

excerpt from *American Pilgrims* [AP page 1 of 7]

from the Old World, to Linn and Chelsea, to Detroit

The first thing is a knit cap—usually the raspberry colored one—rolled up above the ears. If there's an active project—rebuilding a porch or tearing off an attic or adding a second floor with a crew of sons and neighbors—there's also a short pencil tucked behind an ear. There's a plaid shirt, taut around a broad chest and a broad but perplexingly not soft belly. The breast pocket probably holds a pen, a cigar, and—I think—some folded papers. Sleeves are rolled up a little—revealing arms that, almost 50 years later, could still win boxing champion on the ship; fifteen to forty years later could still work the docks; and sixty years later could still provide protection in the alleys and streets of Massachusetts mill towns. The pants are work pants, a familiar hybrid of blue-black-grey, held around the widest part of the belly with a belt. Shoes are work shoes—maybe the same ones from the docks. I always imagined that the docks had water, but now I know they didn't—probably trucks, maybe car parts?, and men.

Warsaw, Indiana: Orthopedic Devices

A four and a half year old boy stands eight feet ten inches tall,
three feet two inches sans playscape.

With arms outstretched

embracing the universe of Center Lake

lying before him

on this ninety one degree nearly summer afternoon,

where preteens propel themselves

from their piers and their peers to the freshwater current lapping underfoot,

where girls at nineteen thrust
their toddlers in bucket seated arcs swinging headlong toward the clouds,
the boy adjusts his gaze, screaming with all of the breath he can summon
DESTINY!
and waits from his childish tower for his sister to respond.

**from Detroit to Fort Smith, Arkansas:
many days only now stacked together in a pile in a box in the basement**

My Dear Pat,

You aren't going to believe me, but I am not drunk. I just got back from Julia's. Lola and Julia and I were washing the dishes. You know that Julia's baby's christening is tomorrow. So Lola and I went across the street to help her wash the dishes. It was late when we finished, and we were thirsty. Julia had some beer in the refrigerator, so Lola and I split one. We were laughing so hard, but Pat, I'm telling you I'm not drunk. Pat, on Monday I'm going to go downtown to get my train ticket. I don't think Ma will be going with me because Pa won't let her. She's so broken up because Louie got his papers yesterday. So now all three of her sons will be going. Let's pray that this mess will be over soon so that we can be together again. Reggie is fine. Ma taught him how to drive a car. He sits on the floor and drives a car and laughs and laughs. Lola taught him how to throw kiss. I bet your buttons are just popping off your jacket thinking about that son of ours. We're setting up the Christmas tree, but it sure doesn't feel like Christmas this year. Well, Darling, please forgive me, but it is very late, and I can't think of anything else to say.

I love you, My Darling,

Helen

Detroit to somewhere else in Southern Lower Michigan

We found, on returning to the bog after probably 10 years, the evidence of a slow competition that wasn't slow enough. We found the plastic flags to lead us through the swamp. We'd forgotten how to identify poison sumac and so grabbed any stem to keep us from sinking further than our hips into warm peat. I, knowing I'd touched poison ivy and poison sumac many times before without reacting, didn't anticipate the regret I'd feel later when the others—putting on business suits, playing with newborn brothers, trying to make pizza for a crowd—would be covered with blisters and itch. We found the 8-inch wide floating boardwalk that gave our muscles a short reprieve. Then it was back to sinking down and sucking up—down to my chest in the unlucky steps and up to tree trunks with their collars of sensitive fern and, as we got closer, growing sponges of sphagnum moss. When we thought we were lost, we'd find another flag—some blue, some orange, some pink. Looking back, I'd bet that one of the colors—orange, I think—was an alert for poison sumac. How many orange-flagged stems facilitated my escape from eternal peat? We told stories of the bog man—the bogey man, the original boogy man—and wondered if the swamp was bigger or we were just older and less fit. We decided it must be the latter since the one child among us seemed to be walking, skipping even, on top of the liquid earth toward our destination. So we continued—more sweat, more plants whose poison possibilities we ignored, more mosquitos, and blessedly more sphagnum which meant that we were almost there. And then we were there—pitcher plants, cranberries, a mat of moss that let us walk and jump on water, tamaracks, and sundews. And we weren't just older. The bog was smaller, and the swamp all around—probably aided by lawn and farm fertilizers all around—was winning.

on New York's decision to accept a mini-van as the design for its new taxis:

Maybe the city—or even the idea of a city—isn't sustainable after all. Maybe even those that last centuries are still just hot-burning romances yearning for the long, low, glow of marriage in the suburbs.

Pretty Flyers and Surprise Cities: from one Detroit to Another

A Friday afternoon errand downtown brings gifts of urbanity fully unknown to our generation of this place, except for those blessed to visit other places. Cutting through the park, I pass the skating rink, continuing to walk backwards with my large box awkwardly out to the side of my bundled body. I'm walking backwards so I can keep watching the man—tallish and slender with a Cookie Monster t-shirt and winter beard, long-sleeved shirt under the short-sleeved one that matches in Cookie Monster blue, charcoal sweatpants with two white stripes down each leg, and a knit cap—turning and jumping and gliding and spinning and extending a leg behind and overhead and executing moves most of us can name with rapture and duty during Olympiad years.

My return walk, now without the box, but still swishing under my coat that might well be a sleeping bag, is rerouted in order to watch the skater again. I sit. A man with coffee and what must be a similar list of responsibilities sits at the next table, also watching. Office workers pass in Casual Friday jeans. Bus brakes screech right down the jolly center of piped Christmas music. “Must be Santa, must be Santa, Santa, ...” This man in the Cookie Monster shirt slices through all of it. Little ones scrap around the rink like I do—thrilled at the rough speed and still learning how to make a turn. Untrained adults grip the fence or crash into it rather than trying to turn. Teen girls hold hands and move around the small rink swiftly, easily, their long hair following them around. And then there is another skater with the

vocabulary of Olympians, a punctuation of hair gathered at her crown, and a pink shirt that says BE
FR
EE.

These two aren't working together, but simultaneously they slice up the rink into graceful compositions of spilled kids and photographing parents and show-off staff and then stitch it together with arms overhead, now out to the side, now behind, on the right leg, now the left, now spinning on then tauntingly diverting from the seven-one axis of a human body.

I am, for the minute, in a different city. And with the naive joy I found while speeding around the rink the first time alone—an adult casting off the ridiculous belief that you had to learn as a kid, a kid from a city that didn't then possess the urbanity to allow it—I laughed out loud. I laughed the joy out loud because between me and the rink walked, of course, two kids in tall hats and payot. This—to the kid from the city that wasn't really a city—only happened in other cities, real cities, not here, except in enclave suburbs. Casual Fridays. Athletic and beautiful Fridays. The Lord's Day. The Sabbath. Dear God, let us really build a real city. Let this not be only a hopeful dream. May our tears be turned into dancing and skating.

On the Bus from Detroit to New York

Quiet. No one is speaking. I hear the whirring of the engine, the motor, behind me. The rumbling, the bumping of the road jostles the roof, my hand, my pen. The seats before me to the left, the right, are vibrating in my eyes. Or maybe my eyes are the ones shaking in the darkness, the emerald green circular glow in the three-thirty-fiveness in the night, in the morning. My pen hopping over paper over knee lifted high—but clearly not high enough—to discern scribbled writing in overhead and underfoot dim LED greenness, is tracing the

topography of the road itself. Can I draw in real-time, in three-space, the section of this now much calmer and mellow, yet still erratic rumbling, grumbling trek to the city of the three rivers in the mountains? Will the steadiness of my hand steady the road beneath me, behind me in my past? It's too dark in the softly snoring spaces all around me to know for certain if the coaster ride along this foggy asphalt track is sinusoidally pendulum swinging the three-and-half inch diameter wooden ear lobe spreaders on the thin, 25-minute-break-grab-a-smoke man who now sits behind me three or four rows back. Are the oscillations smack-Smack-SMAck-SMACKing his hooded cheeks in an exponentially ascending crescendo? Will they converge to stable SMACK-SMACK limit cycles on their march toward positively infinite time? I don't yet hear the smacking. But the night peels away slowly ever slowly before me. I know the day is somewhere ahead, but here at mile more-than-178, now 179, the only glint of the sun's rays I can hope to push away into the many-hours-from-now are high beams in the sign-reflected, lane-dash-marks-reflected brilliance striking through the fog to saturate my eyes enough to keep me writing on. As the shadowed silhouettes of what I know to be trees in the daylight stream past me in fleeting white to red illuminated streaks, the miles peel and jostle away toward red-tail-lighted town after town. I wonder if the hands of third-hand-smoke Anthony even need to touch the wheel. Are our headlights locked to tail lights ahead of us as they pull us to Pittsburgh and pull me farther and wearily less rested toward the morning?

Elkhart, Indiana: Band Instruments and Recreational Vehicles

Through the frame of a fried chicken breast
with lettuce on a sesame seed burger bun
held up with elbow on table

Saturday-evening-casual as an offering to the ceiling tile gods

past wringing hands

on wrist with retirement watch

and elbows on table

with heads nodding in empty-nested agreement

beyond glasses held outstretched

from leaning on elbow

while hunched over Saturday paper

between beer taps and blenders

through window walls prying

between triple flat-screens of a pitcher's perfect game

the sinking rays of late afternoon

bathe a lonely silver maple tree

standing with its feet lakeshore-wet

and its many arms in early spring green

held high

hoping for a lingering glance.