

Confluence and Divergence

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“Confluence and Divergence” published in Carve Magazine, November 2002, and Best of Carve Magazine, Volume 3, 2002.

In the fall desert sunlight both sides of the highway are lined with blooming chamisa, yellow flowers exploding from pale green stalks. Larsen looks beyond them to red sandstone mesas with vertical sides dropping to a rubble of talus. It's Monday morning, and he's an hour out of Albuquerque on NM 44.

He owes this moment to an evening weeks earlier. While he washed dishes Ellen sat at the counter, leafing through a magazine, repeatedly brushing aside a strand of hair from her face, giving him a detailed account of the latest incident at her office.

"You know what I'd still like to do sometime?" he said during a lull. "I'd like to drive up to Canyonlands, all alone, and camp. Do some hiking. Just be out there, no one else around, and see what it feels like."

Ellen lifted her eyes from her magazine.

"Listen, Frank," she said. "Why don't you stop thinking about that trip, and talking about it, and just do it. Do your vision quest. I can take care of the kids for a week if I have to. It would be worth it."

A laugh track drifted in from the living room, and Larsen, his hands still immersed in soapy water, seized the opportunity.

Late in the afternoon Larsen is in southeastern Utah, between Monticello and Moab, turning left into the Needles area of Canyonlands. For miles the road follows a wooded canyon, finally winding down its side and coming out into open meadow where massive bronze buttes sail against the sky. The red rock glows in the yellow slant of the

afternoon sun, dwarfing the road, his car, him.

At the park entrance the ranger tells him the campground is full, but says he can stay at Newspaper Rock, which he passed on the way in. He reverses his route, and when the sun disappears he's sitting at a picnic table, a few steps from his tent, up a short path from his car. A hint of cold rises in the air. The campsites are along a stream running through the small park, which sits at the mouth of the canyon he descended earlier.

Across the road is a rock wall, covered with petroglyphs, which gives the place its name.

For dinner he eats a sandwich from his cooler. Later, he sits in the dark and sips the pint of brandy he brought with him. No one else is camped here, and as the brandy suffuses his chest he congratulates himself on finally achieving his solitary trip. The hum of his office computer, which pervades his days drafting software manuals, is far away, and the gravity of routine is weakening. He hears no underlying roar of motor traffic, and no haze of city lights masks the almost forgotten clarity and pinpoint intensity of the stars.

From the first, Ellen has told him this trip is just one of those mid-life things, and, as usual, she's largely right. It's a chance to escape the wife and kids, the mortgage, and the job he can't quit, to taste again, briefly, the freedom of travel. Taking another sip of brandy, he remembers twenty years earlier, when he came back from six months drifting through Europe. Before returning to Sheila in Colorado he stopped briefly in Albuquerque and spent most of an afternoon at the Fat Chance bar with John Borger, who taught the poetry workshop he took as a college senior. The two of them sat huddled over a corner table, sharing pitchers of beer, while Larsen talked about England, Spain, Morocco, and Greece - the trains, boats, and buses, the fleabag hotels and youth hostels, the romantic adventure he had.

"That's great you could see those things, have those experiences," John finally said. "It's bound to show up in your work. That stuff's just not an option for me anymore."

Then, sensing how he must have sounded, John made a joke of it.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said with false heartiness, holding his hand out in a stop-right-there gesture. “I love my wife and kids.”

Despite the comedy, John’s remark did seem a bit sad to him. Back then, though, people said things like that to him all the time. He figures fifteen years had passed since he’d heard that tone of wistful envy. Then, when he explained his vacation plans to Steve, his fat and hopelessly out of shape boss, Steve said “Gee, that sounds great. I wish I could do that sometime.”

Larsen shines his flashlight briefly on the bottle and is surprised to find it half empty. He decides he better put it away, then sits in the dark. So many years have passed since he’s been out alone like this he feels a hint of discomfort - an eerie, almost threatening sense of exposure to the silence and black expanse.

He stands and walks up the path past his car, only clicking his flashlight on occasionally to check the footing in front of him. He crosses the empty asphalt of the night road, then walks a wooden footbridge spanning a bend in the stream and follows the path to the petroglyph-covered wall of dark rock.

In the moving circle of his light he examines the hundreds of figures scratched into the stone over the centuries: the outlines of human hands and feet; deer, antelope, and buffalo; men on horseback with bow and arrow; mandalas; standing humans; horned shamanistic figures with arms outstretched.

He shuts off his flashlight and stands in darkness before the rock. He hears a lone car pass by on the road. Only the sand beneath his feet holds a hint of illumination, and the brandy whispers that in another time, another age, he too would have added to the stone record. He summons an image, and sees a stick warrior, hatchet raised in one hand above his head.

Tuesday morning Larsen wakes with a dry mouth and a fuzzy head. A half pint of brandy is more than he's used to, and by the time he packs up and drives to the trailhead it's past ten o'clock.

He has chosen the hike to the confluence of the Green and Colorado rivers. At the edge of the parking lot a sign announces the start of the trail, and he looks across a steep bowl of bleached sandstone at what he assumes is the path. He scrambles down the rocks in front of him and back up the other side, then follows the path until it turns a corner around a wall of rock and leads out onto a steep ledge, where it disappears. Rock cairns marking the trail have been conspicuously absent. Irritated, he decides he's made a mistake and retraces his steps.

Back at the trailhead, already sweating, the minute hand of his watch climbing toward eleven o'clock, he looks to his right and sees a cairn only fifty feet away. Walking in that direction, he comes to an opening between two sandstone walls, between which he sees the trail undulating away through rock formations and open scrub country. Within a few strides his irritation at the poorly marked trail is supplanted by a sheepish acceptance of his own brandy-blurred mistake.

The sky is a cloudless blue, the air is still and pure. The trail leads from cairn to cairn over white rock eroded into pocked, rounded, billowing formations. It emerges through narrow openings into pink-tinged stone bowls, then crosses arid, open sagebrush and sand. Off the trail, among the bushes, lumpy brown colonies of tiny organisms cover the earth like a dry mold. In the distance he spies the tangle of red rock spires that give the Needles region its name. Far on the horizon are massive red mesas.

Two hours into the hike Larsen stops to rest and drink from his canteen under a scraggly juniper in a dry stream bed. The day is heating up, and this scrubby plant is the closest semblance to shade he's seen, making him thankful this isn't summer, when shimmering heat waves would be rising from the rock and sand. The emptiness around him is huge and still, and so far the only life he's noticed has been a lizard staring from

the top of a rock. He hears a buzzing nearby, which tells him there are also insects. Then the buzzing stops, and in the reasserted silence he sees a solitary fly has landed on his leg.

The trail twists through more sandstone formations, and crosses more open brush country, until the last half mile, which is a tiring trek through loose, shifting, red-brown sand. Finally, he climbs a rocky grade, and at its top descends again on gray stone ledges to the edge of an enormous canyon.

Far across is the prow of a rock plateau, cut vertically for hundreds and hundreds of feet by the two great rivers. Down below the rivers meet.

Larsen sits on a ledge close, but not too close, to where rock ends and space begins. He bites into his sandwich, more fatigued than he wants to admit. The six miles out are as far as he's hiked in years, and each step has yet to be matched by another going back. To overcome the vertiginous effect of the view he concentrates on details. Way down there a triangular delta of green growth clings to the base of the walls at the upper edge of the confluence. From the right-hand canyon flows the muddy brown water of the Colorado. From the left comes the Green. Where they meet their shades remain distinct, maintaining a clear line of demarcation in their common channel.

He rises and approaches the cliff edge to look downstream. He sees the two currents gradually losing their separate identities, mingling to create a combined tone dominated by the Colorado, and wonders abstractly when he first realized Ellen had the greater influence in their marriage. When they met he still worked as an aide in a psychiatric hospital, and she was already practicing law, making three times as much money. When he moved in with her she was the one who convinced him to take the training course in technical writing and turn his talent with words into a marketable skill. Then came marriage. Then came the house and kids. If not now, when? she'd said. If not this, what?

He lies on his back, puts his hat over his face to shade his eyes, and dozes a few minutes. He recalls a television show about the Colorado. The river is now tamed and

used in so many ways, and so much water is lost - lost to evaporation from lakes behind power-generating dams, siphoned off to irrigate desert farms, diverted to Los Angeles and God knows where else to water lawns and fill swimming pools that shouldn't even be there - that it no longer actually flows all the way to the sea. Instead, it just peters out and disappears in salt marshes.

He sits up again and knows he has to get moving.

“Don't get me wrong,” he grunts as he stands and straps on his pack. “I love my wife and kids.”

A couple of times along the way, when he stops to rest, he wonders if he'll make it back to his car before dark. But he does, sliding with relief into the driver's seat just as the sun touches the horizon.

Wednesday morning Larsen rises early, tired and sore, and drives into Moab. He stops at a coffee bar, where he washes his face in the restroom and then treats himself to a mushroom omelette and three cups of coffee.

He drives through Moab to the highway intersection north of town, where a bridge crosses the Colorado. He pulls off the road into a small city park and gets out of his car to sit by the water. Here he is thirty miles above the confluence to which he hiked the day before, and the river, far less murky, flows quietly through hills at the edge of town.

He considers his next move. He could drive up the road to Arches, but he's been there before and knows he'll find crowds of people at every overlook. He can leave them behind by hiking, but his legs are shot and the caffeine is already wearing off. Perhaps being upstream from where he was the day before triggers the thought. He looks at his map and decides going upstream is what he should continue to do.

He travels on State 128, which meanders north and east along the river valley

toward Interstate 70. Whenever the road nestles up against the river he stops and gets out. At one spot a big bend in the river allows him to sit almost in its midst, and he notices how much faster it flows on the far side than it does in front of him. At another he watches the jagged reflections of sunlight off the light chop of the water. Later he takes a nap in the shade of a tree.

Finally, he decides he'll drive to Grand Junction that night and stay in a motel. Not until he reaches the interstate and heads east - a half hour from Grand Junction, the sun descending over the road behind him as he crosses the Colorado line, thinking he'll probably end up driving to Rocky Mountain National the next day to do some high-country hiking - not until then does he realize where he's really going, where he's probably been going all along. He's going to Boulder, because that's where Sheila still lives.

From Grand Junction Larsen calls home and tells Ellen he's headed to Rocky Mountain National. I'll probably camp there the next couple nights, he says, so I won't be able to call. Any startling revelations out there in the wilderness? asks Ellen. Yes, he says, but they're ineffable. Do you miss me? she asks. Every minute, he says. Don't lie to me, she laughs. How about more than you'd think? That I might believe. Jenny gets on and tells him about her day at school. When are you coming home, Dad? she asks. After I go hike in the mountains, he says. Ellen comes back and says Donald doesn't want to leave the show he's watching, he'll talk to him next time. She talks briefly about work, then tells him he better be enjoying himself, because doing everything is going to kill her in a few more days. He says he is and promises to call the next time he's at a phone.

Thursday morning Larsen is back on the interstate, driving east toward light over distant mountains. As he drives, he thinks about Sheila Garlin, his only real love before Ellen, and wonders again, had he been worthy of it, whether she might have been more than just the love of his youth.

They met in the winter, during their final year of college. In May, after graduation, he moved into her apartment. Sheila waitressed that summer and he worked on a grounds maintenance crew. Their intimacy made them think they had found something lasting, and the timing seemed right - the end of student life, the beginning of adult.

In fact, though, it was neither. Sheila was to begin a master's program in history at Colorado that fall. He had received a thousand dollar graduation gift from a bachelor uncle and wanted to use it traveling in Europe. In August Sheila went to Boulder to find an apartment and start school. He worked a few more weeks in Albuquerque and then took a bus to join her.

When he arrived in Boulder they dropped his belongings at her apartment and walked to the foothills. He remembers Sheila wearing black jeans and a green blouse. Her dark hair was cut short, her brown eyes shone with affection. They sat in a meadow and talked, laughing with delight at being together again. Then, with barely a word, they walked back to the apartment and made love. They ate at a Chinese restaurant, then came straight back to the apartment.

Looking back on those two months in Boulder, Larsen usually allows himself to see them as blissful. He knows, though, he was restless. The only job he found was washing dishes at a restaurant down the hill from campus, working three to midnight. When he came home from scraping, spraying, and loading, he was too tired to do anything but drink beer. Sometimes Sheila stayed up with him, but usually she had morning classes. He'd planned to write poetry, but rarely did. He slept until noon, ate

breakfast, went for a walk, went to work. The entire time that thousand dollars, and several hundred more he had saved, tempted him to leave.

Sheila asked him to wait, saying she might go with him to Europe that summer, but he was too impatient. He told her he'd be back in three months, but his money lasted longer than he expected, and he was away for six. When he returned to the east coast, he called her. He'd sensed a change in her last two letters, and he heard the same hesitancy in her voice. Is something wrong? he asked. No, she said. Things have just gotten a little complicated while you were away. Do you want me not to come? he asked. No, she said. Come. I want you to. We'll figure it out when you get here.

In the town of Dillon, Larsen decides to make a detour on old U.S. 6 rather than stay on the interstate, which in a few miles tunnels through the heart of a mountain. The old highway switches back on itself and climbs toward Loveland Pass, nearly twelve thousand feet above the distant oceans. At one sharp turn he glances over the edge and sees two cars a thousand feet below, crawling along the thin line of road. All around him is the bulk of the white-streaked brown domes, which ride an even greater mass, hidden by pine forest.

At the pass he gets out, and sleet falls briefly from a passing cloud. A large wood sign announces this is the continental divide, and explains that from this point water flowing east will eventually drain to the Atlantic, water flowing west will find its way to the Pacific. He feels an exhilarating urge to set off and climb a peak that looms over the pass, but knows it's much farther away than it seems. A carload of people arrives while he takes in the view. Barely looking around, their hands holding jackets closed against the wind, they pose before the sign while a picture is snapped, then re-enter their vehicle and drive away. Larsen stays longer, hoping to capture something from the place, but the mountain wind soon cuts through his light jacket, and he, too, moves on.

The night of his second arrival in Boulder he and Sheila went to a bar, where they talked about Europe and graduate school. Sheila had made it clear on the phone she was involved with another man, but she had been far from clear what that meant. Though she didn't talk about him, Larsen felt his presence when she mentioned she had taken up cross-country skiing. For his own part, he made no attempt to steer the conversation that way. He was with Sheila, and he was spending the night in her apartment. That was all he needed to know.

He supposes uncertainty fueled their drinking. They returned to the one room apartment, and while Sheila was in the bathroom, he undressed to his underwear and lay at the edge of the bed, not wanting to presume too much. Sheila emerged in the same state of undress, turned out the light, and was next to him.

In the darkness he reached out and touched her shoulder. She moved to him, and they pretended to ignore the six months of unshared intimacy. They kissed, and their hands began the familiar patterns of their lovemaking. The underwear came off, and then he was over her. But instead of feeling her touch he heard her voice.

“Frank,” she said. “Wait.”

He held still above her, then lowered himself to her side. She put her hand on his chest.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I can't do this. I won't lie to Jason, and I don't think he could handle the truth. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” he said.

The next day he rented a room in a boarding hotel on Pearl Street. Perhaps that was a mistake, but at the time he felt there was nothing else he could do. The hotel entrance was a single door at street level, from which a flight of stairs climbed to a dingy second floor lobby with worn wood floors and derelict furniture, where two deflated men,

permanent residents, invariably sat at a table playing checkers. His room was on the left, halfway to the end of a dark hallway of closed doors. It contained a greasy stove, a noisy refrigerator, a single pipe-frame bed, and a table with two chairs. From its lone window he looked down on a black metal fire escape, and out across an alley at a faded brick building.

In a way, the hotel was simply the American West version of the European hotels he'd inhabited for the previous six months. Back in the States for only ten days, he still felt a little estranged from everything around him. During the next week, as he and Sheila explored their new emotional landscape, he was often grateful for that sensation.

A surprising amount of their time together was spent in silence. She told him Jason was older, worked as a carpenter, was college educated. She had met him at a party given by friends in her department. They talked about Larsen finding a job while they sorted things out, but he never went further than studying the want ads.

His third night in town he didn't see Sheila, nor did he have to ask where she was. He drank a six pack in his room, figuring that was how the table was meant to be used, and wondered what to do. Sheila made dinner for him the next night, and the night after that he was alone again.

That night, after putting his beer in the refrigerator, he went down the hall and bathed in the tub that served all the men living at the hotel. He used the sponge and can of bleach he found under the sink to scrub away the residue of previous baths and ran the water. Sitting in the tub, looking out the north-facing window by the sink, he could see the foothills at the edge of town and the sky above them. The cool evening air came through the window. As the sun set he watched a long, thin cloud turn a luminous pink over the green and brown hills, and at that moment, for the first time since he'd arrived in town, he felt a sense of hope. He saw that tomorrow, or next week, instead of being here, he could just as easily be somewhere else. He didn't need to stay and endure what lay ahead.

He kept coming back to the same thing - her hand on his chest that first night - and he knew what that hand meant. "When you left last fall," she had said, "with things the way they were, and then when you stayed away for so long, it made me realize I probably shouldn't count on you for much." That was the closest she had come to an explanation, and the more he considered it, the less he could challenge either its justice or its wisdom.

They had their last talk in the city park at the bottom of Broadway hill, sitting on the grass next to the creek. He told her he understood, that he didn't blame her. He said he'd go back to Albuquerque. If things changed she could let him know. He didn't look at her much while he talked - he stared at the creek or picked at a blade of grass - but when he did her eyes were on him.

He thinks Sheila felt the loss more keenly at that moment than he did. He was working so hard at leaving, at running away, that his feelings couldn't catch up. He was never proud of it, but he thinks he probably succeeded in convincing both of them, despite his claim to the contrary, that Sheila was somehow in the wrong. He is sure, though, that Sheila saw through that later, just as he did. What an ass he had been.

They exchanged two letters in the next half year and then lost touch. He lived in San Francisco, then moved back to Albuquerque and met Ellen. The only news he ever heard of Boulder came from Andrea Sinclair, a friend of Sheila's he occasionally saw around town. He knew Jason became a contractor, building custom homes and selling them. He knew Sheila learned accounting and managed their business. He knew they had done well, but he had no idea how Sheila felt about accounting, just as he had no idea how she felt about her marriage. He knew that, like him, she had two children. In fact, the last time Larsen wrote a poem was the day after Andrea told him Sheila had recently given birth to her second child. Until then he'd never known there was a first.

When old U.S. 6 again diverges from the interstate, Larsen takes it to Golden, where he catches 93 north, the back way to Boulder. He gets a motel room up Canyon Road and forces himself to unpack a few things before picking up the phone book. He finds the listing, writes the address and phone number on a piece of paper, and puts it in his wallet.

He watches some news, then drives back into town and parks on the street. As he walks he sees much has changed. Most strikingly, Pearl Street is completely transformed. The old character of a western main street has disappeared, replaced by a slick mall. He can't recognize a single building; the hotel where he once stayed is gone without a trace. He eats dinner, walks some more, and drives back to his motel.

He had hoped to find a city map while he was out, but since he didn't he stops at the motel desk and asks the girl if she knows the street. She doesn't, but she looks it up.

"That's a nice area," she says. "Do you know someone there?"

"Yes," he says. "An old college friend. I was thinking I might drop in."

The girl nods, he walks outside, and only then, halfway back to his room, all the pieces now in place, does a quick turn of his stomach make Larsen ask, really for the first time, just what the hell he is doing. Does he really intend, after twenty years, to drop in unannounced on Sheila's life? Does he expect her to have been thinking about him the last two days the way he's been thinking about her?

He looks across the shadowed canyon, and the moment passes. He's just on vacation, he tells himself. All he's done is come back to Boulder to look around and see what has changed. He hasn't done anything, or even committed himself to doing anything, yet.

Friday morning Larsen drives north on Broadway. He has considered, and rejected, calling ahead. Whatever he is doing, it can't be done over the phone. It has to be

in person.

He makes a right turn, drives three blocks, makes a left, then another. He cruises slowly until he spies the address, then makes a U-turn at the end of the block and comes back to park across the street from Sheila's house.

Now that the moment has arrived he feels almost sick to his stomach. The house is a large rancher, made of gray brick. A stone walkway crosses the lawn from the double cement driveway. A door of dark wood is set in a porch enclosed in metal security grating.

He knows there may be nobody home, or worse yet, that Jason might answer the door. He tells himself to simply get out of the car. The sunny day is perfect construction weather, and Jason is surely out on a job. But he can't quite do it. Only his mind will make the trip.

He rings the bell and waits outside the gate. The door opens and she peers out.

Yes? she says.

Her hair has less lustre and a few streaks of gray. Her skin is drawn tighter on her face, but her dark eyes haven't changed.

Sheila, he says. It's me. Frank.

Frank? she says. What are you doing here?

I was in town. I thought I'd drop by.

She seems distracted and asks what he's doing. He tells her he got in last night, that he's headed to Rocky Mountain National.

Why didn't you call? she asks. We could have all had dinner together.

I was tired, he says. I hoped I'd catch you this morning.

He can see he's not fooling her, and that she's thinking how little he's changed.

Well, she says, you caught me, but just barely. I have to meet Jason at a title company in twenty minutes to do the papers for a job.

She locks the door behind her and goes to her garage. As she backs out he stands in the driveway.

Next time, she says from her car window, let me know you're coming. I'd love to catch up.

Say hello to Jason, he hears himself say.

She gives him a quick look, then seems to decide it isn't worth pursuing. She waves, backs down the driveway, and is gone.

Larsen returns to himself and shakes his head. Surely it wouldn't be that empty, he thinks. Surely she has more affection for him than that. He stares across the street and tries again.

The door opens and Sheila peers out. She's hardly changed. Her dark eyes register surprise, then joy.

Frank! she says. What are you doing here?

She unlocks the gate and hugs him, then asks him inside. As they talk she glances at the clock.

It's such a beautiful day, she says. Let's go somewhere outside.

She tells him to follow her and drives to a nearby park. A trail leads into the foothills and she takes his hand as they walk. She admits Jason was due home soon and she didn't want to be there when he returned.

Her marriage has had its problems, she tells him, implying there have been lapses in Jason's fidelity. By now they are walking slowly arm in arm. They stop on the trail and embrace, her scent still familiar after all these years.

Frank, she says, it's so good to see you. Do you really have to leave?

I guess I don't have to, he says.

Where did you stay last night? she asks.

He tells her the name of the motel, knowing what she is thinking, knowing -

Out of the corner of his eye Larsen detects movement near Sheila's house. In an instant a rush of adrenaline makes his heart sprint. Blood throbs in his neck and flushes his face. Almost as quickly, he realizes he is not seeing Sheila emerge from her home, but the mailman, who has come up the street from behind and is now sliding his delivery through the slot by her garage door.

He watches the mailman continue up the street, and as he recovers admits to himself that his second fantasy is really no closer to what he's after than the first.

What, then, is he doing here? What does he need to ask her, or tell her, or hear from her? Put that way, he sees it isn't so complicated.

She unlocks the gate and comes out.

Listen, Sheila, he says. I've always wanted to know. If I'd stayed, if I'd fought for you, would things have turned out differently?

Frank, she says, how can I answer that?

You can't, he says. In fact, that's not even what I need to ask.

Then what is?

I guess... I guess I've always wondered whether the way I handled it, running away, made you think less of me. Whether it somehow ruined what we had.

Do you think that?

I wonder sometimes.

Well, don't. I've never blamed you. I've always treasured what we had.

I have, too.

You have to remember we were barely more than kids then.

I know.

And we've both done all right, haven't we?

I think so.

Then are we done here?

I guess we are.

She steps back inside her porch and closes the gate.

Say hello to Ellen when you get home, she says.

Oh, sure, he says. That'll be the first thing I do.

Outside, nothing has changed. Larsen sits calmly behind the wheel, knowing now he is not getting out and walking to the door. For a few minutes he sits and lets that truth sink in. Then he turns the key in the ignition and puts the car in gear.

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Larsen takes U.S. 36 north to Estes Park, where he books a motel room, then drives into the mountains for a short hike. He knows it's stupid, but this way he won't have to lie to Ellen. He will have done what he said he was doing.

In the morning, early, he cuts straight east to I-25 and heads south. Once Denver is behind him he starts thinking about home.

"How was your vacation," Ellen will ask.

"It was great," he'll say. "Just what I needed. I return with a renewed sense of resignation."

It's Saturday, so if he isn't too late, and they aren't too tired, he and Ellen will make love.

South of Colorado Springs, the mountains on his right, the western edge of the Great Plains to his left, he is surprised to find Sheila has once again inspired him to poetry. He stops by the side of the highway, takes a pad of paper from the glove box, and writes down the opening lines he's been playing with in his head.

There are so many ways to be a fool
That by the age of forty
A man cannot possibly explore them all.
And yet I have tried.

He tears the page from his pad and folds it, putting it in his left shirt pocket,
figuring more will come to him once he gets home.