# UPDIKE REDUX

BY WILLIAM GIRALDI

Of all the American literary titans who have died within the past several years—Saul Bellow, Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer, William Styron, Susan Sontag—John Updike was the most beloved. No major magazine, newspaper, or radio program failed to pay lengthy homage to this exceptional American chronicler. Charlie Rose dedicated an hour to his memory; literary Web sites chimed in with assessments and eulogies. His death registered as both a shocking calamity (especially to those of us who had come to think of him as a permanent fixture in American literature and had no inkling that cancer was killing him) and the demise of a certain guard of writers: those men and women who were not content to confine themselves to the novel only, or the essay, or the poem. We can classify the likes of Goethe and D. H. Lawrence as nothing other than men of letters, masters of many genres, and Updike was their descendant. We mourned his death more vociferously than we did the deaths of his fellow titans because, in his mastery of many forms, he was steadfastly and distinctly the most American sensibility, somehow more American than his Jewish contemporaries Bellow, Miller, and Mailer—and this despite the fact that Bellow's *Augie March* is arguably the great American novel, Miller's *Death of a Salesman* the great American play, and Mailer himself the great American personality. Styron, the melancholic Southerner, and Sontag, the überintellectual female urbanite, never stood a chance of being elected the face of contemporary American letters. Updike, the suburban, New England WASP—whose real subject was always the simultaneity of the promise and the destruction of the American dream (part John Cheever, part Raymond Carver)—exudes Americanness: in his plots, in his prose, in his rejection of trendy pessimism. This is the writer who supported the Vietnam War in the 1960s because he could not muster the gall to criticize the country that had been so generous to him.

But Updike's overwhelmingly American sensibility infused throughout many genres is not the principal distinction between him and his contemporaries. His luxuriant language rooted in the sensual, his legendary productivity, and his authorship of the Rabbit Angstrom tetralogy (which among some scholars counts as a collective contender for the great American novel) placed Updike in a league apart from the rest. His being considered a novelist before all else augmented the sanctifying of his reputation, because it is exceedingly rare in the United States to be deemed an important writer unless you are also an important novelist. America is unkind to its poets and playwrights. At the time of Updike's death earlier this year, Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy were his only serious competitors for the title of preeminent American novelist. A list of less serious competitors might include Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, although both writers are given to headlong retreats from emotion and can delight in cerebral hocus-pocus, the opposite of Updike's intent.

The Updikean syntax and productivity were not without their detractors. Some writers and critics accused Updike of preferring color over content—of having nothing important to say but saying it beautifully indeed—and of composing books with such alacrity that they must have been poorly conceived and inadequately executed. That claim has always been empty and easeful. Critics like to mention Joyce Carol Oates whenever they wish to get persnickety about Updike's output, but the comparison is fatuous: Oates, the maniacal, second-rate scribbler, has written herself into irrelevance and cannot approach Updike's excellence. The Rabbit tetralogy is as much an unfolding and refolding of America's conscience as it is of Rabbit's psyche. *Couples*, Updike's novel of suburban eros that caused a deep freeze of moral indignation in 1968, and *Too Far to Go* (1979), a cycle of stories about Richard and Joan Maple (they end up where they started: apart), are definitive diagnoses of the health of American marriage. Because he had more books than most, he also had more flops: *Toward the End of Time* (1997), *Seek My Face* (2002), *Terrorist* (2006), and *Golf Dreams: Writings on Golf* (1996), a vapid and pointless ejaculation that did nothing to improve his image as a middle-class white guy with a well-groomed lawn. On *Charlie Rose* just after Updike's death, his longtime editor, Judith Jones, spoke of his unwavering enthusiasm about the writing process, from initial conception to publication proofs. It seems that Updike never lost the giddy naïveté that writing comes effortlessly and then saves lives. If writing had been a bit harder for him—Hemingway believed that every word should hurt—he might have saved himself from a flop or two and avoided the charge of promiscuity.

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But Updike almost never faltered with his story collections: from *The Same Door* in 1959 to *Licks of Love* in 2000 and the posthumous collection *My Father's Tears*, published earlier this year, he has crafted the truest and most consistently pertinent short fiction of the past forty years. The publication in 2003 of his *Early Stories: 1953-1975* was something of an event; the collection received the PEN/Faulkner Award and prompted a reappreciation of what many consider Updike's greatest achievement. Despite the short story's diminishing status among readers, Updike practiced the form with intractable resolve, almost as if he wanted single-handedly to revive it from cardiac arrest. Philip Roth and Pynchon quit the story; McCarthy and DeLillo never cared for it from the start; Mailer couldn't write one and Bellow thought of it as a kind of redheaded stepchild; but Updike was convinced, rightly, that in the story's ostensibly diminutive skeleton lay a necessary heart. The rows of novels and blocks of literary criticism would have been enough to guarantee Updike's immortality, but for many of his admirers, the stories are where he executes his finest abilities.

In *My Father's Tears*, Updike revisits in old age the same narratives of loss, lust, and love that made his name as a younger writer in the 1960s and 1970s. That is perhaps the most delightful element of this collection: beholding an expert craftsman as he fashions his trademark stories from a fresh perspective. Knowing that *My Father's Tears* is *Pigeon Feathers* (1962) and *The Music School* (1966) written by the same man in his seventies, one feels in the presence of a sorcerer performing an outlawed alchemy: he makes the old young again by

making the young old. One also feels the tremendous burden of grief, for in this collection, Updike is hyper-aware of his mortality, of a death impending much too quickly for a consciousness that assumed it would record forever the minutiae of its own distresses and splendor. Of one main character, Updike writes that "he had not hitherto really believed in his own aging. . . . His inmost self felt essentially exempt from ruin." Regret and cancer are everywhere in these pages.

In "Personal Archeology"—more a meditation than a story—an elderly man who could be Richard Maple meanders across ten acres of property, taking stock of his marriages and the children altered by the mistakes he could not help making: "His children consoled themselves by thinking they would some day grow up and never be so helpless again. In abandoning his family, a man frees up a bracing amount of time." "Spanish Prelude to a Second Marriage" has its senior couple in Granada, "experimenting to see if a vacation together might nudge their long relationship into marriage or a breakup," which is precisely the reason Richard and Joan Maple head for Italy in "Twin Beds in Rome": that story begins, "The Maples had talked and thought about separation for so long it seemed it would never come," and by paragraph's end, they are in an ancient land attempting to remedy an ancient problem.

The opening story of the new collection, "Morocco," strikes a heartbreaking final chord—so many of these stories do—after the narrator recollects the overseas vacation he and his first wife took with their four children. The last lines address those children directly: "We had achieved, in Morocco, maximum family compression, and could only henceforth disperse. Growing up, leaving home, watching your parents divorce—all, in the decade since, have happened. But on a radiant high platform of the Eiffel Tower I felt us still molded, it seemed, forever together." In "Free" and "Delicate Wives," Updike proves, despite the sorrow of those stories, his unmatched powers of erotic female observation: one mistress is "a lithe and wanton fomenter of masculine bliss," while another "carried her wide-hipped, rangy body warily, as if it might detonate. There was something incandescent about her, like a filament forced full of current."

That one can find moments of sensual joy in stories about growing old and saying good-bye is testament to Updike's trust in redemption through the corporeal. The protagonist of "Free" remarks that "old age . . . arrived in increments of uncertainty." Faith, too, arrives in increments of uncertainty, if it arrives at all. Updike's Protestant posturing was always difficult to take seriously because his people believe so fervently in one another, and because he himself valued reason and, as a master storyteller, knew when a yarn was a yarn. The narrator of "My Father's Tears"—one of the saddest stories ever written—explains: "I had been conditioned to feel that there could be no joy in life without religious faith, and if such faith demanded an intellectual sacrifice, so be it."

Updike's fiction is as autobiographical as anyone's in the American realist tradition, but in this new collection, his narrators and protagonists are closer to him than perhaps any who have come before, including Rabbit Angstrom and Richard Maple. Indeed, this book feels as autobiographical as his memoir, *Self-Consciousness* (1989). The title story includes transparent details culled directly from Updike's life: the small Pennsylvania town; the religious mother who reads the *New Yorker*; the narrator, James, off at Harvard indulging his literary and sexual curiosity; the first wife who, after four children, becomes the ex-wife. But it's the tone and style of the title story rather than the details that reveal it as autobiography: the dour, repentant tone of a writer recalling his own youth and the straightforward style of that same writer needing to get the facts straight in the clearest possible manner.

Almost every story collection has its lemons, and even Updike was not immune to this rule. "The Guardians" and "The Laughter of the Gods" are merely ruminations that mistake nostalgia for narrative; "The Accelerating Expansion of the Universe" an unwieldy mishmash searching for itself. "Outage" is all preamble and no payoff. These few fail because the language has not been occasioned by the necessity of narrative; rather, story has been clumsily slapped onto sentences. It was indeed sometimes true that Updike needed to write even when he had nothing to write about.

And because he could not live through or witness even a moderately significant event—never mind a cataclysmic one—without committing its reality to paper, Updike tells his 9/11 story in "Varieties of Religious Experience," except the story is really an embarrassing mélange of different points of view: an observer across the Hudson, a terrorist, a bond trader in the second tower, and a widow on the plane that went down in Pennsylvania. The conceit in operation here assumes that this story might be the sole surviving document to notify the unborn about that apocalyptic day. But the imagination trying to infiltrate what it might have been like in the tower, on the plane, and inside the mind of a madman is an anemic, obvious

rehashing of newspaper articles, film footage, and the like. If a writer has mustered the hubris to tackle the hell of that day—especially when he was not in any of the three locations affected—then he had best have something innovative to add to the millions of images and words already in circulation. Instead, we are given lines such as these: "He was aware of looking at a, for him, new scale of things," and "Dan could not quite believe the tower had vanished," and "No hand of God had intervened because there was none. God had no hands, no eyes, no heart, no anything." A small girl asks, "Why does God let bad men do things?" and one of the young male passengers who helps thwart the terrorists over Pennsylvania says, "You guys ready? Let's *do* it," although surely Updike should have had him say, "Let's do this." The old have never been hip to the language of the young.

These disappointments among priceless rewards do nothing to diminish the overall worth of *My Father's Tears*. It is a hurtfully naked study of disillusionment and resolve, of the pity and terror of reaching the end of a life. One character feels that "the universe would by a generous margin outlive him—that had always been true. But he had somehow relied on eternity, on there being an eternity even if he wasn't invited to participate in it." This also is true: our human universe has gone colder without John Updike in it to show us what we are, to sing of what is best and worst in us. Our readers and writers will not outlive him; he will keep pace with us. And because his books invite us to participate in their emotional knowledge, to receive alms at the altar of language, he need never have worried that the invitation would not be reciprocated. He got what he wanted: he will remain with us always. ●

# LIVING ON THE EARTH

KATHLEEN KIRK

I always wondered if I could see
more, or differently: red dog
rolling in the sloped snow of the ditch,
family of deer in the harvested field,
the breath of each an individual mist.

I can read details
like a roadmap to the next moment
but not prevent it.
I can read this world backwards
and forwards, or upside down,
can read in my dreams.
No one has ever believed me.
Now I see how little it matters
that I was misunderstood.
How it has shaped my vision of God
into nothing but clear light.

The fawn, leaping over broken stalks of corn,
comes to stand by its mother.
The dog unearths some particular
truth with its cold, wet nose.
I am too far away to see
exactly what it is
but I see by the glory and shimmer
of the dog's body
that it is good.