. When MacInnes goes away to school, escaping home at last, Porrock changes too, and so paradise is lost—as it must be, of necessity—for both of them.

In one form or another, Adam and Eve and the sexual serpent are in all these lost paradise stories, none more transparently than in Tennessee Williams' "In Spain There Was Revolution." Its Edenic fable could not be clearer:

"I learned about women from you."

"I'm just the first lesson, am I?"

"First and last."

"Get out, you liar!"

Equally portentous is the idyllic setting in the Ozarks, at the end of summer: what looks like "flawless beauty" is really desiccation and impending death. Williams describes a landscape that seems unwilling to admit "without any bright evasion the solemn fact of things dying." Bright evasion is exactly what the two lovers engage in, she saddened and he annoyed that their sexual pleasures must soon come to an end. Both vigorously deny—in their oblivious innocence—that the revolution in Spain has anything to do with them. Of course neither of them comes of age: that was Williams' point, when he wrote this fable in 1936, that America itself needed to come of age.

Putting aside these centuries-old and potentially coercive formulas, one might still ask about gender in the modern coming-of-age story. Is there any distinctively *female* version of it? Or any prevalingly *male* form? My impression from the array of stories collected here is that women's coming-of-age narratives frequently involve the question of how they, often quite literally, see themselves—a question that is unanswerable until they see how others see them. That almost never happens in the stories

about males. Clothing and physical appearance matter more to women perhaps, but the deeper issue for them lies in discovering how to see and understanding the *self*. And that discovery, for many women, seems to require negotiation with the eyes of others. Nicole Graev's "Tight Jeans" explores this dynamic at length, but for me the best and most archetypal instance of it comes in Jocelyn Bartkevicius' "Hat Check Noir" when she meets one of the nightclub's exotic dancers in the ladies' room:

She wore a sheer blouse over her costume, her stomach puffed a bit like my cousins'. We were the same height, but I was girl skinny and I kept my head down. She told me she was not always like that, that she was watery before her time of the month, that mine was the kind of body to be proud of, that mine was the kind of body she could have. She looked at me with desire and regret as I had looked only at possessions (like the rabbit stole of a friend's Barbie). And she looked at me, at my waist and thighs, until I left, walked back out into the darkened dining room, into the music, the smoke, the night.

Comparable moments of exchanged gazes occur in Dena Seidel's "Good Times," Paula Whyman's "Driver's Education," Liza Kleinman's "What Went Wrong," Jan Ellison's "The Color of Wheat in Winter," and Jacqueline Brown's "Willie," although in some cases it will take careful searching to find them. But none of the other renditions has quite the spellbinding power—or poignancy—that Bartkevicius achieves.

The maleness of men's coming-of-age stories in recent years is even riskier to attempt pinning down. There are strong temptations to mention sports (baseball, basketball, golf, and showoff bicycling all figure here), sexual initiation with an older woman (which males tend to rhapsodize about, nostalgically and dishonestly), father-son rituals (which often leave out women entirely). My impression is that vocation—literally, males finding themselves in and through work—may be a defining, if not unique, component. John Van Kirk's "Newark Job," an apparent homage to Hemingway, is not so much an initiation into the father's work (he's a slumlord's plumber) as it is the boy's discovery of his father's compassion—that his father's love is more than familial and cuts through differences of race and class. That's a very different lesson from the one taught by the doctor father in Hemingway's "Indian Camp." Leaving home and working the carnival circuit is John McCormick's initiation into adulthood in

his memoir “In the Mean Time.” Down those mean streets he must go, but his real coming of age occurs when trying to hop a fast-moving freight car. He stumbles and falls, and survives only because the man behind him helps. “You saved me,” the boy says, feeling “foolish and ashamed.” That admission, that he cannot save himself, may be crushing to his tender male ego, but it’s pivotal to his growing up. He now can find his real self, “trembling, sweating, and relieved beyond the telling to be alive and moving, my friends with me.” Many of these male stories hinge on similar discoveries: that a man’s vocation—i.e., his deeper calling—is learning to surrender egotism, self-love, fantasies of heroism, the theory of being tough, playing hardball, and going it alone. For the adolescent American male, at least, these lessons seem critical to achieving real manhood—and the hardest to learn.

Despite all the ready-made formulas we may have, coming of age can still occur in surprisingly different ways and at unexpected moments in life. Elizabeth Spencer’s “Sightings” concerns a fairly ordinary coming of age, that of a teenage girl whose divorced parents burden her, each in a different way. What’s fresh about it is that we experience it entirely from her father’s sympathetic but dimly-comprehending point of view. Who says that a coming-of-age story must be told by the one experiencing it? Hayden Carruth’s coming-of-age story “Intelligence, Anyone?” is another oddity. It occurs when he takes an IQ test at the age of eight and is discovered to be “well up in the classification of genius.” That proves to be the watershed moment of his life, a “disaster” that shapes all the rest. Even in his sixties, after going “through all kinds of hell,” including alcoholism, electroshock therapy, and endless narcotic medication, he takes an IQ test again and finds his brain is still undamaged, and *still* shaping his life as it always has. It’s a comic but rueful discovery. Wendell Berry’s “The Hurt Man” goes even further: the coming of age occurs to a five-year-old boy. Yet it is all entirely credible and moving. The innocent boy, Mat Feltner, watches a mystery unfold before him when a stranger, severely injured and bleeding to death, comes to the Feltner porch. Amazingly unperturbed, his mother responds “as though she knew him without ever having known him before.” As she steps into the emergency, Mat has this revelation:

What he saw in her face would remain with him forever. It was pity, but it was more than that. It was a hurt love that seemed to include entirely the hurt man and disregarded everything else. . . . To him, then, it was as though she leaned in the black of her mourning over the whole hurt world itself, touching its wounds with her tenderness, in her sorrow.

No child could write this, of course, but the words represent what he understood that day when he was five. The moment is piercingly final and timeless. “He learned it all his life,” Berry tells us, and “from that day, whatever happened, there was a knowledge in Mat that was unsurprised and at last comforted until he was old, until he was gone.”

There is something ceremonious about that conclusion, and it occurs in other coming-of-age stories as well. No matter when or how the events actually occurred (memoir) or supposedly occurred (story), the real experience of it comes only when the words are written. The pivotal moment of Mat Feltner’s life is shaped afterwards, discovered in retrospect, its meaning designed and composed long after its origin. The same is true of Hayden Carruth’s memoir, written when he was in his sixties, looking back and seeing the whole shape of his life. Tight jeans? A ’49 Ford? A dog named Porrock? All the stories in this anthology are constructed in belated understanding, in the aftermaths of jolting, painful, magical experiences. That doesn’t make them false, but it is a reminder of our need for order and control in an often tumultuous world. The very act of writing itself is essential to the ceremony these stories perform. They are indeed not just rites but “writes” of passage, and the title is not a misnomer after all.