

LUZ

We sat along the bank of the Lackawaxan River, Luz and I, determined to make an homage to sculptor Andy Goldsworthy. She collected leaves and bits of branches, the detritus from the recent flood that had scoured this little valley that hugged the river in White Mills, an old mill town in eastern Pennsylvania where Aunt Kate lived. After collecting the material, Luz began constructing her "Goalswordy" - as she called him - interlacing the branches and pressing wet leaves into their pitted surface as the river roared by just a few feet away. We had come to visit Aunt Kate with my Mother, Kate's younger sister Carmella, and went to the river like we always did, to let the sisters reminisce about when they were kids in the 1920's.

Luz likes rivers more than oceans or seas. She's been to both and rivers seem to draw her with a siren call that I don't hear. She'll go out of her way to sit by, or in, or near a river. Any river. She watches silently as they flow along, giggling over rocks along their way, or grabbing twigs on their travels to some even bigger river on its run to the sea. The Lackawaxan was running fast that warm Fall day, with the high watermarks of the flood etched on its banks.

After finishing the "Goalswordy" we took a break along the bank, digging into her backpack for some water, fruit and Oreos. As we were eating I noticed a small plastic baggie at the bottom of her backpack. In it were little rectangles of white paper - maybe 50 in all - and on each one was a printed word. A basic word. These rectangles were left over from Luz's kindergarden days, just the year before.

"Why don't we throw them in the river?" she said when I started to read the words.

"All of them?" I asked her.

" Yes, but just one at a time," she answered.

"Why do you want to do that?"

She grinned at me. "So the words can flow down the river to a bigger river, then down that river to the ocean to Africa, so the Africans can find them on their beaches and learn them and talk to us," she said, eating an Oreo.

So Luz began folding the WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, TO, TOO, COME and BE and the rest into three distinct sections - she did this with great care. Then she took the pile of words to the edge of the Lackawaxan - as it surged wildly past - and tossed them one-at-a-time into the river, with them maybe, just maybe making it from that river- bank in White Mills to the mighty Delaware and down to Chesapeake Bay and out into the Atlantic, and across to that beach in Africa.

## A Sicilian Tale

This little tale began in March of 1996, the night we returned from two cold weeks in Southern Italy. Sicily to be exact. The weather was "strano" (odd, strange) said more than one Sicilian, looking up at the lasagna-noodle clouds that obscured even Mount Etna - that bubbling 11,000-foot cauldron that had once or twice destroyed half the island and hovers daily over heavenly Taormina and humble Catania. "Tempo bruto," the lady at our Taormina pensione said of the rain and bone-chilling cold, as she stared absentmindedly at the invisible Etna. In our two weeks in Italy the only sun we saw was the first day in Sorrento and our last in Roma.

So what does this whining about the weather have to do with Luz?

Well, there was no central heating in those pensiones in Sicily. At least not the places we stayed. Sure, there were radiators in some of the rooms, but they were turned on for maybe an hour-or-two at night. That was it. It was as cold and damp inside as out, and Julie got sick. Flu symptoms: headache, fever, chills nausea, and then she began complaining of bad smells. Smells that neither I nor others could smell. Indeed, it was "strano".

She was still sick when we came back home, and that first night back, sensing something that I guess only a woman could sense, she sent me out for a home-pregnancy test. As an artist with little faith in the practical sciences - I bought two. The first was inconclusive. The second, the next morning, as I dreamed of an invisible Etna erupting into a white void, was not inconclusive, as Julie woke me from my jet-lagged dream with a sweet - but excited... "Wake up, there's two pink lines!"

So there it was. I was to become a Father again at age 52.

I couldn't help but ponder: two of my nieces are having babies in the next few months; my Father and Mother are 85 and 80 and already have nine grandchildren; two of my nieces are older than my wife; my wife is 32, my son 22; and in Italy, when the natives saw us together they called Julie "la bella bambina moglia" - the beautiful baby-wife.

What the hell was I doing?

The rush of memories of my first-born came at me like unleashed thunder, random and overwhelming - the surreal light in the hospital birthing room; the umbilical cord wrapped around his tiny neck when he made his long-awaited appearance; his wide-eyed interest in his new surroundings moments after the birth; his love of water; his first Christmas outside in the snow; his word - Buff - calling to the cat; his first steps alone, chasing after the dogs; his difficulty teething; lots of fevers; baseball in the backyard; his first friends; birthdays; then meningitis when he was four. And another hospital. And other surreal lights. And two weeks of terrible fear. Then his recovery, faster than expected; his first day of school, dressed in buckskin; the bus in the early morning;

paintings and drawings sent home; and more new friends. A year later his sobs the day his Mother and I told him we were separating.

I mean I do have faith in love, destiny and all that, but really, life is a crapshoot and I wondered if I could go through all that again.

Ray, my car mechanic, asked if I was insane. "Do you realize that when this kid is 18 you'll be 70? What will you do then?"

I had no idea. Just figured I'd be 70 anyway, so why not?

And like the Sicilians that live in the shadow of Mount Etna, humble in the face of its mysteries, I too am humbled by the unknown nature of all things, and wait - not without passion and resilience, like them - for destiny to play itself out again.

November 8

The water broke at 8 a.m.  
Julie was calm;  
me? I can't remember,  
just felt overwhelmed.  
Waited for awhile  
as Julie called Nancy  
our friend and nurse,  
who called Clarice  
the midwife.  
"Time them,"  
Nancy said of the  
mild contractions.  
They were 10 minutes apart,  
but getting closer,  
and within an hour to five minutes.  
"I'll meet you there,"  
said Nancy of the hospital  
20 minutes away. Quiet ride there,  
Julie watching the cold clouds  
sweep across the windy sky;  
me? I can't remember,  
just felt overwhelmed.  
In the birthing room,  
Nancy, but no Clarice.  
A Filipino doctor looked in,  
gruff and uninterested,

and still no Clarice.  
Nancy took over,  
the contractions were coming  
fast and hard.  
Julie didn't make a sound,  
just little sighs  
and a bowl of sweat  
as Nancy told her  
what to do.  
Clarice arrived,  
and it was time.  
Time for Luz to appear.  
Not a sound from Julie,  
as Clarice prepared  
for the baby.  
Nancy kept talking,  
reassuring not only Julie,  
but me as well.  
What have I got myself into?  
Am I ready for this?  
I couldn't help think,  
as I patted Julie's forehead  
with a damp cloth.  
PUSH...PUSH  
went Julie,  
as Clarice bent down  
to massage  
her vagina.  
It was shit, piss  
and the baby's head  
showing through  
the blood and mucous.  
Little red/gold curls  
appeared through the muck.  
"It's almost there, Julie...  
PUSH!" said Clarice.  
And out came Luz.  
"IT'S A GIRL!" shouted Clarice,  
who had predicted  
a boy.  
A girl who looked like Cloud  
some 23 years before,  
in another hospital,  
in another town,  
a lifetime ago.  
Nancy placed Luz

on Julie's stomach...  
she lifted her head  
and the first face she saw  
was mine.

### Letter to Cloud in Bangkok

Here it is April 18 and the temperature outside is around 40 and there is a threat of snow tonight. Miss it here? Luz rocks back and forth in her swing, looking at me as she chews on her little horse, her fat little fingers rubbing hard against the World Wildlife Federation panda that I pasted to her swing, and then she smiles at me and with her throaty Lauren Bacall-voice says "Hey...Hey". She knows I'm writing to you. She just got back from a week in Florida with Julie and D-D. Her first plane ride, first visit to the beach, and first feel of warm weather. It may turn out to be the only warm weather she ever feels. Of course I was sick the whole time they were gone, so I stayed in and had my traditional psychological-cum-depresso/espresso video extravaganza. You know the list (I'm sure): "Mosquito Coast", "At Play in the Fields of the Lord", "Black Robe", "Salvador", Bertolucci's "1900", etc., etc...then wound up the week with - drum roll, please - "The Commitments" - had to bring myself up for air.

I'm excited to start the new project (the little forest I want to construct on the knoll in back of the house - I mentioned it in my last letter, right?), but it's impossible to erect the armatures (15-foot long poplars) in this weather. So, I must be patient. I realized awhile ago, as I struggled to concoct another painting and saw myself lose interest about half-way through, that for the last 10 years the way I'm doing visual work has just not excited me. I've struggled to make it so, doubted my talent, my heart, but have come to see that the way and the things and the reasons I painted those pictures of the past are no longer relevant to who I am now. I always felt so muddled when I tried to express it. It was easier to doubt my talent, or blame the art scene, than to try and comprehend just what it is I really want to do as an artist. I've changed and I guess I just didn't want to deal with it. Who says that art doesn't imitate life - or vice-versa? Now my life as an artist feels like it has meaning again. I feel that I can start growing again. Experiment. Stretch myself in new ways. Original ways, yet still connect with some deeply-held convictions. I feel good, Cloud, just antsy to begin.

I re-read letter at least a dozen times and seem to understand your plight, especially in comparison to your cathartic experiences south of the border. That trip was an epiphany and it seems that Sumatra and Laos were somewhat similar, but as I've come to realize (at this late date) that that state of grace is more a product of our inner selves than our outer ones.

I'll always cherish the letter you sent from Trujillo, strengthening yourself (and us) for the unknown Meskita Coast and what you would discover there. It was something you had to do. No doubt about it. Stepping out of all you had known and putting yourself truly out

into the world. Perhaps not all of our collective wanderings carry that sense of urgency, that sense of "if I don't do this I will regret at least not trying." Most seldom do. Your timing was perfect.

I dream a lot lately, sometimes about you, and those usually revolve around woods and meadows and prickly bushes and old rock walls and high billowing clouds and bright blue skies. It's never raining or snowing, sometime late afternoon or early evening, and I come upon you working barefoot in a huge garden as far as the eye can see and your back is to me and I can see you happily struggling to turn the ground or pull in a harvest. It makes me sentimental. Maybe it's just the connection between you and your baby sister.

I miss you very much. We all do. Write or call before you leave there and let me know if you received "Song of the Dodo" and the Pur scout filters. Also, send me a homemade map of your wanderings in India (if you can, if not don't worry about it). Love to you and Nicole.

#### Another Letter to Cloud

It's Thursday night, 9 p.m., Luz just went to sleep upstairs. Julie just planted some flowers and I just watered the garden. Any you, my dear Bumba-Boy, just landed in India. There is something very right with all this, something poetic in the imagery.

The garden is in and the lettuce is already starting to sprout. The little plot looks and feels like you. My other nature-boy project is progressing slowly due to the horrible weather: rainy and cold the first two weeks of May. Can't do too much about it. I put up some homemade scaffolding and cemented in one tree "armature", which is now skeletonized in chicken wire. It's about 12-feet tall-or-so, with six fluid "branches" emanating from its trunk. I still have to do the "foliage". Weight distribution is the key when I apply the burlap and plaster, as I've had the best minds of the building trade (Kotsides and Dave Sager) over for dinner and consultation. I'm thinking of constructing the entire "grove" of 10-12 "trees" first in chicken wire, then tying the branches together with wire so as to strengthen each cantilevered branch by strengthening them all as one continuous unit. Then plaster the whole thing. Or, I can finish one tree, see the results of the weight distribution and go from there. A puzzle as to method, but the ideas are sound...I think?

Anyway, tomorrow I'm working all day on it; will probably add the chicken-wire foliage and then just decide the further method of "tree" construction with as much spontaneity as I can muster. Does any of this make sense? I can kind-of see the whole thing, not clearly, but with some degree of confidence. It's either engineering or philosophy here, not sure which. Probably both.

I take Luz up on the Lee Harvey Oswald Grassy Knoll everyday and we sit and look up at the chicken-wire "trees". She makes fart-noises with her mouth and I sit on a log like the proverbial lump and contemplate my expanding "forest". It reminds me of the early days with you in the old farmhouse, sans "trees". She's doing so many new things now: rolling all over the floor/ground/grass; sitting up by herself; eating mashed carrots, peas, apples, pears and some disgusting Oliver Twist gruel - she doesn't ask for more - and then goes straight for the old milky tit. She makes lots of sounds and laughs easily. She's super-mellow. And very beautiful. Still blond and blue-eyed, she's now 26-inches tall and weighs 20 pounds.

How's India? Did you get to Benares and Bodh Gaya yet?

I've been dreaming lately that you cultivated the strip of land on the other side of the Christmas trees, from the road back to the stone wall, and grew a beautiful garden of strange veggies and made some money to travel again (or was it to enroll in Dental School?). Anyway, if you want to do that you can, the offer is open-ended.

As usual I miss you very much. We all do.. Don't worry about your Sister and your relationship with her - two great souls can't help but get on wonderfully together. Love to Nicole.

Again...Another Letter to Cloud

HAPPY BIRTHDAY! 24! Incredible! And I won't go on about how you did this when you were three or that when you were eight and so on, but it's all there anyway. Always.

Just got your letter from Benares. It was great to hear from you (I was a little concerned, but nothing like with the Meskita Coast adventure - after all you have Nicole with you, deflowered by a Yeti or otherwise), but to hear that you went to Bodh Gaya blew me away! You sat under the Bodhi tree! Incredible. I always dreamt that I sat under Buddha's tree. Guess that if I never get there to do it at least my son has. I fig(ure) I may have to plant my own pipal here and sit under that, or maybe just sit under one of my "trees" up on the Grassy Knoll. But I'm sure that kind of enlightenment doesn't come too easily.

Everything is fine here. Luz is standing alone now, she holds on to the side of her crib and pulls herself up. She's also babbling a lot. A lot of ba-ba-ba stuff (must think she's a car) and mum-mum-mum stuff. She really picks things up quickly and is an unbelievable little mimic. She's beautiful, like her brother.

Summer finally came with 90-degree temps and bright blue skies and the garden took off. The beds you and Nicole made are perfect. I think of it as your garden, I'm just its caretaker.

We had to get another car, so it's the old serfdom of car payments for the next 50 years. Seems like a good one. The Nissan is still chugging along at 155,000 miles and the Sundance is hanging in with 150,000. I'm using that as my "forest" car, hauling plaster, cement, rolls of chicken-wire, water, etc. up to the Grassy Knoll and back. It's starting to look like it did when you were marauding in it around town. I started a second "tree". The first looks Dr. Suess-like (Kotsides says it looks pre-historic), but it'll be just one of many so I have to keep thinking in totality. You know, the old "can't see the forest for the trees" cautionary tale. It feels great being out there everyday making the "grove". It has something to do with you or I sitting under trees like the Bodhi, but yet it doesn't really, it just seems to connect me to you, to Luz, and to any other free spirits out there. Perhaps it will enlighten me...funny, eh?

I don't think I can afford a trip to India. Things came up to change other things and it's difficult right now. I also thought about going back to Italy to see the Passamani's, but I'm not sure I could do that either. Don't be disappointed, we'll travel together again sometime. I feel that I want to free myself, but not from a negative place; more from previous ways of thinking and being. Traveling has always given me a window to connect with the magic of the world - even seeing lemons and limes on the same tree in Procida - and I'm sure I always will, but I have to find the magic in my present being; to truly live in the here and now. I find magic in Luz's face when she discovers something for the first time. Like I did, and still do, with you. Magic in a letter from Bluerfields or Erisweil or Eagle Pass or Dingle Town or Calavino. I always think of that night Luciano Passamani took us out to that unfamiliar high ground overlooking Calavino and pointed out the "hole" in the night sky that turned out to be Mount Bondone. "A Castaneda place," he called it. Life is nothing if it isn't that.

HAPPY 24th BIRTHDAY. You and Nicole are in my thoughts always.

Back at the Lackawaxan

There was just one little rectangular piece of paper left in Luz's backpack. It said: SEE. Luz folded it ever-so-carefully in three sections, walked to the edge of the river and tossed it - giggling as she did - into the Lackawaxan. We watched it flow on toward Africa.

