

CHARLES BAXTER

## LOSERS

Vivas to those who have failed . . .  
—Walt Whitman

### 1: An Introductory Digression

I want to start today with a rhetorical device beloved by writers: a digression. This may be an odd strategy for the opening of a talk, since I have not yet stated my central theme; therefore, I haven't earned the *right* to a digression. Still, my presentation begins, not with writing, but with the architecture of the University of Michigan's Rackham Building, in whose auditorium you are sitting now. As it happens, as a long-time former resident of Ann Arbor, I am greatly honored to have been invited here to address you at this anniversary celebration. For about thirty years, from 1974 until the spring of 2003, I myself faithfully attended almost every Hopwood Award ceremony in this very room and heard almost every speaker introduced in the 1970s by John W. Aldridge, and then later by my friend Nicholas Delbanco, and also, on two occasions, by me, and then as I sank into one of those curiously plush upholstered seats, I would glance upward at the Art Deco gold-leaf patterns on the ceiling. Staring up there at the night-blue paint or at the fluted columns on either side of the stage, my mind sometimes wandered to the subject of this building's style, and the implications of that style. Please don't think I was bored. I was *never* bored. Never. My mind just wandered, that's all.

The Hopwood Lecture, 2006. Presented at the University of Michigan on April 21, 2006.

This building's construction was funded during some of the worst years of America's Great Depression. Its architect, a Detroitter named William Kapp, had been a student of Albert Kahn, the great German-born designer of Angell Hall and the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, among many other structures on this campus and elsewhere in the state of Michigan. One distinctive feature of this particular style is its decorative detailing, like that night-sky ceiling above your heads, or the recessed lighting in this room, considered quite an innovation at the time. William Kapp was aided in his efforts by an architectural sculptor with the rather wonderful name of Corrado Parducci. After my speech, when you all head upstairs for the reception and the chips and salsa, you will notice that the chandeliers in front of the elevators—the slowest elevators in the state of Michigan, by the way—have the patterns of the zodiac on them. The chandeliers look like gilded artifacts you might find in Radio City Music Hall. Standing out there, waiting for the elevators, you might think: *What are these remnants of astrology doing on the chandeliers in an academic building at the University of Michigan?*

As it happens, zodiac patterns are a common feature of Art Deco, a design movement that comes to us as an oddball combination of other artistic endeavors including Cubism, Futurism, pre-Columbian art, and Constructivism. But Art Deco's most notable feature is its quaint dynamism and its campy decorative ideas. Art Deco was characterized by geometric shapes, gilded nudity, and streamlined forms. It featured a look of vulgarized elegance that was associated with optimism. When you look at those chandeliers in the foyer, as you wait to get upstairs, you see a visual pledge signaling belief in the future, a sign of faith symbolized by the twelve sky signs and paid for by the taxpayers of Michigan. Despite the Great Depression, those people believed in the future. Those Wolverines were all good Futurists. Corrado Parducci saw to that.

Year after year I watched the winners of the Hopwood Awards walk, stroll, run, or leap up the rickety stairs on either side of this stage. I have seen winners in four-inch spike heels, tennis shoes, sandals, and wingtips, and winners who came up to this stage barefoot. Sometimes, hours before the ceremony, students would ask me for fashion tips; most of the time, however, they knew better than to do that. Often the

winner would bring along a *claque* whose members would shout and applaud and whistle and stomp on behalf of their friends. You would see flash cameras going off. Before one particular ceremony, I taught one of my students—a young man who now has a good career as a writer—how to tie a double windsor knot. Later on at the reception, his mother told me that she wasn't particularly shocked by his prize or his prize money but was indeed astounded by seeing her son in a necktie. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen him wearing one. "He didn't look like himself," she told me. A writer, we might say, is often someone who often does not look like himself.

The stairs up to this stage present a kind of challenge. Almost everybody is afraid of stumbling and pitching forward on them, and I have observed several winners stagger on their way up, and I once saw the great writer Bernard Malamud, a few months before his death, very nearly plunge headlong on his way down. I say this as someone who took up the writing of short stories partly because I loved Malamud's fiction. There is a passage from Malamud's story "Idiots First" that I once copied out by hand and kept in my desk drawer for inspiration. In any case, this stage is a little Parnassus, and sometimes you get up here easily, and sometimes you don't, and if you are old it can be as hard to find your way down as it is to get up. But if you *do* make it up here, you walk away with your money, and you get to be called a Hopwood Award Winner, someone who, with literary cash in hand, has a reason, as the architects and patrons of this building did, to believe in the future and to look forward to whatever life is about to hand you. Winners are nearly all futurists, and they join a great distinguished company of other winners.

I don't want to spoil your fun on this day of celebration, but my mission during the next few minutes is to argue that, for reasons that are more complex than they first appear, the practice of writing produces no winners. No losers, either, not ever. I love the attendant hoopla of the Hopwood Awards and have observed them for thirty years and participated and collaborated in them gladly myself, and like Walt Whitman I celebrate the winners, but these awards perform a category mistake, one that our society encourages in virtually all of its cultural activities. It is my task today to explain why. Also,

like Whitman, I want to celebrate the losers. Vivas to the losers, Whitman says, in his strange foreign-sounding patois.

But before I do that, I want to offer one other introductory digression. When I first started coming into Rackham Auditorium thirty years ago for these ceremonies, this hall, all twelve hundred seats of it, usually filled up early. A few empty spaces might be visible here or there, but not very many. In those days, the Hopwood Awards were a very big deal. The years passed, the calendar pages fell from the wall, and fewer and fewer people seemed to bestir themselves to be present at these ceremonies. Something seemed to have happened to the culture of the book in our country. This drop in attendance was noticed by the Hopwood Awards Committee, one of whose members suggested that as a countermeasure we should invite Barbra Streisand as our guest speaker. She was, after all, a writer herself, the author of the screenplay of *Yentl*. This (perhaps sensible) suggestion was not acted upon. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of empty seats continued, a sign of the diminishing cultural prestige of literary writing in all forms. This development, too, could be construed in a positive manner if you were inclined that way. "Neglect is useful," Donald Barthelme wrote in 1960, before fully launching his literary career. "One of our traditional obligations in our role as the public [is] to neglect artists, writers, creators of every kind." Through neglect, he said, "Starving opposition is created, and the possibility of criticism of our culture is provided for." As far as he could see, at that time, neglect was "proceeding at appropriate levels." As one commentator on Barthelme, Tracy Daugherty, has written, following Barthelme's time, "[literary] neglect has become a growth industry."

For all the years I taught at this university, I spent a fair amount of energy during the spring semester trying to restore confidence in the young writers who had not won Hopwood Awards, that is, those writers who had suffered neglect. I was pleased on behalf of the winners, but it was the losers with whom I identified. *They* were the ones I consoled. All of my colleagues did. We all pitched in. Sometimes we claimed that the writings that had not won prizes had been misjudged by the judges. Sometimes, we suggested, the judges had been subject to fits of insanity. I did a bit of sermonizing to the losers; I come from a long line of preachers. I told the losers,

as forcefully as I could, that they were not losers. This logical contradiction was noted. I said that literature was not a sack race. They didn't believe me. I reminded them that Kafka, James Joyce, and Jorge Luis Borges had never won the Nobel Prize, but that Pearl S. Buck had. I told them that their problems were not literary but spiritual. They didn't know what I meant. So today, I'm going to make that case again. This is more a sermon than an address, a sermon with the sound of an alarm bell to wake everyone up to the complexity of the situation. Bear with me.

## **2: A (Brief) Moment of Theory**

Humanity from its earliest recorded history has loved games and contests; they are a model for warfare and for all the forms of competition that produce victors. One of the mottos of this very school is "Hail to the Victors." It's tricky, if not impossible, to get in or out of the University of Michigan without singing that phrase in the school fight song. Pindar, perhaps the greatest lyric poet of the ancient Greek tradition, celebrates in his odes the nature of games and their champions. As he writes in the Olympian Ode number eleven, in Roy Arthur Swanson's translation, "When a man works hard and wins, he needs / the melody of praise, / in prelude, and a pledge in honor of his excellence."

We know, too, that the poets of antiquity staged poetry contests themselves. Pindar was apparently a student of the poet Corinna and won his first renown in a poetry contest in which he defeated the poet Myrtis. In a way, the Hopwood Award readings have always been victory odes on the subject of literature as practiced in our time, and the subtext of all these presentations is that some writers win while others lose, and the results should be announced and celebrated in public, with applause and large sums of cash. The grand life of literature and its prizeworthy practices are worthy of eloquent and lengthy speeches such as the one I am giving now, in this great hall. As my fellow Minnesotan Garrison Keillor has noted, winning a big prize is some consolation; it gives you reason to believe you may not have wasted your life after all.

In making the claims that in writing there are no losers, I

also have to acknowledge in all fairness that of course bad writing does actually exist. Sometimes bad writing is entered in contests like the Hopwoods. I speak here of writing that demonstrates more enthusiasm than expertise. It may also demonstrate self-delusion and near-illiteracy, hideously inappropriate diction, dead language, metrical ineptitude, monstrous egotism or unbridled narcissism coupled with collapsible or nonexistent literary structures, implausibility, unmotivated violence, pure silliness, and characters who could live viably only on another planet. And this is to say nothing about the stories and poems and essays and screenplays in which nothing happens and goes on not happening for page after page until the manuscript, perhaps out of the natural exhaustion of inertia, having run out of various nothings to relate, does not end, but stops. As night follows day, bad writing comes forth from pens and computers in passionate profusion. You can never run out of bad writing; you can never run out of bad dreams. There's always a big supply. Every one of my former colleagues here at the University of Michigan will attest to this great plenitude. They will raise their right hands and swear on the souls of their ancestors that bad writing like an ever-flowing stream gushes through their lives and that in their time they have read uncountable pages of it. *But bad writing is never a loss.* Bad writing does not make its author a loser. Bad writing serves as an inevitable and necessary first step, part of an apprenticeship—long or short—that may or may not result in mastery, in those precious glimpses of quality that we celebrate here.

The culture of capitalism and of public media in our time has an unfortunate tendency to turn everybody into either a winner or a loser. The public appears to crave that division. We polarize ourselves into one category or the other in an effort to create clear definitions, and we exclude middles as if they were nonexistent or made us metaphysically sick. Thanks to our fixation on sports and on spiritual authorities like the late Vince Lombardi, we have fetishized winning to such a degree that it is not unusual to see a football-playing face staring at the camera in a TV commercial and saying, "Winning. At all costs. At any price." This statement is

thought to be neither comical nor ridiculous but is presented as plain common sense by an American for Americans.

The victor, we believe, is a survivor. The loser is a nonsurvivor. And losers deserve what they get, which is nothing, or mockery. We have a universal forehead-sign for loserdom. We also have a top-rated television show called "Survivor" in which ruthlessness is celebrated; we have another top-rated show called "The Apprentice," whose verbal tag line, spoken by a Manhattan parvenu with a bad haircut, is, "You're fired," and we have a show called "Dismissed" in which a threesome is turned, through competition, into a twosome. What a pity that it could not remain a threesome! But that's capitalism for you. The American Idol has made his or her treacherous way past a long line of mean judges and semicomical losers to the idoldom that he or she is celebrated for. We have grown so accustomed to the polarizations created by competition that we have started to assume that there must be winners and losers in every category of human activity and that every nonwinner is thrown into some chaotic outer darkness unvisited by those who are truly alive. A remnant of Manichean religious mania colors all this polarization; some are saved, and others are apparently damned, or mocked, forever. It is assumed that this sorting out, one side for goats, the other for sheep, is the way of nature, or of God. Even the theologians of the Catholic Church are now getting rid of limbo, which is located somewhere between heaven and hell and was where unbaptized infants were supposed to go. I'm going to miss that place.

Judging from the available evidence, however, God's intentions are never scrupulously clear. To create such divisions is a category mistake, as I've suggested, and a soul error, a phrase I have acquired from Michel de Montaigne. In order to participate in such a category mistake, a person would have to believe that the practice of the arts—music, dance, literature—is always and everywhere a game and thus always and everywhere a competition. The arts would have to be imagined as some sort of bastard offspring of free enterprise, like oil drilling. Of course some people do believe this. Men believe it more often than women do. Gore Vidal, for one, has been quoted as saying, "It is not enough for oneself to succeed. Others must fail."

What we are in the presence of here is a mutation of compe-

tition into an alien realm where it serves as a spiritual infestation. When an art begins to suffer from public neglect, as all literature does now, the practitioners of the art fear a shake-out. To draw an analogy: Would it be correct to say, for example, that the great eccentric painter Albert Pinkham Ryder, with his few muddled dark paintings, now breaking apart because of his crackpot theories about preserving canvases, is, compared with Picasso, a loser? Is Ryder a minor painter? What about Edward Hopper? Or Beauford Delaney? Who decides? And who cares? Perhaps a few critics. It is a belated critical question, but not a creative one, and it is not a question with which Albert Pinkham Ryder should ever have concerned himself, though of course he did. Are you a loser if you have, so far, written only one good story, or one good book? Who decides? Who serves as the cultural arbiter?

The question of winning belongs to the world of money, power, and fame, but not truly to the practice of art. The one foolproof test of a true artist is that such a person will tell you that the practice of art has nothing whatever to do with winning anything. Art calls upon its maker always to judge criteria of quality but never of victory. Indeed, the rhetoric required for winning may corrupt the entire process. The practice of art participates with our world, just as it exists *in* the world, but some crucial part of it goes on in a different realm entirely as an inner practice, what once might have been called a form of soul work in which the spirit may be legitimately invoked. It is not romantic or a form of Romanticism to believe that the artist goes to society as the doctor goes to the patient. (However, in fairness, Kafka noted that the artist often does not know whether he is the doctor or the patient.) Art can also incorporate play and despair simultaneously, both the healing and the cutting open of the wound. Two people dancing are not losers when they are not dancing for an audience, or for money, or for a prize. They may be demonstrating their skill as dancers, or their love for each other. They may be cutting open a wound or healing it.

To think that art should be validated by money, prizes, or renown is the first mistake. After this mistake, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, there is no other, because every mistake follows logically from that one.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who worried about

this problem considerably, felt that in his time a new category had arisen, the category of fraudulent art. The problem, Kierkegaard felt, was not that fraudulent art was ugly and despised by the public; indeed, the problem was the opposite: such fraudulence thrived on popularity and a variety of fakery that depended upon manipulation and cheap effects.

As a consequence, our confusion arises not just from aesthetic considerations but from our culture in all its incoherence, since the book business has now become part of interlocking entertainment industries and the conglomeration of leisure-time activities in general. The colossal multinational entertainment corporations for whom publishing is often a comically minor part of the enterprise are more than happy to supply misunderstandings on this score. We no longer *report on the universe*, as Emerson commanded us to do; instead we often try to *replace* the universe with an alternative realm, whose truth to life is irrelevant. Meanwhile, along with these disarrangements goes the belief that mass acclaim is actually a guide to quality. Many practicing writers, artists, and musicians have felt a paralyzing despair by holding on to this phony article of faith. When Kierkegaard analyzed this particular problem in his book *On Authority and Revelation*, he came to the conclusion that the true artist writes out of the necessity of what he is forced to say and doesn't care whether the audience likes the work or not. The author wins his or her authority by not caring. This belief is actually more Zen than Christian, and great strength of character is required to hold on to it. Authority—the basis of authorship—for Kierkegaard thereby includes authenticity acquired by indifference to the public and to all success, including money. By Kierkegaard's standard, Emily Dickinson would have possessed such authenticity, while Danielle Steele, to pick a name at random, would not. According to Kierkegaard, the fraudulent author waits to hear what the audience thinks of his or her work before knowing what to think of it himself. By contrast, for the genuine artist, praise and prizes are beside the point.

A terrible spiritual discipline is required to achieve Kierkegaard's ideal state, and few of us are capable of it. Let's not kid ourselves. Money and applause in great quantities have their persuasive effect, especially on our parents and other family members. Daily life in this world seems to re-

quire cash, to make an obvious point, and it has to be obtained from somewhere. Also, it's nice to be liked and even better to be loved, and having an audience appreciate one's work seems like the rightful conclusion of a process that begins in solitude. Emily Dickinson, who understood solitude, wrote, "Success is counted sweetest / by those who ne'er succeed." We all know that some souls break under the strain of neglect, self-neglect, the neglect of others, and the general spiritual loneliness and despair of abjection that is sometimes required by an apprenticeship to an art.

The journalist James Lord, coming in to Alberto Giacometti's studio, found the artist, at the height of his powers, sitting with his head in his hands and thinking of suicide. For several days, as Giacometti tried to paint Lord's portrait, Giacometti muttered and swore. Days later, coming into the same studio, Lord heard Giacometti say, "I am destroying everything with great bravery."

Without ever having been Giacometti, I must say that I know that feeling very well. I myself have destroyed many pages with great bravery. I am never braver than when I am throwing away first, second, third, and fourth drafts. My waste basket and I deserve a medal. I am tempted to say that the artist who does not go through a period of desolation, of brave destruction with its markers of failure and deflation and despair, has missed an important step; maturity without some markers of despair somehow becomes glib. We do not talk much about glibness anymore—the word itself sounds antique—but it is one of the traditional markers of the hack. If something is really easy to say, then it's probably not worth saying. High productivity in commerce and industry may be fine, but in art, no. The arts, as Kierkegaard noted, have a tendency to turn all values upside down. The artist often looks and feels like a loser or a child or "haunted slave and helpless master"; the words and the paint and the notes often come hard or not at all to her, and when she wins anything she often looks upon the winnings with the gravest suspicion, as if they're given out by fools. The Kierkegaardian artist harbors a deep suspicion of the world in general and prizes in particular. Photographs of Samuel Beckett's face after he received the Nobel Prize were exemplary in this respect: Beckett's face presented a mask of resignation and comic despair.

The photographers popping flashbulbs in Beckett's face at least knew enough to apologize. "Oh, it's all right," the Nobel Prize winner said with forbearance.

Because I am delivering a sermon and not an address, what follows now are a few quick concluding parables and quotations. They are not imaginary, however. As we like to say now, they're actual.

### **3: A Few Doubtful Parables and Quotations**

"As things are, and as fundamentally they must always be, poetry is not a career, but a mug's game. No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written: he may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing." That particular deflating quotation, by T. S. Eliot, written in old age by a man who had received every possible accolade, takes us out of the self-certainties and dogmas of Kierkegaard, back to our writerly realm, that is, the world of doubts stretching from here to the horizon, or at least to the nearest bar. As writers, we must learn to live with despondency as a permanent fixture. For writers, doubt is what black lung disease is for miners, or knee injuries to professional football players: a near-inevitability. Note that Eliot denies that poetry is a career. He shares this conviction with Kierkegaard: poetry is a calling, not a career, an activity whose rewards are, for the most part, nonmaterialist and therefore always a matter of faith. You go around feeling a little crazed much of the time, warmed by your internal furnace, which is heated by waste paper. Part of you will always look and act like a bum. Eliot, noted as a magisterial cultural arbiter, calls it a mug's game, as if the poet were always the seedy operator of a carnival sideshow.

Here's an example. The Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek, who lived from 1883 to 1923, was, by most standards, a major-league lout: among his other qualities, he was a dedicated drunk and liar. He wrote up scientific descriptions of animals that did not exist, such as werewolves, for a serious magazine, *The Animal World*, that he edited. At one time in his life he stole dogs off the street for a living, concocting elaborate pedigrees for them that he then wrote up before reselling these

same refurbished dogs to gullible buyers for a profit. He was drafted into the Czech army, was captured by the Russians, and went to work for his country's enemies. He wrote his own obituary, to which he gave the headline, "A Traitor." According to Hašek's English translator, Hašek's grand masterwork, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, seems to have been partially written, given the evidence of the prose, while the author was besotted with vodka.

Nevertheless, Hašek won the bet that he made with fate. His novel *The Good Soldier Švejk* probably qualifies as one of the greatest satiric novels of the twentieth century. Max Brod has compared its greatness to that of Cervantes and Rabelais. Hašek himself seems to have had little or no idea of the greatness or durability of the work he had written. His concerns lay elsewhere.

The examples pile up. A writer obsessed with winners and losers, F. Scott Fitzgerald died thinking himself a failure. His career began with bright and shining successes for novels that almost no one reads anymore and ended with novels that were commercial failures, books that decades after Fitzgerald's death are universally admired. His last royalty check before his death was made out for thirteen dollars and thirteen cents. His career of early success followed by years of failure eerily recalls the career, or rather noncareer, two generations earlier, of the author of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville.

My next-to-last example is that of Elizabeth Bishop, by almost any measure one of the greatest poets of our country in the post-World War II era, who is known for, among her many other poems, one great poem in particular, a villanelle titled "One Art." What is the one art? Perhaps losing. Winning does not require art in the way that losing does. The poem's subject covers the despair over the loss of what one loves; out of these losses, not out of plenitude, the poem suggests, art arises. We lose objects, trivial ones. We forget names. Then as we age the losses grow larger: the places we have to leave, the locales we have to give up. Finally we lose those whom we love, at which point this eloquent poem loses its own nerve for a split second, stutters once, admonishes itself, and, regaining its balance, admits the truth that the worst is only known by expressing it and converting it into the (other) one art. Losing is thus taken to be *the* great subject when treated with both passion and

precision, but only under those two conditions. Given to us in one of the most demanding of all poetic forms, the lesson of this poem, if poems can be said to have lessons, is that if you are going to lose, you might as well lose big, and you had better turn your passion and your art to that subject by using every technical resource available to you.

### ONE ART

The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

There it is: a shipwreck. It floats its way to the island of art and is not repaired but described with *perfect* accuracy. This definition contributes to our knowing; in its perfection, it is a report on shared conditions. The demons of loss that have created the shipwreck, I am tempted to say, have been invited into the poem, where they are put to work. That is the canny directive of literary art: it puts our demons into productive alliances. In this way the demons are briefly fooled and become our allies; their energy supplies our poems with energy. A

demon, if carefully caged in literary form, may lend that form a strange gift, which is immortality.

Please don't be fooled into thinking I've announced anything original here. I may be guilty of some things but originality is not one of them. Every writer knows what I'm talking about and believes what I'm saying, at least conceptually. The trick is to believe all this emotionally, to believe it when you're alone, when you're not putting on your smiling optimistic public face behind the champagne and the hors d'oeuvres. Geoffrey Wolff said as much in his 1994 Hopwood Address, "Writers and Their Characters." "I've come to dread," Wolff observed, "the spring, all those announcements of The Best This, Most Distinguished That. . . . Something evil kicks in on Prize Days." The next year, 1995, Diane Johnson noted that "Any literary work is testimony to our failed intentions. Your book never turns out as good as you had hoped, back when you were thinking it up, before you went and spoiled it by writing it down."

Oh, wait: I forgot something. In the midst of all this talk of the inevitability of despair and doubt and despondency, I had forgotten that the writer must not develop a reliance on despair, as Louise Glück called it in her 1996 Hopwood Address. Do not fear happiness. We can have our happiness, too; we will not lose our poetry and our stories if our wounds are briefly healed. We had a poet in the MFA program here once, Mark Webster, who died as he was jogging along Huron River Road. We named our student reading series after him. But he left something else behind besides his name and memory and the fact of his death—he left behind his poetry, including these lines about a kind of joyous spiritual ecstasy:

The ghosts have much to celebrate  
in their lightened condition  
and perform with great joy  
the routines that a corporeal extant  
despises.

To soar as a winged creature  
was dreamed for, but here we  
move like scents on the air.

That's beautiful, those "scents on the air," that strange, almost-wrong word, "extant," which sounds to me like a hybridization of "sextant" and "existence." Note the shift, after death, into the passive voice. Mark Webster, was, or is (does it make any difference anymore, the verb tense?), writing about our lives as earthbound clods of the spirit, and he imagined our holy spirits, the ones we all have, as a scent, an odor of the spirit. Is it possible, can it be true, that we perform, as writers, our routines in a condition that combines both despair and "great joy"? Yes, it *can* be true because we are neither winners nor losers. We are not in a game. Cavafy's poem "The First Step" tells us this, tells every young writer (in Edmund Keeley's translation):

Just to be on the first step  
 should make you happy and proud.  
 To have come this far is no small achievement:  
 what you have done is a glorious thing.

And I see now that I have forgotten to tell you something else that I meant to say. I began my talk with a digression, by informing you that Bernard Malamud had trouble negotiating the stairs down from this stage after his Hopwood reading. I also told you that I kept a passage from Malamud's writings in my desk drawer for years as inspiration. But I didn't tell you what it was. The passage came from Malamud's great story "Idiots First." The main character, Mendel, who is dying, is trying to get his son, Isaac, the idiot referred to in the title, on a train, to journey to Isaac's uncle, who will take over the caretaking chores. Everywhere Mendel is thwarted by a malevolent devil named Ginzburg, who, as Ginzburg says, has a job, which is "to create conditions." Finally, having found the money for his son's ticket, Mendel, along with Isaac, stands at the gates for the train, guarded by the ticket taker, Ginzburg, who will not let Isaac through. "Favors you had enough already," Ginzburg says. "For you the train is gone. You shoulda been dead already at midnight. I told you yesterday. This is the best I can do." The two of them, Mendel and Ginzburg, begin a physical struggle: Mendel cries out, "You dog you. You bastard, don't you understand what it means human?"

I copied out that sentence, and I copied out the rest of the story. I copied out "*He beheld a shimmering, starry, blinding*

*light that produced darkness.*" I copied the story's conclusion several times, until I could almost recite it. When, later, in my own adult writing life, I had Saul clutching Gordy Himmelman in my novel *Saul and Patsy*, Malamud's story came floating back into my consciousness, as my rescue, and you will find it there, transformed and transfigured into my own scene in the rural Midwest. Blessings on Bernard Malamud and on his work. When he was in this room and then in the lobby under the chandelier with the signs of the zodiac, I was too shy to shake his hand or to speak to him.

The truth is that, in worldly terms, someone is always doing better than you are. Someone is always winning more of the prizes or making more of the money or getting more famous. When you open the newspaper, someone else's picture is likely to be splashed across the book page. In the vanity fair, you are always going to lose out to somebody else. And when no one else seems to care what you do, you will have to find your own consolation. You will have to care for yourself. That takes time and energy. In this way, a literary problem converts itself into a spiritual one. Perhaps you will have to invite the demons into the house of the spirit and put them to work. Only in that way will you *understand what it means human*. You must make an arrangement with yourself for the sake of leaving a record of what happened, of what was thought and felt and noticed, what it was like to be human when you were alive. This is incredibly hard to do. It requires a slight contempt for the dumbshows of the world and a great respect for the inner life. You may become a bohemian, someone who looks like a bum. You may end up selling dogs with fake pedigrees to the suckers. But if you appear faithfully at your desk, pledging yourself to the work, eventually the spirit will descend on you and you will write without any sense that time is passing, and when that happens, no one on earth is doing better than you are.

Congratulations to you all, winners and losers both.