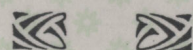


# ONCE UPON A TIME

*A Floating Opera*



JOHN BARTH



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

BOSTON

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江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章



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First Edition

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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# PROGRAM NOTE



*Once Upon a Time* — a memoir bottled in a novel and here floated off to whom it may concern — is not the story of my life, but it is most certainly *a* story thereof. Its theme is Vocation. The better to sing it, I have passed over or scarcely sounded other themes, and have reorchestrated freely to my purpose. Of my children, for example, as of real friends and colleagues past and current, there is scarcely a mention. My twin sister makes a fictionalized cameo appearance. My ship- and lifemate, this opera's dedicatee, takes a larger role, likewise fictionalized, in its opening and closing scenes. My thanks to both for their permission to be thus imagined. I have been careful of all hands' privacy except my own, and even that has scarcely been trespassed upon. Every life has a Scheherazadesworth of stories.

—Langford Creek and Baltimore,  
12 October 1990–12 October 1992

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# OVERTURE

*"Gone"*



"GONE."

What?

*"Century."*

Ah.

It was no dream, then. Our creekside windows have been open through an Indian-summer night, and in our predawn sleep we've registered a sound as of muffled horn: three fading calls that melded, in mid-October earliest light, with cries of geese and swan moving down from Canada. They melded too, on my side of our bed at least, with confused warm dreams of things past . . . and now reforgotten.

You've slipped from me — bare bedmate, my Reality Principle — to stand handsome with the house binoculars in the pewter light of a water-facing bedside window. My head not right, quite, I make my way around the king-size square to embrace you from behind, peer over your shoulder.

"I'm not done sleeping yet," you let me know: part info item, part request, part warning. You unhand my left hand, press into it the seven-by-fifties, and duck deftly back undersheet. "Look. Not a sign."

From the Bahamas or thereabouts, a mild damp air moves through the American South to Maryland and Chesapeake Bay, up the wide and placid Chester River and our fork of Langford Creek, across our lawn, and sweetly over my skin. A touch groggy still, I

refocus from your correction to mine, admiring first my summoner (until you draw the bedsheet up and over your head) and then, through the magnifying, light-collecting lenses, the gray but cloudless dawn of what bids to be a fine Delmarva\* day.

*Aria: "Our pool is winter-covered"*

Our pool is winter-covered, its furniture stashed, its concrete deck brown-soaked with a heavy dew that silvers our driftwood trophies and all the grass as well. Along its perimeter, our birches are shedding early over everything. My mate's planters in that neighborhood are firing last rounds of petunia, geranium, impatiens, portulaca. One variety of day lily, even, still flowers down by the creek bulkheading. In the garden proper, where chrysanthemums are in full fettle, our black-eyed Susans are all but done; our tea roses are leggy now, but still producing; marigolds and begonias go strong yet around the emptied, scoured, inverted birdbath, and will till our first hard frost — maybe next week, maybe not before December in these mild latitudes. Dull by New England autumn standards, our maples, crab apples, and cherries are doing their mid-Atlantic post-equinoctial best; the hollies, yews, ivy, and pyrocantha, trimmed once already in September, will need another pruning before they pack it in. Our chestnuts are all harvested. Over by our treasured patch of tidemarsch, where mallows still blossom daily, our tomato vines are cleared out; firewood's stacked on the slab nearby; the "martin house," summer-tenanted by red-winged blackbirds, is stowed against winter gales. My fiftieth-birthday flagpole, blown slightly out of plumb southeastward by a dozen years' northwest storms, awaits its daily banner from our supply.

At the dock, low tide. "Our" mallards — a communal family of year-round residents whose newest generation, born last spring in our marsh, we cannot now distinguish from their parents — quackdabble around the pilings and ladders and the breakwater paralleling the pier. Except for them, our little flotilla is mostly

\*The Delmarva Peninsula, between Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, is so named for its comprising the entire state of Delaware plus portions of Maryland and Virginia. [Author's note, first of a series]

hailed and stored: The old canoe and Sunfish I've block-and-tackled up into the rafters of the garage; under them, our even older outboard runabout sits trailered, covered, winterized, and up on jack stands. Even our sailboat tender, normally secured bottom-up on the dock at the bowsprit of the boat it tends, is garaged this time of year; likewise crab traps and other dockside summer paraphernalia, against Harvest Moon flood tides and the odd late hurricane that might yet brush by while we're at work over in Baltimore or off lecture-traveling. Only our flagship remains in commission till Halloween, hard frost, and Standard Time: a beamy, sturdy, shoal-draft cutter, *US* — aground in its slip just now, as usual at low water, but cradled snugly in the trough that its keel has molded in the mud over eight summersworth of tides. As I do every morning that we and it are both in residence (though seldom so early), I give it a remote once-over from the window: shipshape, ready for a wrap-up weekend cruise or two, a few end-of-season daysails at least, before we deliver it to the boatyard for decommissioning and winter storage.

Beyond *US*, the float of our deeper-water mooring I've replaced with a painted "winter spar," invulnerable to ice; its angle tells me that the tide has turned. Wild geese are rafted by the hundreds out there; vociferous with flyway tidings, new arrivals glide in like miniature Concordes to join them, droop-snooted on final windward approach, flaps down and landing gear extended. And beyond the geese, across our fork of Langford, off "Potamock Point," on "Potamock Island" . . .

*On with the overture:*

Sure enough: a boatless dock at the Scribner/Duer cottage, hidden in the rusty oaks over there, where through yesterday's Happy Hour I toasted uncertain bon voyage to Jay Scribner aboard his aging ketch, *American Century*. Those calls, then, will have been my old and problematical friend's sounding usward, over his transom, the conch of Departure After All: three lonesome, resonating farewells as he (and, presumably, his lawyer wife, Beth Duer, not at home when I visited) backed out of their slip and away from their dock, away from their secluded island seat — away from

their country, even, and their lives thus far — in pursuit of (knowing “Jay Wordsworth Scribner”) I know not quite what. They have, I observe, retrieved old *Century*’s docklines from pier and mooring piles, as we shall do some weeks hence when we lay *US* up till spring. But if the fellow means really to go forward with his retrograde, off-again, on-again adventure — retracing Columbus’s first voyage in reverse, from New World back to Old, and his own voyage “back to the womb and beyond” — we won’t be seeing those lines put out again with ours next spring.

In your direction I report that there *is* a sign, after all. On their dock. But I can’t read it until there’s light enough to wake me up.

“Come back here before that happens.”

Done, and gratefully: *I wake to sleep*, the poet Theodore Roethke sings. But yours truly is a-fidget now, by those conch-calls put in mind of a golden trumpet in the late 1940s, the Fifties and the Sixties, even the early Seventies, with “Jay Scribner” on its business end. And before that trumpet, a dented bugle wherewith, in World War Twotime, Star Scout “Jerome Schreiber” of East Cambridge, Maryland, sounded across our dew-drenched scout-camp parade grounds, at the head of the Chesapeake, sunset retreats and lights-out taps that started tears in my thirteen-year-old eyes. Jerome/Jerry/Jay; Schreiber/Scribner: homegrown last-trump Gabriel! Puissant Joshua at the walls of adolescence! Self-shattering Roland!

And before even that bugle . . .

But let’s take our waking slow.

Now we’re up, having redozed fitfully after all and made languid Saturday-A.M. love in the full fine light of Columbus Day 1992. Breakfast done, we have withdrawn to separate studies for an hour’s work before addressing whatever next weekend chore or pleasure. But I’m not myself this morning: head not quite right, whatever — a touch too much bon voyaging, perhaps. From the windows of my creekside study, where I draw out sentences like these, I re-scan Potamock with the big binocs. A half-dozen “sun-birds,” en route down the Intracoastal Waterway from New England and points north toward Florida and points south, are getting

under way now from their overnight anchorage behind the island: sloops, cutters, ketches, most of them crewed by middle-aged couples like ourselves, secure anchors and raise sail as they file out of Langford Creek into Chester River for their day’s southing down the Bay. At Norfolk, where the bridge-tunnel between the Virginia Capes marks the ocean’s threshold, they’ll turn off into sheltered canals that lead Carolinaward; once safely below the Outer Banks, from Beaufort or Morehead City the more adventurous will sail “outside” down the coast, standing watches until they reach Florida waters, while the others motor leisurely “inside” to Miami, the Keys, the Gulf Coast, without ever venturing into open water. A monarch butterfly, sunwarmed now, leaves our garden and flutters across my field of view to follow them. Beth and Jay, like the ruby-throated hummingbirds whose empty feeder we’ve not yet fetched in, have gone before. They, too, if they’re really doing it, will in all likelihood take the Dismal Swamp Canal route from Norfolk to Morehead, but will then turn salty old *Century* directly for the Bahamas and — Jay likely thenceforth solo — across to the Azores, Spain, Italy, Greece, Israel, Egypt . . . up the Nile, past the Giza Pyramids, to the limits of navigation.

“Overland, then, somehow,” lately vowed my counterself. “Shuck the damn boat, everything. Naked in the Olduvai Gorge, you know? The effing primal rift. Shuck Jay Scribner; shuck Jerry Schreiber. This carcass, too, serviceable old thing: shuck it like old *Century* and dear Beth. *Resorb*, man. You follow me?”

I focus again on their dock, that signboard.

*For Sale*, I let you know by intercom. Wasn’t there last evening. Can’t quite make out the realtor’s name, but the logo seems bad news: the golden globe of Eldorado Developers.

“So they’re actually going the whole way.”

*Have gone*, it would appear.

“Now it’s just us, really.”

Well.

“Solipsism à deux?”

Better à deux than solo, we agree, and click off. I set aside the binoculars and return to the passage suspended under my pen. But the edge is gone, flow distracted, momentum stalled. Against my



own shop rules, I swivel bemused from worktable back to window. They're somewhere out there: my doughty, prickly, more or less apocalyptic, ex-academic more-or-less friend and his more or less steadfast, lately affluent legal-eagle spouse. On *Century's* weathered decks, the dew's still drying as they beat down-bay through this splendid morning against gentle tide, mild southerly, and normal middle-age restraints.

I'm not alone in half envying them; against *your* shop rules, you call back presently to report that instead of attending your deskwork you've checked with the realtor who sold us this house thirteen years ago and whose notice no local land transaction escapes. Eldorado it is indeed on that sign over there, and Doris herself wouldn't take the property as a gift: so *isolated* (Well, yes, you've pointed out to her: from Latin *insula*, meaning Doris-knows-what), inconveniently reachable only by boat from Potomack Point — which, however, goes with the package — and old Pot o' Muck Island itself dissolving apace for want of some serious erosion-stopper, say a hundred thousand bucksworth of heavy stone riprap right around. But she would kill for the listing, Doris allows: romantic island hideaway on scenic Langford Creek near historic Chestertown on tidewater Maryland's unspoiled Eastern Shore, complete with rustic mansionette, pool/spa/tennis court, deepwater dock — worth a million plus, easy, as is, to some Reagan-era richo from D.C. or Main Line Philly.

Rustic mansionette?

"Quoth Doris," you reply: "We have *our* tech-talk; she has hers." Eldorado Developers of Silver Spring MD, however (Doris needn't have pointed out to you, but did) — one of Beth Duer's clients from across the Bay — is a high-powered outfit not known to go in for single-family rustic mansionettes.

"Condos," you worry.

Would Beth and Jay do that to us? Never mind *us*: They'd never do it to Langford Creek. Would they?

"You know your old buddy better than I. Anyhow, Doris thinks we might want to consider selling before that happens."

Well, that's Doris. Her professional foreboding, however — neither unreasonable on the one hand nor disinterested on the

other — takes the shine off our morning and the weekend before us, which we thought to spend either sailing ourselves if the forecast is right or bicycling some autumn back roads if it isn't. Even without the Eldorado factor, that sale-signed empty slip across the way is unignorable: half mild challenge, half mild reproach. For "Beth Duer" and "Jay Scribner" — whether or not Beth jumps ship in Freeport as forethreatened and flies home to their Bethesda house to await reunion in Lisbon or Palos ("if he gets that far") while Jay singlehands *Century* back to Square One — a momentous next chapter of their life-story has begun.

*Duet of sorts: "Becalmed, plateaued, suspended"*

Ours, by contrast, might be said to be becalmed, plateaued, suspended like my morning's passage or like sturdy *US* out there at ebb tide: a satisfyingly solid, reasonably elevated plateau by any but the most gilded standard, but a plateau all the same. Aware enough, after a score-and-more years together, of our separate and joint shortcomings, we nonetheless prize each other wholeheartedly, as many couples do not. Unlike most of the world's population, we are comfortably well off. Our health, by and large, is as of this sentence sound. We enjoy our callings and practice them with success. If we happen in recent years to have no particularly close friends, neither have we any known enemies; our professional lives afford us ample cordial acquaintance, and we enjoy large doses of each other's company. We maintain an agreeable small house in the city as well as this year-round rural waterfront retreat, where we spend long weekends and entire summers. I would call us fairly well traveled: Three or four times annually we manage short trips, usually outside the country and sometimes expense-paid, if a lecture or professional conference is the occasion; these over and above our sailboat cruises on the Chesapeake and my overnight lecture-junkets around the country. We have thus far lost to accident or disease none of our siblings, my grown children, or our grandchildren, and our relations with them are affectionate. In short, while no strangers to adversity or pretenders to perfection, we know our life together to have been privileged — even extraordinarily so, I would say.

"Who's complaining?" I hear my comrade complain when she reads this complaint: the protesting-too-much, the trace of a whine between the lines.

Not a whine, I would protest: merely a fidget. A bravura new chapter of our lengthening life-story: Maybe we're past that? Maybe who needs one? Unspeakably fortunate, in each other et cetera, yet beginning the typical midlife process (late midlife for me) of contraction and simplification: of our enterprises, our capacities, even our interests. As our get-up-and-go shows signs of going, B & J have gotten up and gone. Autumn's upon us, and here we sit, soaking up the late warmth while waiting for the frost; *they're* kicking over the traces, Jay especially: throwing fortune to the literal winds, following the sun south, and then . . .

Well, we could do that, my shipmate and I. We've got the requisite boat, the saved-up bucks. My kids aren't kids; my parents are dead, hers not yet infirm. Our other commitments — my writing and lecturing, our part-time teaching (she's on academic leave just now) — can be managed, rearranged, whatever. But we don't *want* to do a Beth-and-Jay, do we? We simply feel, don't we, some wist their way? For me at least, vis-à-vis "Jay Wordsworth Scribner" at least, a not-unprecedented feeling.

"Mm."

*Back to it, more or less:*

Sixes and sevens then till ten, not quite myself. I check the weather radio: Forecast's fine — indeed, ideal, for days ahead, despite a late tropical depression somewhere off Bermuda, not to worry. Dew's dry out there, sun's bright, day's warming toward shorts and T-shirts. Wind's holding at a sweet eight knots straight up the pipe from Sunbirdland, spreading full the Maryland motley that I ran up our skewed pole at second-coffee time. One last go at that suspended passage of some pages back:

*Extended aria: "Suspended passage"*

Author speaking:

However autobiographical in manner and trappings, this "overture" and any opera following it are in fact fiction: *a* story

of my life, by no means *the*. Chesapeake Bay is real enough, Maryland's Eastern Shore, the Chester River and the creek making off it where Mr. and Mrs. Narrator abide. But there is no "Potamock Island" on any of those, no "Potamock Point." Nothing in our literal life and tidewater neighborhood corresponds to the portentously named "Jerome Schreiber/Jay Wordsworth Scribner," his companion Beth Duer, their erstwhile "eco-ketch"\* *American Century*, and its skipper's remarkable project of resailing in reverse Columbus's first voyage's first half, not to mention his improbable extension of that retracement into the eastern Mediterranean, up the Nile, and overland into the African Rift Valley. All fiction.

Fiction most of all, this, in that I draw its sentences in late 1990, two years before the imaginary events recounted and the quincenary of Columbus's landing in the West Indies. The project of commemorating that first historic confrontation of America and Europe, and their consequent reciprocal loss of innocence, is at this writing well advanced. My track record with the muse — three to four years between books, on average, and this one scarcely begun — makes me confident that by the time these words see print, those festivities will be history. But this overture's imagining that on Columbus Day 1992 "my wife" and "I" will still be among the able living and in the approximate circumstances described, while not unreasonable, is no more than a knock-on-wood projection from our situation as of Columbus Day 1990.

This has been (*that was*, by when you read this page) a year in which it happened that a number of things in my life and work more or less wound up in relatively quick succession. Through its first half, I finished final-editing a new novel — my eleventh book, tenth volume of fiction, eighth novel — with the terminal-sounding title *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*: a comedy whose dark muse is, in fact, that figure called by Scheherazade "the Destroyer of Delights, Severer of Societies, and Desolator of Dwelling-Places" — lethal Time. Near midyear I turned sixty and,

\*I.e., still ketch-rigged, but no longer deployed as erst it was to propagandize for cleaning up the Chesapeake estuarine system. See footnote to future recitative "On with the lights" in *Between Acts: Light*. [Author's retrospective note]

per personal program, retired on that birthday from my full-time professorship at the Johns Hopkins University, across the Bay, in Baltimore: "early-early phased retirement" by the university's standards and in the language of its benefits administration office, but I had been teaching for nearly forty years, the last seventeen of them at my alma mater. I swapped my endowed chair for emeritus rank and reduced my academic responsibilities to one graduate-level seminar, fall semester only — this out of my attachment to university life, the pleasures of coaching a small group of selected advanced apprentices, and the practical benefits of a campus office and secretarial privileges, although I work mostly at home.

This/that same year, making random notes toward whatever next major writing project might follow *The Last Voyage*, I turned and filled the final page of a spiral-bound stenographic notepad reserved for that purpose. I had begun that notepad twenty-three years, or seven books, earlier, in 1967 — a world ago. It is the third such that I've filled in my professional lifetime; the other two, though of the same size, span a mere seven years each. I have delayed finding a new, fourth steno-pad to cover 1991 —, whether because there are still in Pad Three notes toward enough possible projects to fill out my remaining creative lifetime or because, as I enter my seventh decade, that blank space after 1991 — looks disagreeably gravelike.

In another sort of notebook (I keep all kinds: travel logs, ship's logs, house logs, even fish-tank maintenance logs) — this a small black one for the registration of what are, occasionally, small black thoughts — I noted that just as I had filled Page Last of Steno-Pad Three and entered 1990 after 1967 —, I had in September turned the last blank leaf of my old academic roll-book, also numbered Three: *Johns Hopkins, 1973 —*. Time now to fill that blank, too, with eventful 1990 — but as of this writing, although the semester is well advanced and the calendar year winding up, I've not yet done so. Nor have I bought a fresh roll-book for autumns to come, although I intend to maintain for a while my attenuated connection with the university.

Bear with me.

Roll-Books One and Two I must have mislaid in our last house-move, and I miss them: The three together would name every student I've taught since 1951, from my maiden graduate-teaching-assistant class, through my through-the-ranks years at Penn State, Buffalo, and Boston, to my current handful of Hopkins hotshots. Those students must number several thousand, for while in recent years I've taught only small seminars, for decades before that I carried a full load of lecture-courses as well. The record-keeper in me craves the precise numbers on which his pleased fatigue is based; the academic burnout wants the stats of the fire.

Among that missing myriad would be found the maiden name of my wife, here more or less fictionalized together with her narrator husband: I met and taught her at Penn State in the mid-1960s and serendipitously re-met her in Boston some years later, as shall be sung, just when my two-decade first marriage was closing down. In the final days of 1990, having wound up my circa-five-thousandth published page, my sixth decade of life, my full-time academic career, and my third musely steno-pad and student roll-book, I'll be celebrating with her our twentieth wedding anniversary: not the end of anything, happily for us, except the second decade of a graced connection, but we'll toast the milestone with feelings beyond reciprocal gratitude. Ours will be, as of that date, each's longest-standing intimacy: Duly time-tested, it is a bond we're confident is breakable only by death — and we know that break to be exactly twenty years nearer than it was in December 1970.

L'Chaim.

Outside our house, meanwhile, the Cold War thawed, Germany reunited, the French and British Chunnel-diggers shook hands under the Channel, the new Persian Gulf crisis bade equally (as of this writing) to midwife a new world order or to abort it, and, depending on one's way of counting, either the 1980s ended or the Nineties began. Of such equivocal calendrics, more to come.

There it is. Absent fatal accident, by when this extended aria is published its singer's marriage will be well into its third blessed

decade. With so few students now to keep track of, I may not bother with a new roll-book for my emeritus seasons, but no doubt I'll get around to picking up Steno-Pad Four: 1991—, and no doubt I'll find seeds to sow in it for possible future cultivation. Although the muse's pause this time has been somewhat longer than usual, experience leads me to expect that by the time *The Last Voyage* officially hits the stands in early '91, I'll be scribbling away on the Next: something "new," suggested by yet another reinspection of those aging bits in Pad Three: 1967–1990.\*

The decades have taught me patience with my muse. Before she'll sit in my lap and sing, she visits me less like one of Zeus's daughters by Mnemosyne than like one of those vintage Hollywood monsters, almost human, whose inchoate grunts and rumbles move the heroine to declare, "I think it's trying to *tell* us something." Always, in the past, in her own good time, she has cleared her throat, refound her voice — which is to say, mine. But she won't be hurried; overtures to her must be made sidewise, left-handed.

For poets and short-story writers the case is doubtless different, and I've known novelists who work on several projects at once. But my sort of congenital, one-thing-at-a-time novelist confronts this empty interval between imagination's exhaustion and replenishment, between delivery and reimpregnation, only once every several years. I've learned to use the well-filling intermission to write an essay or two, often of a stock-taking or position-fixing character, while monitoring my new and old jottings like those radio astronomers listening for intelligent extraterrestrial signals against the low buzz of the expanding universe — except that these are *my* signals, my mutterings; it's *me* I'm waiting for word

\*Just now, e.g., I'm re-regarding this entry, dated 26 April '86: *A Voyage from Maryland, or, The Doomsday Factor. An anti-Candide, his "garden" cultivated to exhaustion, puts his "estate" behind him (sells out to "El Dorado Developers": condos, marinas, shopping plazas, pollution). Au revoir to realism and New World; sets out for Old: mythic, fantastic. . .*

from, whose garbled transmissions I'm trying to decipher.\* King Kong and Fay Wray both; my muse, c'est moi.

Dum dee dum.

Well, it *has* gone past the norm, this particular repollenative pause. What pause doesn't lengthen for gents my age? Not a season this time, but a virtual cycle; not an essay or two, but three or four, amid *Voyage's* copyedits and galley proofs, lecture and vacation travel, seminars and family and business matters and houseguests and housework and play — the background noise of one's personal universe, whether expanding or contracting, against which one listens, listens for the Signal; life's busywork, which lets the muse sidle up as if idly, like your secret lover at a public party, to murmur (with the gestures and expression of one commenting on the canapés) exactly what you've been waiting to hear.

Scratch that adulterous trope. Other folks' muses may wear designer duds and carry on like that, but mine's some combination of E.T.'s avatars aforementioned and Sindbad the Sailor's magic isle of Serendib, with its peculiar navigational aspect of being unreachable by direct intention. To get to Serendib, one must plot one's course in good faith elsewhere and then lose one's bearings — serendipitously. No problem for old Sindbad up through Voyage Six, when he first attained that fortunate isle: He was in good faith headed elsewhere; hadn't known the place existed. But how to hack Voyage Seven, the caliph's explicit commission to sail straight for Serendib? My muse is Serendib-like, a low-magnitude star that disappears when gandered frontally. She's like that slippery Christian grace unattainable by ardent direct pursuit, which taints her pursuer with the sin of pride.

Dum dee dee.

*Kenosis*, the Greeks called this emptying of the spirit's vessel in preparation for a refill. Early Christian theology picked up the

\*Steno-Pad Three, 18 Jan '90: *We set out: down Bay, farther than ever before; hang a left at the Capes and aim for Portugal, toward end of decade, century, millennium, our able lives. And then . . . However . . . But scarcely had we . . . [on w. story].*



term to describe Christ's relinquishment of godhood to take human form and die. See, e.g., Philippians 2:5-8.

Dee diddly die.

Because you know, don't you, singer of this extended aria, that beyond a writer's untimely demise (Italo Calvino's, Raymond Carver's, Donald Barthelme's) lies the prospect of his/her *not-so*-untimely demise (old Sophocles's, old Thomas Mann's, old Jorge Luis Borges's) — if not in this decade, then in the next, at latest the one after — and that these musely recovery times are as likely to lengthen as one's other recovery times, until comes the intermission that no next act follows. You're in robust health, I assure myself (*for your age*, the put-down parentheses add), but you're not age-proof. Your knack for slaloming on one water ski behind that old runabout upped and vanished some summers back and hasn't been heard from since. You can't jog the four flights from your university office up to the seminar room as erst you could and still speak sentences when you get there. They gave you a twenty-one-gear'd beaut of a mountain bike at last spring's retirement party, and you've used all twenty-one on Maryland's near-flat Eastern Shore. Where'd you put Roll-Books One and Two, by the way?

John Keats sonnetized his youthful fears that he might cease to be before his pen had "glean'd [his] teeming brain," and not long thereafter joined the ranks of the illustrious Untimelies. 'Twould be no picnic (you permit yourself in passing to counterfear) to go on being and being and being *after* your pen has glean'd etc. Or say you're Scheherazade — Who isn't? — and you took your maiden deep narrative breath all those nights ago, and now it's this many plots and characters and themes and situations later, foreshadowings and reprises and twists and pace-changes and even Weltanschauung-evolvments, for pity's sake, and here you've just wound up yet another longish yarn, neatly denouemented if you do say so yourself, and maybe the king's wowed and maybe not (What does *he* know about storytelling?), but anyhow he's not offing your head, and so now it's time to launch your thousand-and-whatevereth before the muezzin cries from the minaret that

prayer is better than sleep, and let's just see now, maybe the one about — Nope, you used that on Night 602 or thereabouts, so maybe work up instead the bit you tucked away in midst of the Sindbad series, wasn't it, that bit about what was it now, had a sort of spin to it, charm to it, color, tippy-tip of your tongue, dum dee dum dum, and there's His Highness restless already for his royal next; you know well enough that little sniff and twitch of his. . . .

Scheherazade, c'est moi. King, too. That muezzin, even, whom ever at my back I hear while with some third ear listening, listening —

What was that?

*A story, perhaps, perhaps in progress:*

You've shut down your desk already and fetched out sea- and tote bags for filling. Seems we're going for a sail.

Overnight?

"Whatever."

Mm.

"Monday's free and Tuesday's negotiable." You check our checkout list. "Whole week's negotiable, on my end. Rest of the school year, actually. Good old academic leave."

Rest of our lives, come to that, we suppose — of which today is, as they say, Day One. That fancy grows upon us as we go about our familiar prep for a one- or two-nighter: Top off the cutter's water tanks, start up its fridge on shore power, ungarage and launch its tender, open boat and close house per each's checklist. It is no problem to keep things flexible, provisionwise: two days' fridge and freezer stuff from the house, enough canned staples and liquids aboard already for at least two more, further supplies available from any number of marinas and harbor towns out there — We know the Chesapeake's upper two-thirds by heart. Calendar commitments we can feasibly reschedule by radiophone or shore-side booth, should we find ourselves inclined to stay out past the holiday. Even mail and newspaper delivery we can stop by phone from wherever we might find ourselves. The sticking point would

seem to be clothes; in this variable season especially, we need some idea how long a voyage we're packing for. Two days? Four?

Two weeks, I hear myself propose.

"Get serious."

*Aria: "Why not?"*

But there's some *Why not?* in my shipmate's tone. Watch-standing blue-water passages, really extended living aboard — they're not our style, we guess. I would miss my missing muse, who, though movable, is not portable (But just now she's missing anyhow, no?). My partner, ever readier than I for travel, would ordinarily miss her schoolteaching (But she's on leave these days, no?). We both would miss our big bed and other dry-land comforts. Every mid-June for the past many, as it happens, we have set out down-bay from Langford Creek and cruised as far south as the water turns out to be swimmable that year, returning north when we reach sea-nettle country. *Chrysaora quinquecirrha*, the stinging Medusa jellyfish that typically infests the lower Chesapeake by the time its waters warm, has thus far set our southern limit at Point Lookout, the mouth of the great Potomac — and that far down only once in twenty Junes, when record spring rainfall held the pest at bay, so to speak. More usually, the summer solstice brings US and Chrysaora together no farther south than the Patuxent, the Little or Great Choptank, sometimes even the Miles and the Wye, just a day's sail out. In one rare droughty period (whence dates our swimming pool) even Langford Creek was infested come school-graduation time, and our sail that spring had to be all north, headwaterward: more crowded and less various cruising ground. Ten to twelve days, on average, these mini-odysseys, which we still look annually forward to. But in the sixty-plus wide miles between Point Lookout and the Virginia Capes — what we call the Chesapeake Triangle — there is much mare incognitum, river after river on both sides of the Bay: Pocomoke, Rappahannock, York, James — Algonquin country, John Smith/Pocahontas country, right down to the ocean's doorstep, and we have yet to sail it. What better time than now? Water still warm, but air too

cool for swimming and thus Chrysaora no large frustration; foliage at its peak; anchorages uncrowded even on the weekends. Why not sail clear down to Capes Henry and Charles; wet our keel just once, if only for an hour, in the bona fide North Atlantic; nothing over there till Portugal; then home in time for Halloween haul-out, general Thanksgiving, Hanukkah/Christmas, hibernation — Why not?

*Duet: "Let's do it"*

"Let's do it."

At least let's try it? Start down open-ended, bag it anytime we want? Really, why not?

"You don't like open-ended."

True, by and large. Thus Halloween, latest: follow old *Century* as far as the Threshold, put one foot over, then come home to our life.

"While those Scribner/Duers *leave* home with theirs."

Well: with their separate *lives*, we suspect. Separately. Ours is one. Us. Do it?

"Why not."

*Semi-explanatory aria: "Weak Chaos"*

As I was saying back in 1990, in that suspended passage: No doubt the coinciding of those several "close-outs" aforesung with the turn of the decade — itself an imminent foreshadow of the impending turns of century and millennium — accounts for the restless air of this overture, in which one hears as well some strain of the valedictory. It accounts too, obviously, for my dreaming up a special sort-of-friend, Jay W. Scribner/Jerry Schreiber, together with his mate, to set out upon an epical voyage that I myself can imagine with interest but would never attempt; further, for my imagining ourselves — "US" — setting out in their wake on a different sort of voyage, more modest in its objective but perhaps, in its way, as consequential for the voyagers.

As a rule, reader, I am a thorough planner of my fictions. Although experience has taught me that some things (and what

sort of things) can be left for subsequent inspiration, I don't normally begin a story without a clear idea where it's going and by what waypoints it means to get there. To this unexceptionable rule, *Once Upon a Time* I project as a deliberate exception.\* Just as in fact I'm only supposing and earnestly hoping that my wife and I will be alive and able on Langford Creek come 12 October 1992, I honestly don't know — having imagined "us" setting out aboard *US* on that date upon a wistful end-of-season cruise to the bottom of the Chesapeake, so to speak — whether we'll get there, what we'll see and do along the way, whether we'll return on schedule or at all, and — Question of questions! — what "our" voyaging is about.

Despite that fair-weather forecast, I rather imagine a very considerable *storm* as an early complication of our plot, once that plot's stakes have been determined and established. No point in worrying my mate in advance, but what voyage-tale's complete without tempest or equivalent? Loss of way (On the Chesapeake?), loss of ship (We're insured; anyhow, you can bet that no actual boat of ours bears a hokey name like *US*), loss of shipmates (Heaven forfend!), loss of identity, even; encounters with symbol-fraught obstacles, temptations, adversaries, tasks, enchanted islands — all these old standbys are standing by, of the voyage-tale genre as worked both by myself in novels past and by my innumerable predecessors over four thousand years of written literature and the untold millennia of the oral narrative tradition.† But as to what, which, when, and wherefore in "our" case, muse sayeth naught, yet. Clear enough by now that I'm improvising this overture expressly to discover what opera will follow, as one might say "Once upon a time" in order to hear what that magical invocation might invoke.

Not only fiction, then, this, but in its peculiar way futuristic, time-travel fiction: a journey into the unknown like all our jour-

\*Its title, for example, just now occurred to me; I've gone back and made a title page.

†One of the world's earliest written narratives is an Egyptian papyrus known as "The Shipwrecked Sailor."

neys, from Sindbad's and Columbus's to every airline- and commuter-train passenger's, every Now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleeper's; every next-step-taker's, next-breath-breather's. E.g. (true story): As of my opening this aria, a much-loved member of our extended family — respected and prosperous physician in his forties, rock-solid husband and father and citizen, a high-vitality, life-enhancing, good, good man — has been ominously missing for more than a week. Car found untouched in parking lot of hospital where he'd gone to make routine night rounds; jacket and empty wallet found in alley across town a few days later. Police and private investigators baffled; family traumatized and fearful of the worst, our American cities being what they have become. Then, between this paragraph and the one before it — last night of Hanukkah 1990, as it happens, all nine menorah candles burning bright — comes news the fellow's been found, mirabile dictu, alive and physically intact though head-bumped and more or less amnesic, in another hospital in another state — twenty-five hundred miles from where he vanished ten days earlier! Nes gadol hayah sham: "A great miracle happened there" — its story still unclear and, in the nature of the case, likely to remain so forever. A Johns Hopkins colleague apprises me that similar flights into the unknown — unpremeditated, unforeshadowed, "out of the blue" and into it, involving loss of prior identity, boundary-crossings literal and figurative to "other states," eventual amnesic or more or less transfigured return to original state, and resumption of "normal" life (my chap is reported to be his old self again already and vigorously back at his healing profession) — are classic enough to have a charming textbook name: *fugue*. Unlike the musical kind — but quite like Odysseus's, Aeneas's, and Dante's descents into the otherworld — these mysterious real-life fugues are almost never repeated.

As for ours: Fiction, says Aristotle, should prefer the plausible-though-in-fact-impossible to the possible-but-implausible, if push comes to shove. To give my vagrant muse elbowroom, I'm setting our story two years down the road from the drafting of its overture, but strictly speaking the interval could as well be two days or two minutes. My medical relative didn't know, two hours

before his fugue, that his prosaic nightly round was about to turn into a quasi-mythic "night-sea journey" (launched, it now turns out, by a violent mugging). I didn't know, two sentences ago, that I'd be writing this particular sentence just now, or two words ago this word, but there it is.

There it is. Inasmuch as ink flows like time but less swiftly, it does not escape me that just as that word *word* is history now as I write *this*, so the point must come in "our" adventures when the writing present overtakes the written present and leaves it behind. I anticipate at that point something like a narrative Doppler-shift, but cannot now imagine its character: neither the *eeee-whoo!* of fast-passing vehicles, I should think (language doesn't go at such a clip), nor the one-way "red shift" of receding galaxies proportional to their distance from the observer, who passes none nor is approached by any. Of a friend's death, Samuel Beckett is said to have said, "He has changed tense." Something like that, I imagine, might be in order down the line.

"Controlled indeterminacy," "self-organized criticality," "weak chaos" — such paradigmatic notions come to mind. They go some way toward describing how our real lives are really lived, as well as a way of telling our life-stories. Sings the earlier-quoted Roethke, "I learn by going where I have to go," and like prudent navigators we may reckon our course by deducing where we are from our running plot of where we've been. Getting there, however, nonetheless involves continuous improvisation, together with what some aria to come may sing as "coaxial esemplasy": the ongoing, reciprocal shaping of our story (in this case, a story of our life) by our imagination, and of our imagination by our story thus far. On this reading, Roethke's line means "By going, we learn where we have to go." But it may also be said to say, "By going where we have to go, we learn."

Learn what? Why, perhaps the answer to our first and final question: Why? What's it all about? Come to that, Who are we?

*On with the inquiry:*

Au revoir, suspended passage. I cap my immortal pen (adjective to be explained presently, but no vanity involved or metonymy

intended), close my venerable three-ring looseleaf binder — sacred, in fact, like the pen, though to no one except myself — and unplug our middle-aged Macintosh lest it be fried by thunderbolts in our absence. Creepy as this may sound to younger souls in particular, as is our habit before setting out together on extended journeys we each then put in plain view on his/her desktop a sealed envelope, normally drawered, addressed *To My Executors* — not so much *lest* common disaster befall us as by way of propitiatory magical insurance that it not. That little black notebook mentioned in "Aria: 'Suspended passage'" now goes into my seabag along with Steno-Pad Four: 1991 —, its first pages already filled with notes toward this project. If I'm to learn by going etc., I'll need wherewithal to inscribe my lessons elsewhere than in the log of *US*, which is for sailing data only. We have ballpoints aplenty on board for such inscription, but as I bid good-bye now to my creekside study, I'm moved to consider the unprecedented: taking with me on our uncertain voyage said venerable three-ring looseleaf binder and immortal pen.

*Extended aria: "This old binder. This old pen"*

This old binder — *Trussel Press-To 76CX Made in USA*, I can just make out on its once evenly blue-stippled inside front cover — antedates the writer who pens this sentence in it, though not the penman. This old binder has been mine and in near-daily use for forty-five years: I bought it new in the university bookstore during freshman orientation week in September 1947, when I was seventeen. Its stiff cloth-covered cardboard covers were a clean light gray-blue then, *JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY* printed on a dark diagonal across the front. Through my student years, this binder went with me in every Baltimore weather to every lecture and seminar, its looseleaf pages duly apportioned among my courses of study, semester after semester. Just another school-supplies item then; not meant to outlast the usual term of such items, it was given no special consideration. On its outside front cover, like faint ring-nebulae, are condensation stains from Truman-era cups of student union coffee and cans of National Bohemian beer. The margins of the inside covers I evidently made use of to start balky



pens: Beneath a brown patina of . . . thumb oil, I suppose, from countless openings and closings, is a hatched underpainting of short straight ink-lines and blotted drops, the whole surface worn away by so many *more* openings and closings that the once-rectangular cover is worn well out of square into a sloping curve that meets the bottom outboard page-corner a full two inches short of its original dimension. The missing material, like my professional life, has been invisibly distributed, fiber by fiber, through the rooms I've lived and worked in over four and a half decades — but a reassuring margin remains. The exterior cloth hinges meant to join its covers to its spine are entirely gone, and the spine itself is half exposed, but the inside hinges still do the job. The cover fabric, ring nebulae and all, is rubbed to a mottled gray-black glaze by continual light friction against the tops of a long series of desks and worktables; correspondingly, the front-central top surfaces of my writing tables, both here on the creek and over in the city, are chafed through their varnish to bare wood by my endless tiny shiftings of this old binder as I write. Of those alabaster saints in medieval churches, their toes worn away by the kisses of the faithful, Jay Wordsworth Scribner once wondered to me in Rome: If lips can do that to stone, what must stone do to lips? The example of my old binder leads me to hope that the attrition is gently reciprocal, more a polishing than an ablation.

The three metal rings of this old binder, their open/close levers and other hardware, are uniformly corroded from their original shiny chrome but still functioning, as is the binder itself and its user: We spend all of nearly every weekday morning together in light but steady physical contact, as we have done right through my adult life. Not long after my freshman undergraduate year, I began filling one of those dividered sections with my first student attempts at fiction, while in the others duly annotating my courses in history, philosophy, literature, foreign languages, the social and natural sciences. Through graduate-school days, almost the whole binder came to be filled with apprentice fiction-in-progress, although it still went with me to doctoral seminars in this and that. Thereafter, it withdrew with its owner, M.A.'d but Ph.D.-less, from formal academic study into aspiring writerhood; while I made my

living as a professor of composition, of English, of creative writing, my looseleaf binder stayed home, wherever home was, eschewed all things academic, and to my frequent envy devoted itself exclusively to the practice of literature. Like my muse, of which it is an aspect and a totem, it became movable but not portable. It does not travel everywhere I travel, but it has lived everywhere I've lived: Maryland, Pennsylvania, Andalusia, New York, Massachusetts, California, Maryland. I have first-drafted in it every page that I've ever published and many that I've not, from that undergraduate apprentice-work to this piece in progress: more than ten thousand manuscript pages, I estimate. It still has a few vintage-1940s dividers in it, their tabs long since worn off. The fat first section, half an inch or so of fresh white looseleaf paper on the right, a growing sheaf of black-scribbled pages on the left, is for work in progress — just now, *Once Upon a Time*. When this overture is drafted, out it will go into a younger binder already labeled *OUT* and waiting, to free up this one for the first draft of (I suppose) Act One, while the Overture moves through its several word-processed drafts to come. A second division, emptied last year at *The Last Voyage's* close but steadily refilling now, is for worknotes on this project, expanded from the germinal jottings in Steno-Pads Three and Four. This division I expect will grow with the project until it fills a binder of its own, for over the years my black ballpoint "notes" have become more and more a kind of surreptitious proto-draft: a halfway house between the true notes of steno-pad and small black notebook on the one hand and the actual first-drafted sentences of this old binder. Under pretext of expanding these notes on the chapter or aria in hand, I often give its sentences their first trial form and sequence, in prose less responsible than this, in less responsible ink on less responsible paper — less responsible and therefore freer to take tentative shape.

Just as in both my city and my country workrooms there are separate areas for Creation (a large writing table), Production (a computer workstation), and Business (a big old glass-topped office desk), so in this old binder a final divider divides art from accounting — more accurately, my accounts with my muse from the