



Zimmer
Auditorium
Reading

Tuesday, April 17, 2001, at 8:00 p.m.

*Campus fiction reading before an audience
of more than five hundred*

JAMES SCHIFF

We have people in our audience tonight who have traveled from as far as Georgia, Nebraska, South Carolina, even Maine to see John Updike. In fact, when I announced to one of my classes that individuals were flying in from these distant states, one student raised his hand, looked at me in disbelief, and said, “For a writer? You mean people are flying that far to see a writer?” While I know that some will travel far for love, and others will go cross country to attend a Final Four NCAA basketball game, it’s refreshing to see that people can be just as devoted to their writers.

John Updike was in town ten years ago, which translates to about twelve or thirteen books ago, and I had the good fortune to attend a small luncheon in his honor. During that meal I learned that he had just returned from a golf trip to Scotland and Ireland, and that he would

be spending the rest of the day touring Cincinnati with literary patrons, giving an interview, attending a reception and dinner, then reading from his fiction. He went on to say that he would be doing something similar in a few days in another city. While John Updike was delightful, intelligent, witty, and genial, there was something that I could not quite figure out. Here was one of America's most prolific writers, an author who has now published more than fifty volumes and over two hundred short stories, and what was he doing? Spending his days playing golf and traveling to cities where he socialized, ate rich meals, and signed books. How could this be?

A month or two later I happened to be in Pittsburgh for an academic conference where, by coincidence, John Updike was the keynote speaker. Again, as I observed, the author was attending panels, giving readings and interviews, talking to and shaking hands with strangers. It was at that point that I became convinced that John Updike was merely the front man for an underground stable of writers who were working surreptitiously somewhere in the Northeast, cranking out stories and reviews for the *New Yorker* and articles for every journal from *Popular Mechanics* to *Elle*. I figured I had a great scoop here, better than finding the elusive Pynchon. But then, later that night, it must have been around eleven o'clock, I was sitting with friends in the lobby of the William Penn Hotel when I looked across the immense room and was surprised to see, of all people, John Updike taking a break, seated alone at a table, writing. Now, for all I know he was filling out a form to order room-service breakfast, but the image was memorable: the writer, after an exhausting day, still working to get the words out and onto paper, no matter what the time.

John Updike is a writer whose work is truly astonishing, not only because of his productivity, but because of his versatility (he has written novels, short stories, poems, a play, essays, and book reviews); his range (his characters are Toyota salesmen, biochemists, divinity school and

history professors, Danish queens, African dictators); his intelligence (as Martin Amis writes, Updike is “a master of all trades, able to crank himself up to PhD level on any subject he fancies”); and perhaps most importantly, his verbal precision and lyrical prose. I cannot tell you how often I have read a line of his and reacted in much the same way as I did when first seeing that Tiger Woods commercial in which Tiger plays Hacky Sack with a golf ball balanced on the clubface of an iron. Watching, you say to yourself, in the case of both Tiger Woods and John Updike, *How does he do that?* As one critic wrote many years ago, “John Updike frequently gives the impression that he has six or seven senses, all of them operating at full strength.”

I could go on and on praising John Updike, but instead I'll close with two quotations. First, novelist Philip Roth, who has won his share of awards, said after finishing Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*, “Updike knows so much, about golf, about porn, about kids, about America. I don't know anything about anything. His hero is a Toyota salesman. Updike knows everything about being a Toyota salesman. Here I live in the country and I don't even know the names of the trees. I'm going to give up writing.” And William Pritchard, who is here in attendance tonight, said of John Updike, “He is putting together a body of work, which in substantial intelligent creation will eventually be seen as second to none in our time.” Please welcome John Updike.

JOHN UPDIKE

Thank you. Thank you, Jim. Gee whiz. I think that clock at the back of the hall is wrong. I have 8:17 p.m., and I'm nervous about the time because, on the assumption that this is a group seriously interested in the short story, I was proposing to read not just one, which is usually plenty, but two stories. Neither is very long, but they have the interest of having been written at opposite ends of my fairly long career as a short-story writer. The first one, which I will read first, was written in

1956, and the last one was written late last year and was just published in the *New Yorker* early this year. They are similar in that each is about a husband, a wife, and another woman. The differences, though, I think will become evident for those who have the patience to listen to both. And even to me. I reread them this afternoon and found the old one surprising. It was the sixth story of mine that the *New Yorker* took.

I set up shop in the mid-fifties hoping to be a professional writer. I assumed that the trade and the profession existed, that there was an economic niche in this country for people who wanted to write. And I think at that point in the fifties it was still true, but just barely true. I was lucky. I was one of the last ones to catch the train before it pulled out of the station.

The *New Yorker* was very important to me, as a model of excellence and restraint and coolness. It was its cool that I liked, I think, above all. The quietness of it, the understated quality; you don't get that much in magazines, including the *New Yorker*, anymore. But I'd hoped to make a living by selling the *New Yorker* enough short stories, and the fact that I was able to sell this one, after a fallow period, meant a lot to me. It's called "Snowing in Greenwich Village," written by a young would-be writer who, in fact, did live in Greenwich Village for about a year and a half. What else do I need to warn you of? I didn't notice any trade names you wouldn't recognize or anything. You would notice that what is sexually exciting to these people might not be so to you. But this is 1956.

Snowing in Greenwich Village

The Maples had moved just the day before to West Thirteenth Street, and that evening they had Rebecca Cune over, because now they were so close. A tall, always slightly smiling girl with an absent-minded manner, she allowed Richard Maple to slip off her coat and

scarf even as she stood gently greeting Joan. Richard, moving with an extra precision and grace because of the smoothness with which the business had been managed—though he and Joan had been married nearly two years, he was still so young-looking that people did not instinctively lay upon him hostile duties; their reluctance worked in him a corresponding hesitancy, so that often it was his wife who poured the drinks, while he sprawled on the sofa in the attitude of a favored and wholly delightful guest—entered the dark bedroom, entrusted the bed with Rebecca’s clothes, and returned to the living room. Her coat had seemed weightless.

Rebecca, seated beneath the lamp, on the floor, one leg tucked under her, one arm up on the Hide-a-Bed that the previous tenants had not as yet removed, was saying, “I had known her, you know, just for the day she taught me the job, but I said O.K. I was living in an awful place called a hotel for ladies. In the halls they had typewriters you put a quarter in.”

Joan, straight-backed on a Hitchcock chair from her parents’ home in Amherst, a damp handkerchief balled in her hand, turned to Richard and explained, “Before her apartment now, Becky lived with this girl and her boyfriend.”

“Yes, his name was Jacques,” Rebecca said.

Richard asked, “You lived with them?” The arch composure of his tone was left over from the mood aroused in him by his successful and, in the dim bedroom, somewhat poignant—as if he were with great tact delivering a disappointing message—disposal of their guest’s coat.

“Yes, and he insisted on having his name on the mailbox. He was terribly afraid of missing a letter. When my brother was in the Navy and came to see me and saw on the mailbox”—with three parallel movements of her fingers she set the names beneath one another—

“Georgene Clyde,
Rebecca Cune,
Jacques Zimmerman,

he told me I had always been such a nice girl. Jacques wouldn't even move out so my brother would have a place to sleep. He had to sleep on the floor." She lowered her lids and looked in her purse for a cigarette.

"Isn't that wonderful?" Joan said, her smile broadening helplessly as she realized what an inane thing it had been to say. Her cold worried Richard. It had lasted seven days without improving. Her face was pale, mottled pink and yellow; this accentuated the Modiglian-esque quality established by her oval blue eyes and her habit of sitting to her full height, her head quizzically tilted and her hands palm upward in her lap.

Rebecca, too, was pale, but in the consistent way of a drawing, perhaps the weight of her lids and a certain virtuosity about the mouth suggested it—by da Vinci.

"Who would like some sherry?" Richard asked in a deep voice, from a standing position.

"We have some hard stuff if you'd rather," Joan said to Rebecca; from Richard's viewpoint the remark, like those advertisements which from varying angles read differently, contained the quite legible declaration that this time *he* would have to mix the old-fashioned.

"The sherry sounds fine," Rebecca said. She enunciated her words distinctly, but in a faint, thin voice that disclaimed for them any consequence.

"I think, too," Joan said.

"Good." Richard took from the mantel the eight-dollar bottle of Tio Pepe that the second man on the Spanish-sherry account had stolen for him. So all could share in the drama of it, he uncorked the bottle in the living room. He posingly poured out three glasses, half full, passed them around, and leaned against the mantel (the Maples had never had a mantel before), swirling the liquid, as the agency's wine expert had told him to do, thus liberating the esters and ethers, until his wife said, as she always did, it being the standard toast in her parents' home, "Cheers, dears!"

Rebecca continued the story of her first apartment. Jacques had never worked. Georgene never held a job more than three weeks. The three of them contributed to a kitty, to which all enjoyed equal access. Rebecca had a separate bedroom. Jacques and Georgene sometimes worked on television scripts; they pinned the bulk of their hopes onto a serial titled *The IBI—I* for Intergalactic, or Interplanetary, or something—in *Space and Time*. One of their friends was a young Communist who never washed and always had money because his father owned half of the West Side. During the day, when the two girls were off working, Jacques flirted with a young Swede upstairs who kept dropping her mop onto the tiny balcony outside their window. “A real bombardier,” Rebecca said. When Rebecca moved into a single apartment for herself and was all settled and happy, Georgene and Jacques offered to bring a mattress and sleep on her floor. Rebecca felt that the time had come for her to put her foot down. She said no. Later, Jacques married a girl other than Georgene.

“Cashews, anybody?” Richard said. He had bought a can at the corner delicatessen, expressly for this visit, though if Rebecca had not been coming he would have bought something else there on some other excuse, just for the pleasure of buying his first thing at the store where in the coming years he would purchase so much and become so familiar.

“No thank you,” Rebecca said. Richard was so far from expecting refusal that out of momentum he pressed them on her again, exclaiming, “Please! They’re so good for you.” She took two and bit one in half.

He offered the dish, a silver porringer given to the Maples as a wedding present, to his wife, who took a greedy handful of cashews and looked so pale and mottled that he asked, “How do you feel?” not so much forgetting the presence of their guest as parading his concern, quite genuine at that, before her.

“Fine,” Joan said edgily, and perhaps she did.

Though the Maples told some stories—how they had lived in a log cabin in a YMCA camp for the first three months of their

married life; how Bitsy Flaner, a mutual friend, was the only girl enrolled in Bentham Divinity School; how Richard's advertising work brought him into glancing contact with Yogi Berra, who was just as funny as the papers said—they did not regard themselves (that is, each other) as raconteurs, and Rebecca's slight voice dominated the talk. She had a gift for odd things.

Her rich uncle lived in a metal house, furnished with auditorium chairs. He was terribly afraid of fire. Right before the Depression he had built an enormous boat to take himself and some friends to Polynesia. All his friends lost their money in the crash. He did not. He made money. He made money out of everything. But he couldn't go on the trip alone, so the boat was still waiting in Oyster Bay, a huge thing, rising thirty feet out of the water. The uncle was a vegetarian. Rebecca had not eaten turkey for Thanksgiving until she was thirteen years old because it was the family custom to go to the uncle's house on that holiday. The custom was dropped during the war, when the children's synthetic heels made black marks all over his asbestos floor. Rebecca's family had not spoken to the uncle since. "Yes, what got me," Rebecca said, "was the way each new wave of vegetables would come in as if it were a different course."

Richard poured the sherry around again and, because this made him the center of attention anyway, said, "Don't some vegetarians have turkeys molded out of crushed nuts for Thanksgiving?"

After a stretch of silence, Joan said, "I don't know." Her voice, unused for ten minutes, cracked on the last syllable. She cleared her throat, scraping Richard's heart.

"What would they stuff them with?" Rebecca asked, dropping an ash into the saucer beside her.

BEYOND AND BENEATH the window there arose a clatter. Joan reached the windows first, Richard next, and lastly Rebecca, standing on tiptoe, elongating her neck. Six mounted police, standing in their stirrups, were galloping two abreast down Thirteenth Street. When the Maples' exclamations had subsided, Rebecca

remarked, "They do it every night at this time. They seem awfully jolly, for policemen."

"Oh, and it's snowing!" Joan cried. She was pathetic about snow; she loved it so much, and in these last years had seen so little. "On our first night here! Our first *real* night." Forgetting herself, she put her arms around Richard, and Rebecca, where another guest might have turned away, or smiled too broadly, too encouragingly, retained without modification her sweet, absent look and studied, through the embracing couple, the scene outdoors. The snow was not taking on the wet street; only the hoods and tops of parked automobiles showed an accumulation.

"I think I'd best go," Rebecca said.

"Please don't," Joan said with an urgency Richard had not expected; clearly she was very tired. Probably the new home, the change in the weather, the good sherry, the currents of affection between herself and her husband that her sudden hug had renewed, and Rebecca's presence had become in her mind the inextricable elements of one enchanted moment.

"Yes, I think I'll go because you're so snuffly and peaked."

"Can't you just stay for one more cigarette? Dick, pass the sherry around."

"A teeny bit," Rebecca said, holding out her glass. "I guess I told you, Joan, about the boy I went out with who pretended to be a headwaiter."

Joan giggled expectantly. "No, honestly, you never did." She hooked her arm over the back of the chair and wound her hand through the slats, like a child assuring herself that her bedtime has been postponed. "What did he do? He imitated headwaiters?"

"Yes, he was the kind of guy who, when we get out of a taxi and there's a grate giving off steam, crouches down"—Rebecca lowered her head and lifted her arms—"and pretends he's the Devil."

The Maples laughed, less at the words themselves than at the way Rebecca had evoked the situation by conveying, in her understated imitation, both her escort's flamboyant attitude and her own undemonstrative nature. They could see her standing by the

taxi door, gazing with no expression as her escort bent lower and lower, seized by his own joke, his fingers writhing demonically as he felt horns sprout through his scalp, flames lick his ankles, and his feet shrivel into hoofs. Rebecca's gift, Richard realized, was not that of having odd things happen to her but that of representing, through the implicit contrast with her own sane calm, all things touching her as odd. This evening, too, might appear grotesque in her retelling: "Six policemen on horses galloped by and she cried 'It's snowing!' and hugged him. He kept telling her how sick she was and filling us full of sherry."

"What else did he do?" Joan eagerly asked.

"At the first place we went to—it was a big nightclub on the roof of somewhere—on the way out he sat down and played the piano until a woman at a harp asked him to stop."

Richard asked, "Was the woman *playing* the harp?"

"Yes, she was strumming away." Rebecca made circular motions with her hands.

"Well, did he play the tune she was playing? Did he *accompany* her?" Petulance, Richard realized without understanding why, had entered his tone.

"No, he just sat down and played something else. I couldn't tell what it was."

"Is this *really* true?" Joan asked, egging her on.

"And then, at the next place we went to, we had to wait at the bar for a table and I looked around and he was walking among the tables asking people if everything was all right."

"Wasn't it *awful*?" said Joan.

"Yes. Later he played the piano there, too. We were sort of the main attraction. Around midnight he thought we ought to go out to Brooklyn, to his sister's house. I was exhausted. We got off the subway two stops too early, under the Manhattan Bridge. It was deserted, with nothing going by except black limousines. Miles above our head"—she stared up, as though at a cloud, or the sun—"was the Manhattan Bridge, and he kept saying it was the el. We finally found some steps and two policemen who told us to go back to the subway."

“What does this amazing man do for a living?” Richard asked.

“He teaches school. He’s quite bright.” She stood up, extending in stretch a long, silvery-white arm. Richard got her coat and scarf and said he’d walk her home.

“It’s only three-quarters of a block,” Rebecca protested in a voice free of any insistent inflection.

“You must walk her home, Dick,” Joan said. “Pick up a pack of cigarettes.” The idea of his walking in the snow seemed to please her, as if she were anticipating how he would bring back with him, in the snow on his shoulders and the coldness of his face, all the sensations of the walk she was not well enough to risk.

“You should stop smoking for a day or two,” he told her.

Joan waved them goodbye from the head of the stairs.

THE SNOW, invisible except around streetlights, exerted a fluttering pressure on their faces. “Coming down hard now,” he said.

“Yes.”

At the corner, where the snow gave the green light a watery blueness, her hesitancy in following him as he turned to walk with the light across Thirteenth Street led him to ask, “It is this side of the street you live on, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I thought I remembered from the time we drove you down from Boston.” The Maples had been living in the West Eighties then. “I remember I had an impression of big buildings.”

“The church and the butcher’s school,” Rebecca said. “Every day about ten when I’m going to work the boys learning to be butchers come out for an intermission all bloody and laughing.”

Richard looked up at the church; the steeple was fragmentarily silhouetted against the scattered lit windows of a tall apartment building on Seventh Avenue. “Poor church,” he said. “It’s hard in this city for a steeple to be the tallest thing.”

Rebecca said nothing, not even her habitual “Yes.” He felt rebuked for being preachy. In his embarrassment he directed her attention to the first next thing he saw, a poorly lettered sign above a

great door. “Food Trades Vocational High School,” he read aloud. “The people upstairs told us that the man before the man before *us* in our apartment was a wholesale-meat salesman who called himself a Purveyor of Elegant Foods. He kept a woman in the apartment.”

“Those big windows up there,” Rebecca said, pointing up at the top story of a brownstone, “face mine across the street. I can look in and feel we are neighbors. Someone’s always there; I don’t know what they do for a living.”

After a few more steps they halted, and Rebecca, in a voice that Richard imagined to be slightly louder than her ordinary one, said, “Do you want to come up and see where I live?”

“Sure.” It seemed far-fetched to refuse.

They descended four concrete steps, opened a shabby orange door, entered an overheated half-basement lobby, and began to climb flights of wooden stairs. Richard’s suspicion on the street that he was trespassing beyond the public gardens of courtesy turned to certain guilt. Few experiences so savor of the illicit as mounting stairs behind a woman’s fanny. Three years ago, Joan had lived in a fourth-floor walkup, in Cambridge. Richard never took her home, even when the whole business, down to the last intimacy, had become routine, without the fear that the landlord, justifiably furious, would leap from his door and devour him as they passed.

Opening her door, Rebecca said, “It’s hot as hell in here,” swearing for the first time in his hearing. She turned on a weak light. The room was small; slanting planes, the underside of the building’s roof, intersected the ceiling and walls and cut large prismatic volumes from Rebecca’s living space. As he moved farther forward, toward Rebecca, who had not yet removed her coat, Richard perceived, on his right, an unexpected area created where the steeply slanting roof extended itself to the floor. Here a double bed was placed. Tightly bounded on three sides, the bed had the appearance not so much of a piece of furniture as of a permanently installed, blanketed platform. He quickly took his eyes

from it and, unable to face Rebecca at once, stared at two kitchen chairs, a metal bridge lamp around the rim of whose shade plump fish and helm wheels alternated, and a four-shelf bookcase—all of which, being slender and proximate to a tilting wall, had an air of threatened verticality.

“Yes, here’s the stove on top of the refrigerator I told you about,” Rebecca said. “Or did I?”

The top unit overhung the lower by several inches on all sides. He touched his fingers to the stove’s white side. “This room is quite sort of nice,” he said.

“Here’s the view,” she said. He moved to stand beside her at the windows, lifting aside the curtains and peering through tiny flawed panes into the apartment across the street.

“That guy *does* have a huge window,” Richard said.

She made a brief agreeing noise of *n*’s.

Though all the lamps were on, the apartment across the street was empty. “Looks like a furniture store,” he said. Rebecca had still not taken off her coat. “The snow’s keeping up.”

“Yes. It is.”

“Well”—this word was too loud; he finished the sentence too softly—“thanks for letting me see it. I—Have you read this?” He had noticed a copy of *Auntie Mame* lying on a hassock.

“I haven’t had the time,” she said.

“I haven’t read it either. Just reviews. That’s all I ever read.”

This got him to the door. There, ridiculously, he turned. It was only at the door, he decided in retrospect, that her conduct was quite inexcusable: not only did she stand unnecessarily close, but, by shifting the weight of her body to one leg and leaning her head sidewise, she lowered her height several inches, placing him in a dominating position exactly suited to the broad, passive shadows she must have known were on her face.

“Well—” he said.

“Well.” Her echo was immediate and possibly meaningless.

“Don’t, don’t let the b-butchers get you.” The stammer of course ruined the joke, and her laugh, which had begun as soon as

she had seen by his face that he would attempt something funny, was completed ahead of his utterance.

As he went down the stairs she rested both hands on the banister and looked down toward the next landing. “Good night,” she said.

“Night.” He looked up; she had gone into her room. Oh but they were close.

JOHN UPDIKE

I remember the late Brendan Gill stopping me in the halls of the *New Yorker* and saying, “Oh,” in his very flamboyant, Irish way. He said, “Oh, what a nervy last sentence that was.” It, of course, refers back to the very beginning: [reads from the story] “The Maples had moved just the day before to West Thirteenth Street, and that evening they had Rebecca Cune over, because now they were so close.” So their closeness, we don’t know what will happen, what will come of it. It is a tale of very young marriage: still awkward with each other, still making little missteps. And the other woman is just really a shimmer of remote possibility. She seems more vital, more adventurous. She has more adventures than the frail, snuffly Joan.

Well, let’s fast-forward forty-five years and here is a short story, shorter than that one, uncollected, called “Free.” What do I need to warn you about? I’ll just begin.

Free

“She has such lovely eyes.” The remark had come from his mother, on one of her visits to the town where Henry and Lila, married to others, lived at the time. She could not have known that her son and Lila were having an affair—one which, like an escaped field fire, kept flaring up each time they thought they had stamped it out. But Lila would have known that this was her lover’s mother, and that would have injected an extra animation, an eye-sparkle, into

the conversational courtesies she showed the older woman. Once, her mother had been the visitor to their superheated circle of young couples, and Henry had marvelled, looking at this stout, sixty-something woman's profile at the little party Lila gave, how a person as doughy and plain and desexed could have produced such a beauty, such a lithe and wanton source of rapture.

His mother's remark had given his illicit love a ghostly blessing, and the two women did share a love of nature—they knew the names of birds and flowers, and when he and Lila met it was often in the wilds, in a lakeside cottage that a liberated friend, an older woman, lent her, on the woodsy far edge of an adjacent town. The off-season chill, and the musty smells of the canvas and wicker summertime furniture and a bare mattress and a disconnected refrigerator, gave way to the aromas of their own naked warmth, as the lake twinkled opposite the window and squirrels pattered across the roof. Lila under him, he poured his gaze down into her widened eyes, indeed lovely, a hazel mixed of green and a reddish brown ringing the black pupils enlarged by the shadow of his head. There was a skylight in the cottage, and he could see its rectangle, raggedly edged with fallen twigs and pine needles, reflected in the wet convexity of her startled, transfixed eyes.

His mother had never warmed to his wife: Irene was too citified, too proper, too stoical. For Henry, she had been a step up, into a family of comfortably well-off lawyers, bankers, and professors, but in the small incessant society of their home her dispensations of intimacy were measured, and became more so rather than less. Henry tried to restrict his appetites to match, and rather enjoyed his increasing dryness, his ever more effortless impersonation of a well-bred stick. His mother, whose ambitions for him took something florid from her unfulfilled hopes for herself, saw this constriction and resented it; her resentment fortified him when, with Lila more intensely than with several others, he strayed from fidelity and inhaled the wild, damp outdoor air.

Damp: he never forgot how Lila had abruptly stripped, one sunny but chill October day, and executed a perfect jackknife—her

bottom a sudden white heart, split down the middle, in his vision— into the lake, off the not yet disassembled dock and float. She surfaced with her head small and soaked as an otter's, her eyelids fluttering and her mouth exclaiming, "Wooh!"

"Didn't that kill you?" he asked, standing clothed on the wobbly float, glancing anxiously about for the spying strangers that all these autumnal trees might conceal.

"It's ecstasy," she told him, grimacing to keep her teeth from chattering. "If you go forward to meet it. Come on. Come in, Henry." Treading water, she spread her arms and butterflyed her body up so her breasts were exposed.

"Oh, no," he said, "please," yet had no choice, as he saw this erotic contest, but to drop his clothes, folding them well back from the splash, and to dare an ungainly, heart-stopping lurch into the black lake water. The pink leaves of swamp maples, withered into shallow boat shapes, were floating near his eyes when he came up; his submerged body felt swollen and blazing, as if lightning had struck it. Lila was doing an efficient crawl, her tendony feet kicking up white water, away from him, toward the center of the lake. He gasped for breath, dogpaddling back to the dock, and from this lower perspective saw the trees all around as the sides of a golden well, an encirclement holding him at the center of the dome of sky. This was one of those moments, he thought, when a life reaps the fruits that nature has stored up. This was health: that little wet head, those bright otter eyes, that tufted, small-breasted body at his disposal when the electricity ebbed from his veins and their skins were rubbed dry on the towels Lila had foresightedly brought.

But even then the less healthy world intruded. He wondered if Irene would smell the black lake on him, with its muck of dead leaves. She would wonder why his hair was damp. He was not good at adultery, not as good as Lila, because he could not give himself, entirely, to the moment, rushing forward to meet it. His mother's blessing did not save him from gastritis, and an ominous diagnosis from his doctor: "Something's eating at you."

The justice of the phrase startled Henry; his desire for Lila was a kind of beast. It would pounce at unexpected moments, and gnawed at him in the dark. “Work,” he lied.

“Can’t you ease up?”

“Not yet. I have to get to the next level.”

The doctor sighed and said—there was no telling, from his compressed and weary mouth, how much he guessed or knew—“In the meantime, Henry, you have to live on this level. Give up something. You’re trying to do too much.” This last was said with an emphasis that struck Henry as uncanny, like his mother’s blessing out of the blue. The air itself, his illusion sometimes was, hovered solicitously over him, a web of witnesses, superintending his fate, while he plodded on in a fog.

He resigned from his church’s fundraising drive, of which he was co-captain. This, and giving up coffee and cigarettes, made his stomach a little better, but it did not cease to chafe until Lila suddenly, for no reason she ever explained, confessed to Pete, her husband. Within the year, they moved to Florida; within a few more years, the word came back, they were divorced. Her marriage had always been mysterious to him. “He doesn’t need me,” she had once said, her eyes breaking into rare tears, while she focussed somewhere over his shoulder. “He needs my asshole.” Henry couldn’t quite believe what he heard, and didn’t dare ask her to clarify. There were many things, it occurred to him, that he didn’t want to know; no wonder other people struck him as so wise. Though life brought him advancement at work, and vacations in Florida and Maine, and grandchildren, and, with Irene’s guidance, an ever more persuasive impersonation of a well-bred stick, there was never another beast; such fires burn up the field.

IN TIME, Irene died, of cancer in her sixties, and he was free. By way of his friends—those inescapable knowing friends—he had kept track of Lila, and knew that she was again unmarried, after two post-Pete marriages: the first to an older man who had left her some money, the second to a younger man who had proved,

of course, unsuitable. He learned her address, and wrote her a note suggesting he come see her. It had been his and Irene's custom to visit Florida for two weeks in midwinter, staying at a favorite inn on an island off the west coast—more Irene's favorite than his. The inn smelled of varnished pine and teak, and had stuffed tarpon and swordfish mounted in the long corridors, and photographs of old fishing parties and hurricane damage; on the sunny broad stair landings stood cased collections of shells, the ink on the dried curling labels quite faded. It smelled of Florida when it was a far place, a rich man's somewhat Spartan paradise, and not yet the great democracy's theme park and retirement home. Yet since Irene's death, after the two years of shared agony, of hospital trekking, of rising and falling hopes, of resolute hopelessness and then these posthumous months of relief, grief, and alarmingly persistent absence, Henry had grown timid of straying from the paths she had marked out for them to travel.

The inn was on the west coast, below Port Charlotte, and Lila's condo in Deerfield Beach, on the east coast, above Fort Lauderdale, so it was an arduous drive, south and then east into the sun, against what felt like a massive grain in the monotonous Everglades landscape. Then the east-coast congestion, the number of aggressive dark-skinned drivers, the blocks of white-roofed one-floor houses laid out for miles on the flat acres of sand like a kind of sunbaked greater Chicago, disoriented him; old age, he was discovering, arrived in increments of uncertainty. Street signs, rearview mirrors, and one's own ability to improvise could no longer be trusted. He asked directions three times, steering away from the young people on the bright streets and pulling up alongside skittish and wary seniors, before finding Lila's condo complex; squinting he doped out the correct entrance and where the parking lot for visitors was hidden. He was inside a three-story quadrangle, each unit facing inward with a screened sunroom. Piece of scribbled paper in hand, he matched the number there to one on a ground-floor door; when his ring was answered he had trouble relating the Lila of his memory and imagination to the tiny woman,

her nut-colored face crisscrossed by wrinkles, who opened the door to him. Her face had seen a lot of sun in these past thirty years.

“Henry dear,” she said, in a tone more of certification than of greeting. “You’re over an hour late.”

“The drive was longer than I thought, and I kept going around and around within a couple of blocks of here. I’m so sorry. You always said I was slow.” From the way she held her face up and motionless he gathered he was supposed to kiss it; he abruptly realized he had brought her no present. It had been the nature of their old relationship for him simply to bring his body, and she hers. Her cheek had a dry pebbled texture beneath his lips, but warm, like a dog’s paw pads.

“I can’t complain lunch has gotten cold,” Lila said, “since it’s cold salad, chicken, in the fridge. I began to think you might not make it at all.”

More than once before, he had failed to show up—some sudden obstruction at work or in his duties at home. That her anger never lasted or triggered a permanent rupture had indicated to him that, strangely, he had a hold over her much like hers over him. In her voice now, he heard hardly a trace of Southern accent, just a softening of the edges. But her manner was edgy enough; she might be one of those spoiled, much-married women who say whatever rude sharp thing comes to them, take it or leave it, as if sassy were cute. Her clothes—lavender slacks, a peach silk shirt with the two top buttons undone, white platform sandals, magenta toenails—had that Florida swagger, which women anywhere else wouldn’t dare at her age.

“Please forgive me,” he said, playing his courtly card, until the drift of the hand came clearer. His heart had been thumping throughout his long drive, to the point where he imagined an onset of fibrillations, and his panic had grown as he searched the blocks of Deerfield Beach, with their unreal green lawns and ornamental lemon trees. Now that he was here in Lila’s presence, a step away from embracing her, a kind of glazed calm, a sweat of suspension, came over him, as it used to when Irene would take a

sudden downward turn, or during those endless last nights when there was nothing for him to do but stay awake, hold her hand, and feed her ice chips. How marvellous he had been, the network of friends confided to him when it was finally over. To himself he had just been dogged, obedient to one of the few still unchallenged phrases of the marriage vows, “in sickness and in health.”

He became aware, at his back, of splashing sounds. There was a pool in the center of the quadrangle of condos, and her sliding doors were open to admit its sounds, along with those of shuffleboard disks sliding on concrete, cars revving up, palm trees rustling in their antediluvian discomfort, glasses and ice cubes clinking on a tray somewhere in another screened-in room looking out on the wide shared space. A memory of Lila’s little lake, her white body knifing into the cold water, brought him to recognize, as she swayed on her ungainly footgear ahead of him toward her dining room, that she had kept lithe, though the years had redistributed her weight toward the middle, and loosened the flesh of her brown arms. Her salt-and-pepper hair was cut short in this hot climate and fitted close around her tidy skull, on its supple swimmer’s neck. The old beast lived, and sluggishly stirred within him, chafing his stomach; in an abrupt collapse of all the rest of their lives he felt at home with this woman, their two bodies moving phantasmally among the rush-seated chairs, the glass tabletops, the faintly musty furniture of a perpetual summer. “I always did,” Lila said. Forgive him. For what? For fucking her? For leaving afterward, in his own car, hurriedly down the dirt road in a semi-panic?

Over the chicken salad and white wine, and iced tea and Key-lime pie, they caught up with enough of their decades apart. Her husbands, his spousal tragedy, their scattered children, the expectable aches and predictable exercises with which they tried to stay in shape, to preserve the sensations of youth as long as they could. They shared a vanity, it seemed to him, in regard to their physical health.

“Why did you tell Pete, and come South?” he asked at last. “Was it to escape me? Was there no other way?”

It was as if she had forgotten, and had to strain to see such a distant moment. “Oh . . . we’d often talked about Florida, and then the right job for him came up. I had to clean house. You were dirt under the bed. Dear Henry, don’t look so sad. It was time.” As she turned her head, he remembered her mother’s profile; Lila’s was now identical.

LILA HAD, he saw as he watched her talk and gesture, become vulgar, in the way of a woman with not enough to do but think about her body and her means; yet a vulgar greed for life was part of what he loved. It had been direct and simple. In two hours, they had said enough; they had never been ones for long confidences or complicated confessions. Their situations had been obvious, each to the other, and their time together had been too intense, too rare, too scandalously stolen, for much besides wonderment and possession. Now, as the shadows deepened in her touching condo, with its metal furniture and mall-bought watercolors, and the westering sun reached across the rattan mats toward the room where they sat still at the glass table, having returned to white wine, a vast uneasiness seized him; he was not used to being alone with her this long, this late into the afternoon.

She stood up, firmly on her bare feet. She had eased out of the awkward sandals; the straps had left red welts on her bony blue-veined insteps. They had been tendony and blue-veined thirty years ago. “How about a swim?” she asked.

“So late?”

“It’s the best part of the afternoon. The air’s still warm, the kids have gone in, hydrotherapy is over.” She touched her shoulder, as if to begin undressing.

“I don’t have a suit.”

“You can use one of Jim’s. He left about three.” She laughed. “You can let out the waist string. He was just a kid. He used to strum his knuckles on his abs and expect me to be thrilled.”

Henry stood, pleased to be standing, once again, and without the hurry, next to Lila—her serious small mouth, its upper lip

now wearing a comb of small creases, and her lovely eyes, gleaming like jewels in crumpled paper, bright hazel remembrances of his mother's desire to have him live, to be a man, for her. He panicked at the invitation. "I—"

He, too, had been unfaithful, as she had with Jim's abs, with Jim's predecessor's money, with Pete and his uses for her. For two years he had lain beside Irene feeling her disease growing like a child of theirs. He had stayed awake in the shadow of her silence, marvelling at the stark untouchable beauty of her stoicism; in the dark her pain had seemed an incandescence. Toward the end, in the intervals when the haze of painkillers lifted, she spoke to him as she never had, lightly, as to another child whom she did not know well but with whom she had been fated to while away a long afternoon. "I think they might have been just kidding us," she confided one time. "Suppose you don't get to take a trip up to Heaven?" Or again, "I knew I was boring to you, but I didn't know how else to be." In her puzzlement at his tears she would touch his hair, not quite daring to touch his face.

"I'd better get back," he said.

"Back to what?" Lila asked.

To that inn Irene had loved, with its stuffed fish and nameless saved shells, in Spartan comforts. To the repose he found in imagining her with him. Since her death she was wrapped around him like a shroud of gold and silver thread.

"You were always getting back," Lila said. Her tone wasn't rancorous, merely reflective, her tidy head tilted perkily as if to acknowledge what she was: a little old lady still game to take her chances, to play her hand. "But you're free now."

Back in the front room, Henry already saw himself out the door, under an enclosed sky that was rectangular this time. It would be a long drive, against setting sunlight, through the great south Florida swamp. "Well, what is free?" he asked. "I guess it's always been a state of mind. Looking back at us—maybe that was as free as things get."

JOHN UPDIKE

So you've all gathered your impressions of those two stories, plucked from opposite ends of my life. What struck me really is that the situation is much the same. The wife is still ill and somehow still victorious. The man is still skittish. The other woman is still beautifully at home in her own skin. Isn't that what we say, at home in her own skin? Now, are there any questions you might ask me about short stories, or those short stories, or pretending to be a short-story writer?

Yes?

AUDIENCE

What responsibility do you feel a writer has in regard to either making social change or reflecting culture?

UPDIKE

What responsibility do I feel a writer has toward creating social change or reflecting the culture? I suppose there's no avoiding reflecting the culture, and it's a good thing. Stories are meant, like other forms of writing or communication, to bring light. And a story justifies itself if it clarifies our own lives, even in a small detail; if it makes us see and feel any more sharply. I think that this sharper seeing, this extra vision which a writer brings, might work social change of a subtle sort. I rather doubt a writer of fiction is in a position to create large changes, although some books, *The Jungle*, for example, did effect reform, I believe, in the meatpacking industry. And *The Grapes of Wrath* made people aware of Depression woes, the plight of the Okies, the general need to be compassionate, and the need for a society to help its weak and afflicted members.

Of course, the Russians were much concerned, up to the death of Communism, with the responsibility of the writer to serve his society in helpful ways. But they were defining the helpful ways, and there's a danger, I think, of a writer being enlisted in somebody else's cause. In

the end all you have is your own life, your own witness, your own experience, what *you* think is interesting and momentous and in some sense worth telling. I think an important arrow in the quiver of a writer is the illusion that he has something worth revealing, something that hasn't quite been said before. Beyond that, I wouldn't assign him any high social tasks.

Yes?

AUDIENCE

In an interview you were doing for the collection you edited, *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, you said that you selected your story "Gesturing" because it reflected a time in your writing when you had a particular music, you said something like that, and that startled me to hear a writer reflect on himself that way. Tonight you juxtaposed two stories from different parts of your career, and I wonder how sitting outside yourself and being an observer of your own writing changes your writing, the way you think of yourself. How do you identify the peak of your career?

UPDIKE

I don't know how clearly you could all hear the question. It pertained to a comment I made on *The Charlie Rose Show*, where one is apt to say almost any crazy thing that pops into one's head. Charlie Rose has a way of looking more orange in reality than he does on television, and when he leans toward you his face, already long, gets even longer, so that you undergo a kind of panic. And I always have great trouble remembering what I said on *Charlie Rose*. But this young man did remember and chastised me, well he didn't chastise me, but he reminds me that I talked about one story of mine, the story I chose to include in the allegedly *Best American Short Stories of the Century*, which I edited with the help of Katrina Kenison.

I was trying to explain why I chose that story of mine instead of some others which were available. And he was struck, the young man asking the question, by my dispassion, my willingness to seem to judge myself from the outside, and I can only say to that, that one becomes one's own critic at some peril. I chose that story in part because it recalled a moment of my life that it amused me to think about, a moment in my life I was glad to see preserved to this extent, and because it had not appeared in the *New Yorker*. I'm associated with the *New Yorker*, and the collection was heavy with *New Yorker* stories, so I leaned toward this one, which had been a little too explicit in a few stretches for that exemplary magazine, so it was *Playboy* that bit the bullet and published it. But what I liked about it, beyond these extra-aesthetic considerations, was a certain music of imagery. The predicament of a man living alone in Boston, feeling guilty, in ragged touch with his separating wife, his mistress, and his children, and at the same time, in the midst of his guilt and a really faceted life, finding a kind of bliss, the bliss of solitude in city life.

I think it's hard for a writer to know when he's doing his best. It's kind of a subconscious event, a coming together of strengths you don't quite know as your own. Strengths you try to develop are often not those which you instinctively have. For example, the success in short-story anthologies for college and high school of a story I once wrote called "A & P" is quite astounding to me, since at the time I wrote it, I thought of it as one more story I was turning out to make a living. My wife read it with a marked coolness, and yet, revisiting the story, I can see that in a sense it is more peppy, more compressed and compact than many of those that I tended to like more.

But writing is, in part, an athletic feat. It's done in the head, though you can feel when the images and the words and the people's remarks are coming easily with an effort that's not altogether your own. And, like any athlete, you dread the moment when your body and mind begin to

fail you. So that, in the mid-seventies, I probably was writing pretty much on all cylinders still, and exuberantly. I mean, there was a spillover, there was kind of more than you need, and up to a point that's a nice quality to have in a story or a painting. A feeling of repleteness, of there being *plenty*.

Yes—down here?

AUDIENCE

Staying with television appearances, Mr. Updike, I turned on my TV Sunday evening and there you were, animated. How does it feel to have done a guest shot on *The Simpsons*, and how did that come about?

UPDIKE

The question was, the gentleman saw me on *The Simpsons*, a briefly animated representation of me, and how did I feel about it. I used to watch *The Simpsons* faithfully until they changed the hour when it was shown, and it suddenly no longer fit with my domestic rhythm. So I can't claim to be a morbidly avid fan, but I'm basically well disposed towards *The Simpsons*, and was flattered to be asked to be one of the many voices that they work into the endless saga of Springfield. I was shown the script which I would have to perform, and it consisted of saying, "John Updike," which I thought I could do since I'd done it before, and producing a chuckle. A chuckle. Well, that proved to be the hard part of the performance. I went to a Boston sound studio and a young man—I assume he was young, he sounded young to me, most men have become young to me—coached me through it from an L.A. sound studio. In the full plot of all this, Krusty the Clown has invited me to write his biography—well, not invited me, but has persuaded me, and I've written it as part of the factual basis of this plot. But he is so rude to me, so slighting of my talents, that when he suffers some embarrassment at a child's hands, I chuckle. So how do you chuckle over a microphone

three thousand miles to make it worthy of *The Simpsons*? That was tough. I chuckled one way [Updike chuckles]. I chuckled another way [Updike chuckles again]. But always the young man wasn't quite satisfied with the chuckle and he kept saying, "Can you do this?" And then he did a really good chuckle but it wasn't mine. It turns out your chuckle muscles are fairly limited; or I couldn't do his chuckle, so I felt the session had been a failure. Yet when I watched it on television I thought my chuckle came out adequately, and I was pleased. It was the kind of invitation to which you can't say no. I did notice that both Amy Tan and Stephen King got many more lines in that episode than I did.

Were there any more questions? I've been sort of looking straight ahead. Yes—back there, gray sweater.

AUDIENCE

Could you elaborate on changes in the economics of the fiction-writing business since 1956? And has that effected changes in the type of writing done today?

UPDIKE

The question was, could I talk about the economics of the fiction writing business from 1956 to today, and what changes have been effected. There's a lot I don't know. All I know is that, in my own life experience, when I began to write short fiction and try to sell it to magazines there were a number of middle-class, general magazines, so-called, that did pay for fiction. The *Post* and *Collier's* still existed; the *Post* was a ghost of its former self but, nevertheless, it was there, and I sold a couple of early stories to both those magazines. But the *New Yorker* was the main object of desire, and it ran between two and four short stories a week, so it was a healthy market. And I think they were very receptive to anybody who was productive because they needed product.

The magazines that I mentioned above have faded. The *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *Playboy* are all monthlies and to some extent take up the slack. That is, they're quality magazines, especially the first two, that will run distinguished or serious fiction. But it's hardly a living, whereas one *could* make a living out of *New Yorker* fiction. I did, and John Cheever did, and a number of other writers did. It related, I think, as much to the fifties dollar—how far the fifties dollar went, as opposed to the nineties dollar. I certainly could not now set up shop with a family, even in a low-overhead small town, and expect to make a living from short fiction.

What the short-story writer of today can do, I don't quite know. There are these diminished markets. However, knowing that they're diminished, somebody has to feed them, somebody has to appear in print, somebody has to supply what appetite remains for short fiction. And a number of academic and scholarly quarterlies have come along, as well as hopeful enterprises like *Glimmer Train*. When I talk to young writers, which isn't often, I'm sometimes surprised by how indifferent they are to the matter of getting into print, as if the little audience of the writing workshop, the writing seminar is enough. But my crude generation thought the idea was to get into print and get some money out of it. A country as large and as literate and rich as this one should be able to support a few writers. There are still ways to make a living as a writer; I'm not sure if short stories are among them. But, nevertheless, it can be a piece of your career, and they are exciting to write, challenging to write. In some ways, you'd think that our shrinking attention span and available time would make them more attractive than ever, but reports vary on how well short stories do when bound into book form.

When I set out as a freelancer I vowed that every other book would be a novel; the ones in between could be collections and short stories. It was thought then that there wasn't any money in collections. But ac-

tually, some short-story writers have done quite well. Lorrie Moore, who you can hear next week, I would hope has done quite well with her books of short stories, as has Alice Munro; and Ray Carver before he died certainly had achieved an audience without the novel crutch. To me the novel hasn't been a crutch. It's been the main adventure, in a way. Although I've been told both as a young and an old man that my short stories are the best thing I do.

Anybody over here? Are we tired of this session? Yes—

AUDIENCE

When writing short stories, do you use pen to paper or a word processor, and in both do you notice a style change in your writing?

UPDIKE

It's a good question. When I write short stories, do I notice a style change depending on whether I use a word processor or pencil and paper? Because, I guess, I saw them as bread and butter of a sort, I've always typed the short stories. And now I always write them on the word processor. The novels are quite another story. I may have typed some; *Rabbit Redux*, I think, was typed, and *The Poorhouse Fair*. But, basically, I've always written novels by hand because the spell seemed so delicate and so important that I should have nothing distracting, even the sound of a machine, in my ears. Poems and novels needed to be written by hand. How this changes your style, I don't know. I have this belief that in certain circumstances you just think more freely with pencil and paper than you do with a typewriter, but I must say in reading the works aloud I don't see much difference. It's the same gray cells; it's the same set of experiences that I'm drawing on. But I would advise anybody who feels blocked or stymied to try to switch to pencil and paper, or pen and paper, as being the most aboriginal and most basic way of putting your thoughts on paper.

James Joyce, who wrote everything by hand and had typists at his beck and call, which many of us don't have, had a Jesuit-trained handwriting which was pretty legible. If you look at Joyce's proofs you can read them, unlike, say, Proust's. Joyce said he liked to feel everything flow through his wrist. So, yes, there is something to be said for writing by hand, but it leaves you with a lot of handwriting which is hard for even you to decipher.

Yes?

AUDIENCE

Would you care to comment on Nicholson Baker's *U and I*?

JOHN UPDIKE

Would I care to comment on Nicholson Baker's *U and I*? The U is the letter U and it means not you, but me. It was a book that arrived in photocopied manuscript in my home, and it lay there for a while because I was trying to finish something of my own and didn't want to distract myself. But when I did read it, I found it to be a very amusing, flattering, and harmless kind of postmodern homage, which I was happy to have. I've been in touch with Baker since he wrote it. I count him as one of my literary friends and a writer whom I admire, and I hope not only because he wrote the homage to me.

It was a curious book. Those of you who've read it, those few may know that in it he confesses to not having read most of my work. He gives a very long list of books of mine that he hasn't read. So it's not your standard homage. It's really an account of how a young writer relates to an older writer in terms of figuring out what a writer is. He takes an interest in things like dedications, and how acknowledgments are phrased. This kind of small maneuver fascinates someone setting out on the same track. The way he regarded me, I regarded Thurber and those other writers whom I adored and hoped to emulate. But you can't

precisely emulate your models. Often nobody knows who your models are because your own experience and your own voice are so different from theirs. But you do learn something, you do learn how to go about it, how to be, as I've said it, a writer. I don't want to hold you here for all night. Maybe one more question. Right here, yes?

AUDIENCE

It really isn't a question. I don't want to slight either the short stories or the novels, which have given me great pleasure over the years. But I really do think one of the most interesting things you've given us is your essays and your treatment of other writers, your views, your comments on art. You've been so generous giving us these huge anthologies, which we can just rustle through and relax with, reading whatever we want. I just want to say that I'm very grateful for that.

UPDIKE

Thank you. I don't know if the audience could hear that. It was more homage, as if I haven't had enough, this time to the essays and the criticism. I never set out to be an essayist or critic. My mother didn't raise me to be one. My notion of being a writer was that you write the stuff—fiction, poetry, whatever; you invent and you don't waste your energy on criticism. But then when I began to receive criticism in the press, it seemed to me that I could do better than this. So I volunteered in effect to William Shawn, the then-editor of the *New Yorker*, to try a few reviews, and he agreed. At first I did them now and then, and then now and then became pretty often, and then pretty often became very often, until it seemed to me I was on the point of becoming a reviewer mainly and a fiction writer as a hobby. It was alarming. It was a monster I never meant to bring out of the bottle.

At its best, writing a review, an appreciative one, is an exercise in self-education and an exercise in organized thinking. Both are worthy

enough, and I've enjoyed writing some of the reviews. If I were a real man of character, I'd probably someday try to anthologize them—boil the several quite large books down to a selected criticism. But my attitude towards criticism and essays has been that above a certain level they are all equally valid, depending on what interests the reader. And so I have, as you say, produced quite large books of the collected reviews. I would hope to review less as my energy dwindles, to do fewer reviews and concentrate on the more poetic, subjective, egoistic arts.

Thank you very much for coming tonight.