

A BOUQUET OF REINCARNATIONS

For John Idol

One winter afternoon, my grandmother told me as she put a kettle on a cold stove that “a watched pot never boils.” Shivering from a rare Georgia snow I’d just left, I studied her pot on what slowly became a flame-orange burner in about five minutes or an eternity, whichever came first. Sure enough, she was right: no sooner had I lost interest in that kettle than it started to whistle. This got me to thinking in Sunday school that if I never took my eye off the clock above the crucifix, I’d never get any older, and I wouldn’t have to go to another school that I didn’t like. (My father was a career military man, and we moved every two or three years.) The troubling hierarchy of clock and crucifix, however, went unnoticed.

When a great aunt died not long after my pot study, I said that she’d “gone to the dogs” by which I meant that she’d gone to be with my pet Labradors who had gone, I’d been assured, to a better place. The dog comment, however, must have conveyed incipient cynicism to my grandmother because she marched me over to a light switch.

“You see this switch, Skipper?”

“Yessum,” I said.

“Now if I turn off these lights, are they out forever?”

“No mam,” I responded.

“That’s right. Just because the light goes out when I mash the switch doesn’t mean the electricity that made the light is gone, does it?”

“No, mam, it’s right there hangin’ fire in the wall just waiting to be turned loose again.”

“Yes, and that’s where Aunt Lucille is—not in the wall, of course, but just waiting somewhere to be lit.”

That was a powerfully convincing analogy for a youth, and for years I felt guilty every time I threw away a burned-out bulb. “Cheaper to buy new bulbs than fix the old ones,” Granddad said, confusing the issue even further.

A year later, my father provided still another reason for a callow youth to believe in reincarnation. Only four months after he arrived in Germany, the war ended. I guess that wasn’t enough time for him because he volunteered to go to Japan to fight those people too. But it wasn’t too long before that war ended as well. I figured the Japs heard that my father was on the way and decided to save themselves a lot of trouble. When Dad got home, he told me the ship that had been transporting him and his men to the Pacific was one of twenty-or-so ships which our Navy salvaged after Pearl Harbor. Only three ships were so badly damaged that they were left on the harbor bottom; the rest were raised and repaired to fight those who had sunk them. God had to be on our side, I concluded, and the rumors of immortality I was hearing had to amount to something.

Any doubts that I might have had were dispelled when my cousin Diane and I launched her dog. Diane’s terrier Roscoe had moved in with us when her sister was born. Mostly the animal stayed outside, which meant we forgot to feed him sometimes, which meant that sometimes he made a meal of our grandfather’s prize pullets. After Roscoe raided the hen house for the third time, Granddad issued an ultimatum—“get shut of that dog!” When we asked how we might do that, he said, “Just lose him in the woods.” Well,

that was an exhausting enterprise for an August afternoon in South Georgia, but what options were left to us? Granddad would never let us use his shotgun, there was no animal pound, stoning was too slow and unreliable, and a knife was out of the question. So we got some rope and went down to the banks of a neighbor's fish pond. Here were several supple sweet gum and sourwood saplings which I sometimes used as giant sling shots to chuck stones on days that I tired of counting to a thousand. I picked out one tree that still had some snap, climbed it, and then swung to the ground. As I held it down, Diane tied one end of the rope around Roscoe's neck and the other end to the sapling's crown. At her signal, I released my hold and off flew Roscoe. At the apex of his flight, however, he slipped his noose and plummeted into the bulrushes ringing the shallow pond. When we saw no signs of life down there, we returned disconsolate to the house where we told Granddad what we'd done. About that time, up ran Roscoe covered in mud and ready to play despite the raw wounds on his ears. Since neither of us had the heart to do him any further harm, we implored Granddad to dog-proof the hen house. "Seeing that Roscoe is tough enough to bounce back from an autopsy," he said, "I reckon I have no choice. In the future," he continued, "if you bury someone, bury him face down. That way if he starts digging his way back, he'll have a lot farther to go." For myself, I was sure we'd snapped Roscoe's neck when we launched him, but here he was licking my hand like Lazarus raised from Abraham's bosom. I wasn't about to bury my oldest friend face up or down.

A couple of months later when Roscoe was killed by a car, my sisters and I were, nevertheless, obliged to bury him in the peach orchard beside the house. After a few days, I got to missing him so that I dug him up. When Granddad saw what I'd done, he wrung the neck of an old rooster that had always given Roscoe fits, and we buried them together with Roscoe's head resting on the rooster's side. "Even the son of God had to die to get to heaven," Granddad said. "No one gets a bye. The Good Book says 'a live dog is better than a dead lion,' and though I've never met the king of beasts, I reckon the prophet had it right. Anyway, Roscoe can chase his chickens forever now or die tryin'." We muttered a few more words over his grave while my sisters wept as they tied two sticks in a cross. Then we all sang "Amazing Grace." A few days later, Granddad came back from town with a pecan tree sapling and planted it beside the grave, which had already begun to sink.

My sisters regarded me with awe after I rescued our pet from the grave, so when Miss Goldie was discovered floating upside down in her algae-choked bowl, they brought her directly to my attention. I reasoned that if a fish swims upstream to die, swimming downstream must be good for its health. I took the fish into the bathroom and turned on the cold-water spigot. Then while holding the lifeless creature by its tail under the tap with one hand, I gently squeezed her sides with the other. After a few seconds as Goldie began to wriggle, I dropped her and an Alka-Seltzer into a bowl of fresh water. With the help of a new aerator, recycled Goldie lived several more months to our utter amazement and joy.

Shortly before Christmas one year while I was still basking in my family's glow, my mother bought a Christmas cactus which she explained was one that bloomed every year to honor Jesus' birthday and "to remind us," she said, "that the only thing standing between immortality and immortality is the sign of the cross." As we waited in vain for that plant to flower, Mother, her faith shaken, threatened to take it back to the nursery. About March of the next year, however, we began to notice buds developing at the ends of each long pendulous branch. On Easter morning, Mother came downstairs to hide some pastel

eggs and declared, "Glory be! The Christmas cactus has bloomed at Easter!" She took those blossoms to heart the way Mary rejoiced at the stone rolled away from Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. The connection may have been specious, but it sure made us happy, for when Mother was happy, her kids were ecstatic, and thoughts of a better life never crossed my mind, for my plate was full.

Throughout my childhood and well into my adolescence, the sun followed me wherever I went. I could not conceive of the earth without me, and I seldom tried. My faith was rocked, however, as a freshman in high school when our often profane and iconoclastic general science teacher said, "The only way to reach Paradise is through Intercourse [long pause] Pennsylvania! No, seriously, after death all of us return to the same state we'd enjoyed before birth. How bad is that?" To illustrate, he suggested that the soul might be compared to a drop of water. "Let's call it Drop A," he said. "Now if you reduce that drop to two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen, where is your drop of water or your soul? If you examine the same hydrogen and oxygen atoms after the distillation, where is the evidence that they have ever been water, much less Drop A?" Even though Drop A's oxygen and hydrogen are virtually indestructible, that analogy bothered me for a long time until I took a sophomore earth-science class. Here I learned of aquifers, great bodies of water that may lie untapped in the earth's bosom for millions of years. I was wise enough to see that the aquifer-as-heaven analogy, which I'd hastily constructed, was not perfect because clearly the body undergoes a chemical decomposition after death, and all the vital fluids eventually dry up, including Drop A. Alas, the soul is not a drop of water that slips blissfully unchanged and discrete into a heavenly reservoir at death, but all was not lost.

In junior chemistry, our study of the inert gases, which make up about one percent of the earth's atmosphere, was for me metaphorically fertile. Inert argon, for example, tasteless, colorless, and odorless, never combines with any element; it never changes in any fundamental way as it courses and mingles with other gases about the earth. Remarkably, argon is part of every breath we take, yet it is unmarked by any apparatus, animal, mineral, or vegetable, that it passes through. There is a very good chance that in every human breath at least one argon atom exists that percolated through the mortal lungs of Socrates, Attila, Mary, Jesus, and anyone else who has ever drawn a breath on this planet. It occurred to me, then, that the soul might consist of a single atom of an inert gas, inviolate for eternity. Hidden in its subatomic rain forest, I was confident, is the memory of its original body, life, and personality. About the time that I was concocting this theory, however, I read of a Swedish mortician who observed that the human body on average loses twenty-one grams at the instant of death. Could an argon atom weigh twenty-one grams, I wondered? Senior physics disabused me of this quaint notion.

I'm old enough now to recognize the soul-as-argon theory as a comfortable fiction (though it's never been disproved), but I find no harm in such myth-making, for like crutches, myths make forward motion possible when just standing is painful. Who wants to wake on a beautiful spring day and think, "In X years, I'll be food for worms and nothing more"? With the right crutch beside the bed, be it a multi-vitamin or a pair of running shoes, one can at least get up, fix breakfast, water the garden, and succor the spouse. "With the right attitude," Robert Pirsig wrote, "nothing is difficult." I've long admired the plucky Incan flutist who left his femurs to musical science. When he made out his will, he had to know that everyone who would ever play or hear the instruments carved from his

thigh bones would be moved by his musical soul and his defiance of death's finality.

My own myth-making ability was tested when my grandfather died. Granddad had asked to be cremated, and though his wife disapproved, she was faithful to her husband's last wish. One night as we sat staring at his funeral urn wondering what to do with five pounds of ashes, I remembered my old Watched Clock Theory of Immortality. I suggested that we place a few ounces of Granddad's ashes in an hour glass and let him mock the stasis of death every time we used it. Finally, however, we sprinkled a generous scoop of his remains in the garden that he had spent fifty years of his life making fertile. Grandmother then took the remainder to the Crystal Palace, her potting shed, where she mixed them and a dollop of tears into some potting soil, which, in late October, she worked around the roots of her forget-me-nots. The long unfurling clusters of petals were never as blue, their eyes never as gold as they were the subsequent spring.

Grandmother herself died not long afterwards. I like to think of her in the Crystal Palace cultivating the "reincarnations," as she nicknamed her favorite hothouse perennials. When the doughty French woman Jeanne Calment publicly jubilated on her 121st birthday, Grandmother was cheered by news that the Bible's limit of 120 years was not absolute. Though Grandmother fell short of the "limit" by forty years, she didn't think Jehovah had ever intentionally placed such an arbitrary restriction on human longevity. When Mrs. Calment celebrated her 122nd birthday, Grandmother's intuition was proven correct though she could not be present for the festivities. She was in the cemetery which she liked to remind anyone who would listen was Greek for "sleeping place."

She was equally encouraged when she read in the local paper that her oldest grandson, yours truly, had achieved immortality. It seems that when the Class of 1943 decided to donate a bell to the new Clemson University carillon, their president called the English Department where I am employed and asked if anyone could supply them with a poem for the four-thousand pound "C" bell. The secretary gave them my phone number; I sent them six verses suitable for a bell, and a year later the newspaper headlined, "Local Poet Achieves Immortality." I submitted this headline with my annual evaluation the following year with the marginal annotation, "and a two-percent raise?" In fact, I received no raise. Immortality like virtue, it seems, is its own reward. The ironic thing is that every time I begin to feel immortal, my back goes out or I get a cold.



Since immortality has been so generously bestowed on me, I have made a short study of the subject like the blind man inspecting a white elephant.

First I wondered what is the evidence that any living thing is immortal or even close to it? Lotus seeds have germinated after 1288 years which is a long time but not a bronze bell. Cancer cells, on the other hand, will reproduce forever if nutrients are supplied. Pollen appears to be immortal; ten-thousand year old pollen grains have caused allergic reactions in archeologists exploring long-sealed tombs. Bacteria locked in a rock crystal for 250,000 years have recently been resuscitated. Emily Dickinson thought a letter was immortal because its envelope enclosed a mind without a body. I suppose the same could be said for any poem, symphony, or water color on good paper. Art has long been hailed

by its creators and sympathetic critics as immortal despite the dust swept from museums and libraries every day. James Joyce thought that if he made *Ulysses* arcane enough scholars would be kept busy forever. No sign of any let up yet! If Steven Spielberg and Michael Crichton have it right, genes are immortal, but a clone is a poor substitute for immortality. I can't imagine anyone rescued from despair because a scraping from their meatless bones will some day regenerate their body. The flesh of mother and clone may be identical, but their intimate selves are altogether different. Finally, the past and future are immortal; we measure the present in nanoseconds.

Another question that occurred to me is, though immortality is widely touted, who are those opposed to it? Pindar exhorted his soul to enjoy and exhaust the limits of this life before it began preparing for another. Odysseus was offered immortality by Calypso, but he surprised many by turning her down. Medieval French kings had a seneschal among their courtiers one of whose duties was to whisper, "Remember, Sire, you are mortal," even as the worshipful masses shouted, "Long live the king!" The Greek Tithonus and Swift's Struldbruggs both made the mistake of achieving immortality without acquiring youth, so theirs are cautionary tales. The centaur Chiron renounced his immortality when he realized that eternal life meant eternal suffering. Many since Chiron have felt that neither centaur nor man is capable of immortality like the single mother of eight living in a Mississippi trailer who wanted nothing of her preacher's "eternal life." The contemporary novelist Tom Robbins has little apparent use for the immortal soul, something that he variously refers to as, "a billow of sacred flatulence..., a shimmer of personal swamp gas..., or a cross between a wolf howl, a photon, and a dribble of dark molasses." Finally, it has been suggested that the gods themselves, bored with their own perfection, might envy man's mortality. But to rephrase Susan Ertz, whereas the gods, who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday, long for surcease, man desires an infinitude of football. That strikes me as a long-term goal to reconsider.

What does science have to say about immortality? Until the evolution of the death gene about three billion years ago, biologists think that many simple organisms enjoyed a form of immortality—splitting endlessly unless the food supply disappeared or they were struck by lightning. Such was Eden for the protozoa. Some scientists see cryonics as a legitimate attempt to regain that deathless state, but to date only some small mammals have been frozen alive and thawed unharmed. No humans have been reanimated following their descent into a stainless-steel cylinder of sub-zero dimethyl sulfoxide. At last count, about forty people had paid their \$80,000 and been placed in cryonic suspension, but three-quarters of these have been thawed and buried when their bank accounts dried up. Indeed, many are cold, but few are frozen.

Computer scientists have suggested that immortality might be attained in cyber-space. This would involve placing everything one knows, family albums, financial records, home movies, diaries, and so forth on the Internet. The drawbacks to such an afterlife are summarized by Lily Tomlin's observation, "There is sex after death; we just don't feel it." Nevertheless, an eternal presence on the Worldwide Web might accomplish what William James thought was the principal virtue of believing in transcendence: "a genuine difference in our moral life."

Like science, pseudo-science has long offered a variety of schemes tailored to every wallet. The Chinese philosopher Ko Hung thought that a steady diet of cinnabar (mercuric sulfide) and white honey would render the diner incorruptible, but no one since Ko

vanished like milk in the mattress has been able to duplicate his results. A more cynical but unnamed pseudo-scientist facetiously suggested that since copulation produces life, necrophilia ought to yield an afterlife. Today there are plastic, Tupperware-like coffins that are burped regularly for freshness, \$125,000 hyperbaric oxygen chambers which enclose a sleeper in pure oxygen (non-smokers only), and \$7,000 injections prepared in Swiss clinics from a potpourri of cells drawn from aborted sheep. Finally, there's the \$399 Fountain of Youth Reincarnation Kit. "If you can conceive it and believe it," the literature promises, "you can achieve it." The kit consists of a pamphlet and map informing the temporarily dead "how not to get hopelessly lost in heaven or hell." Candidly, the Fountain of Youth home page does not say that their kit will make the purchaser immortal; it will only show the way to a second life because, as super spy James Bond presciently noted, "You only live twice." (Curiously, Bond is quoted several times in Fountain of Youth literature as if he were a real authority.) How can a purchaser be sure that humans have a second life coming? "Well, everyone has had at least one *deja-vu* experience, haven't they," Fountain of Youth asks, "and surely everyone by now knows the benefits of Past-Lives Therapy." The kit, which is only offered for sale on the Internet, lists a post-office-box return address in Evergreen Park, Illinois. My guess is that it's a cemetery.



Despite the two-ton bronze bell ringing in Tillman Tower with my name and verses embossed on it, I long for something more. I sympathize with the youthful Roman emperor Elagabalus who sent for the "breast of a phoenix" to insure his immortality. Unable to locate the mythic bird that rises from its ashes, the emperor's soldiers killed and salted a flamingo, which they called an African bird of paradise, and sent it to Rome. Predictably, this substitute failed, for the emperor was murdered at eighteen, an age when many of us, not just emperors, are feeling like permanent fixtures on the planet.

So I shall ask to be buried in the fetal curl with a goblet of nectar and a bowl of ambrosia beside me. Should cremation be mandatory by that time as it is in India, I'd like my ashes scattered in a costly fireworks display. Should all these charms fail, may I live again like George Eliot "in a few minds made better by my presence." In case I do return, I've willed everything to myself. Just kidding. Either way:

To know the punch line
is to spoil the joke,
so heaven's gate
is shrouded in smoke.

It's best not to know
if the wind will rise—
then if it does,
it's a fine surprise.