

Allergies

by Sam Pickering

From *The World Was My Garden, Too*, Madville Publishing (2019)



Sam Pickering shelling peas with his daughter Eliza.

I have been stung by honey and bumble bees, paper wasps, bull ants, and swarms of bald-faced hornets and yellow jackets. I have stepped barefoot on the stinging hairs and spines of slug and saddleback caterpillars. Rarely have I explored wood and scrub without being jabbed into a jump and exclaiming, “Oh, shit!” I’ve inhaled the setae of flannel caterpillars, and the hairs of gypsy moth caterpillars have raised ridges on my arms. I have fallen over and been submerged beneath waves of nettles hotter than boiling oil. Poison ivy grows faster on me than it would if farmed hydroponically. Often, I returned from wandering the outdoors having been stung so many times that my face resembled a knobby cluster of red grapes. Mysterious bites and stings have made my legs bloat and look broiled. Twice I munched berries that made my throat swell and almost blocked my breathing. In the spring when I mow the lawn, grass pollen makes me cough, gag, and eventually throw up. In the fall when I rake leaves, mold doubles me over, and I throw up again. In lakes I attract leeches; in the ocean, ill-tempered jellyfish. Yet, not until recently have I

thought about allergies. As a child I lived on peanut butter, and instead of making me break into hives, penicillin saved my life. I could eat a salad of ragweed, and the only time I sneezed as a child was when I tickled the inside of my nose with a straw.

Age has changed my tolerance of and fondness for welts and jabs. Once upon a time after the pain and swellings passed, showing and telling took over adding zest to my days. This year pollen from birches and red maples turned my nostrils into unruly creeks, and two weeks ago, a mystery insect stung me on the little finger of my right hand. The finger turned purple and doubling in size looked like the outside finger on a child's baseball glove. For six days the finger throbbed, and my hand sweltered. I wondered if a harvester ant stung me, but I have never seen a harvester in Storrs. "Maybe a cow killer," I said to Vicki, a doubtful attribution because I did not spot the wasp. Vicki urged me to see a doctor. I refused. Much as I'd aged beyond susceptibility to the pricking of all lusts except that of the Platonic variety, so my allergy to stings had clearly worsened. It had not, however, reached and never would reach the anaphylaxis and epinephrine stage. "Gone," I muttered later as I looked at my little finger wondering if the skin would spit, "gone are the hardy boyish days when eight or ten stings led only to bad language."

Taxonomies simplify living by defining and separating. Some people, Chesterton wrote, identified the lower classes as "humanity minus ourselves." Retirement has given me the leisure to overindulge observation. Rarely, alas, does a closer walk with a stranger foster tolerance and active benevolence. Often it induces distaste and causes a person to distance himself. I am now allergic to a superfamily of humanity, an Apoidea of types, exposure to which blisters, particularly educational drones collecting money for universities that are hedge funds with hives of classrooms attached. I am also allergic to the allergies of other people, for example, both that of the wealthy for the poor and that of the poor for the wealthy. Complicating the diagnosis of an allergist is the fact that I'm occasionally allergic to consistency. For example, I avoid spirits and the conversation of toppers. But then a mixologist stirs a story into talk and turns demon bourbon into a mint julep. In his Reminiscences and Recollections, "anecdotes of camp and society 1810 to 1860," Captain Gronow described Twisleton Fiennes, the Late Lord Saye and Sele, a legendary epicure and bacchanalian. "I shall never forget the astonishment of a servant I had recommended to him," Gronow wrote. "On entering his service, John made his appearance as Fiennes was going out to dinner and asked his new master if he had any orders. He received the following answer, 'Place two bottles of sherry by my bedside and call me the day after tomorrow.'" Such a tale is worth a hot flash of mental cirrhosis.

Additionally, I've never admired politicians. Do they run to avoid the self-knowledge that comes to every stationary person? Do they run to escape thought? Do they ache to embrace the assuaging fiction that they are not so flawed as others? How can anyone repeat the old lie and proclaim he is campaigning to serve other people when the truth is that his ego rides him, spurs jabbed into his flanks and whip hand raised above his conscience? Do many adore flowers? Flowers are "the expression of God's love to man," Joseph Breck said. In early summer do politicians saunter across sandy neglected meadows bristling with wild raisin? Do pinks and black-eyed Susan's make them stop talking? Do they notice the blossoms of potato vine bleached and looking like sea shells? Do they lose themselves in the lavender mist rising from the anthers of Timothy? Do they believe that anything they accomplish can rival the blue of chicory or the yellow of bird-foot trefoil? Can they appreciate the potpourri of milkweed balls or have the malodourous fumes oozing from putrefying integrity destroyed their sense of smell? Do any ever

sing, “Oh, to be beside a beaver pond now that June is there, and white tails are clipping through the air”? Presidential gardens would serve people better than presidential libraries. Obviously, I don’t know much about politicians. I have never met one. During campaign season when political worker bees stream through my neighborhood, I shoo them out of my yard. Slightly less noxious and more easily avoided are sports disciples. Imagine attending a dinner at which all the other guests spent Saturdays and Sundays praying in football stadiums. Even before the aspic appetizer, a person would find himself in “The Mind of Darkness,” quoting Joseph Conrad, and moaning, “The horror! The horror!”

At the end of life, a person’s allergies become him. Rhetorical matters make me dropsical with bile. In two successive days last week, three people encouraged me to “Have a Great Day!” Because of their eructating, formulaic triteness, the remarks lacked the zing of a sweat bee’s sting. Yet, they provoked a self-inflected response, not a reaction immediately painful with wasp kinin but instead delayed and gloppy with nausea-producing self-loathing. “Thank you,” I responded to all six speakers, “that’s so very nice.” As my allergies to verbal and social matters have waxed, so my tongue has become waspish. At times I think everyone I have ever met, not simply people my age hastening toward their grand climacterics, visits a physical therapist. I have never talked to a therapist. I refuse to allow anyone to grope my muscles and joints. “Hands-on experiences cause callouses if not blood blisters,” I explained to Vicki.

Putting socks on over damp feet is tedious and exhausting. A fortnight ago in the locker room at the Community Center when a sock pasted itself to my right heel and sprouted Velcro preventing me from pulling it above my ankle, I said aloud, “if a therapist tried to put on this sock, lumbago would knock him to the floor.” Two other men were in the room. On noticing them, I continued, “not that I’d let a therapist work on my footsies. That feely stuff is a medical racket.” “I’m married to a physical therapist.” one of the men said. “And,” the second man continued, turning the first man’s simple sentence into a compound sentence, “my older son manages a firm that specializes in physical therapy.” “Oh,” I said, realizing the time was ripe to change the subject. “What do you think about Argyle socks?” Neither man ever wore Argyle socks, and that conversation ended before it started. I am easily deterred unless I don’t want to be deterred. “Have you noticed,” I then asked the men, “that people who use this locker room never groan or moan? Perspiration to the tune of silence isn’t exercise. What do you guys think?” A friend told me that moaning, if not whimpering, was an integral part of physical therapy, and I chose the topic to appeal to the men. My friend was wrong; the men did not respond.

Age has changed my literary taste. Nowadays I prefer Emerson to Faulkner. I like mulling Emerson’s sententious wisdom, statements like “Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it.” I have grown allergic to Southern gothic and books that depict the grotesque antics of the usual extended Southern fictional family, cousins of the Snopes, twice embraced, not removed, folks called Big Bubba Borax and Sweet Baby Tail-Tail. Becoming allergic to place and the best-known literature of that place disturbs me, and occasionally I spade into my library and exhume a book I once liked. Invariably I conclude the book should have remained buried. Last month I re-read Harry Crews’s novel A Feast of Snakes. The Feast featured a carnival of feral scenes of the kind that naïve outlanders once expected in Southern novels and in the South itself. If a woman “would not come across,” Sheriff Buddy Matlow locked her in his jail in Mystic, Alabama. If she continued to resist Buddy’s affection, Crews recounted, Buddy turned a

rattlesnake loose in her cell. “Ain’t it a God’s wonder what a snake can do for love,” Buddy declared after a successful seduction. Buddy would have fared better had he given Lottie Mae, one of his inamoratas, a box of pralines. Sight of the snake unhinged Lottie Mae, hexed her, Lummy, a friend, said. Happily, and memorably, Lottie Mae rid herself of the hex. During a rattlesnake roundup Buddy purchased a snake condom adorned with two small fangs. The next time he courted Lottie Mae, he put on the condom. When a snake rose “straight as a plumb line” in Buddy’s lap, Lottie Mae saw the mouth and fangs at the top of its body. “It was the snake she had been waiting for.” She pulled a straight razor out of her shoe, and “in a single fluid movement,” struck at Buddy’s lap “and came away with the snake in her hand, its softening head with the needle fangs still showing just above her thumb and forefinger.” Emerson never imagined the mincing which Lottie Mae practiced. For my part the scene made me erupt in spotty allergic laughter. Afterward I reentered the novel.

“Literature in its highest forms,” Richard Holt Hutton wrote, “almost always requires a certain amount of solitude, of separateness of spirit, of imaginative brooding.” Hutton’s requirements are boons to most writers, be they producing signatures of high or low pages. At their best allergies insulate the aged scribbler not only from the bacterial but also from the vagaries of his times. Although the anchoritic life has some appeal, I am sane. Despite my allergic reaction to the world with its wasps, caterpillars, nettlesome people, and books releasing cadaverine and putrescine, I am unable to remain reclusive for longer than a snip of time. Since childhood I have been a meanderer, and habit is stronger than allergies. “To the quietest human being, seated in the quietest house, there will sometimes come a sudden and unmeaning hunger for the possibilities and impossibilities of things,” Chesterton wrote. “He will abruptly wonder whether the teapot may not suddenly begin to pour out honey or sea water, the clock to point to all the hours of the day at once, the candles to burn green or crimson, the door to open upon a lake or on a potato field instead of a London street.”

On that street or in the potato field appear sights which immediately make me forlorn. Most are so trifling that they don’t rise to the level of allergy. Nevertheless, because schooling civilizes, the sympathies of educated people are imperfect. Shortly after graduation I saw a student walking across the campus wearing a mortar board, black gown, and as a scarf an albino Burmese python. In Florida Burmese pythons have become an invasive species. In spring or summer females lay hatcheries of eggs, almost ninety at one count. I associate people who buy pythons from pet stores with beer cans, burgers, French fries entombed in salt and ketchup, the use of questionable medicinals, cars missing hubcaps, and pickup trucks festooned with rude bumper stickers. I suspect most purchasers are young like the boy I saw. They have rattletrap minds and hope to shift attention away from their prosaic characters. By wearing snakes, they imagine appearing adventuresome thereby attracting admirers. In truth the boy was a visual soporific less interesting than the linguistic short-order cooks who season talk with “Have a great day” or the insultingly-reductive “Have a good one.”

If I sprayed myself with an antihistamine and rid myself of allergies. I’d become sleek, reverent, prudent, and in my anonymity respectable, admired, and popular. I’d be recognized as good social mayonnaise. I’d be the sort of all-purpose spread who because he didn’t care about anyone or anything never criticized a raw or underdone thought. In sum or rather in subtraction, I’d be a politician. Happily, someone with allergies cannot shed his spots. Moreover, such spots spread and drift into each other like run-on sentences. Within twenty minutes of noticing the boy

with the python, I overheard a man haranguing a woman about religion. He believed God created the earth for Man. “Isn’t that a little presumptuous?” the woman asked diffidently. “No, haven’t you read Genesis?” the man responded almost shouting. “If you were a Christian, you’d know that you and all the other daughters of Eve are responsible for evil and man’s expulsion from Eden.” Such talk makes my thoughts burn like shingles. If I listened to more of the conversation, I knew the sores would burst, and in viral language I’d urge the man to see a psychiatrist. I like creation stories, but I am allergic to the inhumanity Calvinistic divines have bled out of Genesis. On the wall of my study hangs a painting of Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent. The painting was produced by an aboriginal artist living in Arnhem Land, and I bought it in Darwin fifteen years ago. Ngalyod can be male and female. While female she was the mother responsible for the creation of mankind. She or he also causes wet and dry seasons and can nurture as well as destroy life. In my painting she is coiled protectively around five eggs. When I look at the painting, I imagine that one of the eggs contains humanity’s first ancestors. In the other eggs are flowers and trees, clouds, words, the great oceans, herds of beasts, the firmament—everything and all things, all equal and beautiful. What a soothing contrast to the allergenic biblical assertion that the earth and its denizens, vegetable and animal, rooted, feathered, real and fabulous were created for man.

Many things I notice are placebos. Neither do they cause or cure allergies. Occasionally they puzzle or delight. Deciding which can be difficult. Instead of becoming the slave of definition, perhaps it’s better to keep Emerson in mind and admit that words “cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth.” My friend Josh recently sent me snapshots of four photographs mounted on a Wall of Remembrance in a community gymnasium in Louisiana. “Four pictures,” Josh noted, “selected from many.” The pictures were matted and encased in black fourteen by twelve-inch wood frames. The photographs depicted community members who died while exercising at the gymnasium. Under each photograph was a small oval brass plaque. Engraved in cursive on the plaque were the name of individual in the picture, dates of his birth and death, cause of death, and equipment being using when the person died. Thus, Sally Bruckner Brinker was born on April 3, 1927 and died on May 8, 2012 of a stroke while using a rowing machine. Pegram Royce was seventy-three years old when he dove into a pool after hours and drowned. Culpeper Bowman died at fifty-nine after being bowled over by a medicine ball and hitting his head on the floor, suffering an intracerebral hemorrhage. On February 13, 2016, Adelaide Bogusky died prematurely at forty-two when she got entangled in Battle Ropes and snapped her neck.

Accompanying pictures of the wall were two other photographs, the first of the motto stamped across the top of an Oklahoma license plate, “Fracking for You.” In the second picture appeared a sticker pasted to the bumper of a Dodge Ram from Texas. Printed on the sticker was “Don’t Fence Me In.” A thick black X ran like rails through “Don’t” leaving behind the imperative “Fence Me In.” On the left side of the sticker was a cameo depiction of the Texas state flag with its single white star; on the right the American red, white, and blue flag. The truck was parked on the curb in front of a shop selling essential oils. Side by side in the store window, Josh wrote, were two books: Healing Oils of the Bible and Lucy Libido, “A Girlfriend’s Guide to Using Essential Oils Between the Sheets.” “Sam,” Josh said, “in idle moments you sometimes mention leaving Connecticut and returning to Tennessee. Fifty years of living in New England have compromised your immune system. Two days after settling in the South, you’d have a massive allergic reaction and sink into a fatal catatonic stupor.” Josh may be right. Next to the

essential oils shop was a knife store. “Toys for Men” a sign declared. The store on the other side of the shop sold leather goods. Hanging on a rack inside the door was an assortment of Gun Pocket jackets. Manufactured by UNIK Leather Apparel, the jackets were on sale for \$149.99 each. Inside the jacket was a pocket in which the wearer could conceal his 1911 forty-five caliber pistol and an extra clip of bullets. “Carry laws have really helped business,” a clerk told Josh. “You should see the Concealment Purses made for pistol packing mamas.” “Their prices ranged from \$59.99 to \$94.99, not exactly Louis Vuitton,” Josh concluded. “Praise the state legislatures and pass the ammunition.”

“All things are artificial,” Thomas Browne wrote in *Religio Medici*, “for nature is the art of God.” If that is true, mankind’s aesthetic sense which neglects appreciation and concentrates on exploitation is blasphemously perverted. If it is also true that the world was created for man and that, as Genesis states, God gave man dominion over all the earth, then man is an unconscionable ingrate. Nevertheless, as a cure-all for my social allergies, a panacea common enough to be labeled patent therapy, I often roam wood and field. In contradistinction to the gospel song, the dew is not still on the roses. I walk alone, and no voice whispers in my ear. Sometimes a bee startles me, but another person’s whims or opinions do not determine my pace. I am free from monosyllabic agreement and disagreement. Alas, the suspension of allergenic thought is temporary. Experienced people realize that shucking allergies is impossible. Pessimism cannot be excised and is a fact of everyday life. If an aged individual claims to be an optimist and isn’t consciously lying, then he is suffering from an incurable poverty of mind. I’m allergic to such people. When I meet a goose, I imagine someone cramming a pipe down his throat and force-feeding him, fattening his liver before grinding it into foie gras. Of course, the result would be so tasteless that its best gastronomical use would be as cat food.

In the woods, the only geese I see are Canada geese, and I am silent. Words do not break out and impoverish, and my allergies ease into charmed remission. On walks all I hear and see are familiar and domestic: yellow iris in a marsh, red-winged blackbirds nesting amid cattails, overhead the high burring of gray tree frogs, and nearby the fragrance of wild pink azalea spilling over the banks of a creek. The fiddleheads of royal ferns roll into green marbles then suddenly turn brittle and begin to shred into fronds. At dusk chimney sweeps chitter and rise and fall like motes across the sight. In shadowy light the bark of northern white cedar looks pin-striped, reddish and brown, elegantly smooth but also worn into informality, fibers pulling loose here and there. The heartwood of double-file viburnum is sienna and smells berried and roasted. While the songs of vireos jump nervously like a bad conscience, those of rose-breasted grosbeaks are gay and welcoming crying “cheerio, cheer, chee.” One morning I slipped off rocks loosely wrapped in algae and tumbled into a stream. Water soaked my clothes, and that night bruises bloomed along my arms and over my knees; yet, the fall was pleasing. I was dirty and cold, and in the soiled, uncomfortable moment, I was happy, my crankish allergies forgotten. As I walked home I found a newly-hatched snapping turtle withering on a dry path. I carried the turtle to a quiet inlet of the Fenton River. I held the turtle in my hand and pushed my palm under water. For a moment the turtle didn’t move then it shook and wiggled off my hand into life.

At night when the dander of the world makes me cough and sneeze, I strap on a headlamp and roam the yard. Rabbits freeze immobile in the grass. While their eyes gleam silver in the light their fur spreads loose and foggy, and their bodies lose definition. Raccoons cling to the trunks of red oaks. Five or six deer trail through the woods, their eyes gold and flickering like

candles carried by a procession of cowled monks. Across the ground the tinny blue flowers that make shafts of bugle seem rough and vulgar in the day soften, and the color becomes dreamy and sleep-inducing. "Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune," Emerson wrote, "I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration." No one with strong allergies to humanity can enjoy a perfect exhilaration. But in the woods the stings of civilization become almost unnoticeable. "If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars," Emerson declared. Today skyglow tossed upward from cities makes seeing the stars difficult. But if a man would be content let him stand under a fringe tree and inhale the absolving fragrance of its blossoms. Let him watch yellow warblers flit through alders or study the slow dance of a walking stick. Let him breathe the musky spray of foxes and listen to the cocky shrilling of northern flickers. Let him cradle one of the chalices blooming on a tulip tree and let him drink deep of the orange lapping the bottom of the bowl, slowly and thoughtfully as if it were communion wine.

Let him also be aware that contentment on the moldy above-ground side of the grave is evanescent. There is no land of pure delight. On both banks of the Jordan flowers wither and the living green dries to straw. A person's winged thoughts, as Thoreau put it, inevitably turn into poultry. The next hour, the next day, I will blurt something regrettable or a cloying acquaintance will say, "I'm praying for you." I will be tempted to respond, "I hope you mean to the Rainbow Serpent?" But I won't say anything. Consequently, an allergy to my own cowardly respectability will break out, and I'll retreat to the quietest room in my quiet house. The retirement won't last long. Home is where the heart dies. "You should be as a pipe for any wind to play upon," Robert Louis Stevenson advised walkers. At home I'll sit and read. Too often the winds that play upon me are fetid. Two days ago, I started a novel but kicked it into waste can when an insane girl adorned her hair with a barrette of her own feces. That afternoon the mail brought the photograph of another picture hanging on the Wall of Remembrance, this of Carter (Duke) Sudduth who committed suicide after losing his bearings on an elliptical trainer and becoming a liberal was shunned by his devout friends. Folded inside the local newspaper was a flyer inviting me to join a literary group on the town square on Saturday and explore my "inner creativity." On the radio a gosling honked endlessly about "the transformative effects" of the mid-life crisis. "Listen to the voice of your inner angel and lay your head upon her manly shoulder." Such inanities cause headaches even to mechanical men with aluminum ears. The prating forces listeners to swallow objections to gagging commonplaces. It almost drives them to the extreme of dosing themselves with life-long learning in hopes of exhuming courses that teach knotting necks and extension cords.

Four times during the day a solicitous robocaller urged me to take advantage of a special promotion promising "peace of mind twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week." The offer consisted of a medical alert system. Purchasers hang little buttons around their necks and press them if emergencies arise. Instantly they are connected to advanced care specialists. During the fourth call an allergic flush spread over my face. Although I knew that I was addressing a machine not a person, I raised my voice and described the barnyard activities of the caller's mother in scarlet round-heeled detail. By the next morning I calmed down and went to Dog Lane Café to have coffee with friends.

Elderly people reminisce and look backward with complacency. They don't live new lives. They are at ease with their mediocrity, and their conversation soothes. They tell good tales

and are canny enough to appreciate anecdotes. “My Uncle George died last month,” Larry recounted. “But it doesn’t matter. He didn’t leave me anything.” “At the family dinner last Christmas,” Belle recalled, “I was seated next to my ten-year-old grandson. An absolute horror! The prospect of schoolboy conversation inflamed my diverticulitis.” “What did you do?” Larry asked. “I behaved sensibly,” Belle responded. “I funneled wine down the urchin’s throat and made him tipsy. When he banged his head on the table, my daughter was forced to remove him from the room and take him upstairs and put him to bed. He did not return.” Age itself is the source of much conversation. John’s wife Martha bought him an electric lawnmower at Home Depot. John unloaded it from the car then took it to the side yard it and assembled it. After adjusting the handle to his height, he pretended to fiddle with the machine, examining its parts, turning it onto the side, and lifting it off the ground, every so often shouting an expletive peppery with exasperation. “Honey,” he eventually said going into the house and addressing Martha directly. “What kind of lawnmower did you buy—some sort of Chinese mechanical tangram? I can’t start the damn thing. Where in the hell do I put gasoline and oil?” John thought his remark hilarious. Unfortunately, Martha didn’t laugh. She believed he was serious, and nothing he said later convinced her that he was joking and wasn’t a simply an old guy who had slipped another notch closer to the ground.

Between rows of reminiscences my friends sow remarks about human nature frequently transplanting aphoristic reflections from wise books to clear the fuliginous hours. “If a man must needs be conceited,” Henry said quoting G. K. Chesterton, “it is certainly better that he should be conceited about some merits or talents that he does not really possess.” “Robert Lynd wrote something almost as perceptive in The Cockleshell,” Belle noted. “I can scarcely recognize a blessing in disguise except when it is bestowed upon somebody else. The theory that blessings in disguise are constantly happening to other people I find consoling,” Lynd said, “it enables me to bear their troubles without feeling too miserable.” Earlier in the year, Larry cited Agnes Repplier’s criticism of overly-assiduous editors whose notes interrupted reading. They, Repplier, wrote, build bridges over raindrops and “put ladders up a pebble.”

In the eighteenth-century Edward Young criticized people who quoted excessively, writing, “Some for renown on scraps of learning dote, / And think they grow immortal as they quote.” My coffee mates quote frequently and often discuss death, but they don’t believe in immortality. They know words molder quicker than flesh and recognize that all ends are full-stopped. However, if forced to choose between resurrection of the body and that of the mind, they’d choose the latter, especially if its temporal lobes were tumescent with wit. Recently, Albert announced that he had written his obituary. “If I list it as forthcoming, can I include it among the publications on my resumé?” he asked. We agreed unanimously that he should include it. We also concurred that it was unlikely that he’d see it in print. Larry then interrupted saying he agreed with Clarence Day’s Father who supposed that all people had to die and “said he wouldn’t mind if people died only once in a while, as they used to.” “But,” Father continued, “he didn’t know what the matter was nowadays, somebody died every month.”

Only rarely do we talk about local doings, but occasionally happenings astonish us. Last fall, a Human Resources administrator went to a pharmacy in Vernon to get a flu shot. The store’s computer was broody, and after entering administrator’s name and date of birth, the clerk had to massage the key board before the machine consented to bring up the man’s medical record. The machine preoccupied the clerk, and she didn’t notice that the man had only one arm.

He'd lost his right arm years earlier in a car wreck. Once the insurance information appeared on the screen, the clerk asked, "in which arm would you like the shot?" "I don't think that's funny," the administrator responded. "What kind of horrible person are you? You aren't blind. Use your eyeballs." "Huh?" the clerk said looking up from the computer. "Oh, my god!" she exclaimed when she saw the man lacked an arm. "I am so sorry," she said staring at the stump of his right arm. She was so flustered she confused right and left. "Clearly you'll have the shot in your right arm since that's the only." She didn't finish the sentence. "You insensitive lump! You vacuous imbecile! You'll pay!" the man said raising his stump, jabbing it at her as if his missing hand was filled with graveyard dirt, and shouting repeatedly, "Take that." The clerk took it poorly. She went home in tears and didn't return to the pharmacy until the following week. Even so she resigned shortly thereafter. She could not sleep after coming back to work. Every night she had a nightmare in which a one-armed man chased her through a dark house, carrying her coffin under his left arm.

For the record we do not discuss politics. The subject is bumptious and oozes urushiol. Nevertheless, occasionally one of us slips. Last month before we shushed him, Henry opined that in present-day America "civil obedience is moral disobedience." Henry is verbally trigger-happy and is fond of shoot-from-the-lip maxims. He is also a retired lawyer. "If you want justice in the United States, you have to buy it," he once declared. On another occasion he quoted the old saying, "He who preaches war is the devil's chaplain." "Never trust a man who doesn't mow his own lawn," he said last Friday. "I don't know about that," Larry responded. Larry's mowing ended years ago. He almost amputated his left foot shortly after disobeying his wife Peggy and buying a chainsaw. On most days we disperse after we've had a cup of coffee or if we are feeling adventuresome two cups, one of which our cardiologists advise us ought to be decaffeinated. Twice outside the café on the sidewalk we sang a benediction, not a canticle from Morning Prayer, but a verse from an old music hall song: "We're all growing older, older every day, / Older and older, so the people say; / Some are growing uglier, and some are growing gray, / But we're all growing older every day." At the end of the verse we didn't bow our heads and whisper "Amen." Instead we grinned and shouted a rhyming "hurray."

When I left the café on this occasion, I was alert and in good spirits. Behind a rack of pamphlets on the town square stood two Jehovah's Witnesses. Passersby avoided them, and the men looked forlorn, so I stopped and chatted. At the end of the conversation, I said, "Be seeing you." "Do you live nearby?" one of the men asked. "Yes, on a side street not far from here," I answered. "Well, then," the man said, "We'll be seeing you first." Later as I sauntered home along a state highway I watched a chipmunk scoot under sweet fern then noticed a damsel fly clinging to an autumn olive. The wings of the fly were gray and modest and hung down over its back like a veil. A doe stood on a ledge above the road. She looked posed. Her skin glowed in the sunlight, and muscles rippled across her flanks in currents. Bunched along the shoulder of the road were bouquets of yellow hawkweed. Ox-eyed daisies had begun to bloom and were so bright and spirited that I smiled. Sadly, the smile disappeared quickly. I spotted a painted turtle in the road, but on darting onto the asphalt to rescue the turtle, I discovered that someone had run over it exploding its shell. The turtle was on the center line, and the driver who crushed it strayed out of his lane on purpose. "Damn," I exclaimed, but I didn't limit myself to one expletive. Exposure to the human mongrel makes me fester into words, and I described the driver's phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species, this last, *rancidulus filius canis* or for the urbane cosmopolite, *schweinehund*.

