A Jew’s final prayer, it is recited when death is imminent. The Vidui (vi-DOO-ee) is not so much a confession, although that is the usual translation of the Hebrew word, as an acknowledgment. Having lived a life, you may be prompted to give thanks for it or repent of it. But either way, an acknowledgement of some kind is appropriate. Celebration and lamentation are unreliable, because they so much depend on the mood of the moment or one’s habitual predisposition—one’s mental weather or climate. Death is an occasion that demands a more realistic attention, serious and just. This is what I am attempting here—honesty.

Strangely, the quality of the prose does not much matter. Style is a vanity, and I am no longer trying to impress anyone or to be pleasing. Awkwardness, too, has a truth to convey. I admit that I tinker with the sentences now and then, but only as a way to achieve clarity and wrest from them whatever interesting implications may be lurking among their obstinate syllables.

I have spent my life doing this, constructing an other, a non-me with which I can struggle in the hope of achieving some understanding and even perhaps a degree of refinement. Nevertheless, with a solitary self, there can be no real dialogue or Talmudic pilpul, and I have to admit that decades of this activity of mine have produced little in the way of wisdom. At best, there were momentary insights I had, surprising and satisfying but not, alas, memorable. Or not memorable enough for me to remember.

But was there an alternative?

§

To acknowledge the world should not be so difficult a
is relevant here because the prayer’s meaning arises from the one who is praying. God is always the same, as are the words of the prayer, but each of us is different. Aren’t we?

The assumption that there is a set formula by which the dying acknowledge their lives at the very least de-emphasizes their individuality, which they are in any event at the point of losing. We recite the prayer and by so doing belatedly join (or rejoin) family, congregation, tribe, and ultimately mankind. The details of the life matter less and less as we merge into the generality of humanity. We say: “We have transgressed, we have acted perfidiously, we have robbed, we have slandered. We have acted perversely and wickedly, we have willfully sinned, we have done violence, we have imputed falsely. We have given evil counsel, we have lied, we have scoffed, we have rebelled, we have provoked, we have been disobedient, we have committed iniquity, we have wantonly transgressed, we have oppressed, we have been obstinate…”

Some of us have done some of those things, and others, others. But very few have committed all of them. It makes no difference however as we leave the corruption of the world for the further corruption of the grave. (Metaphors are dangerous.) It is a serious moment, and yet I know myself well enough to wonder whether some of my neurons may persist even then in behaving badly. “The worms play pinochle on your snout,” is distressing as it flashes across my consciousness. We have oppressed, we have been obstinate, we have been embarrassing…(Is that perversity enough?)

It must happen to others that such stray thoughts intrude, irrelevant if not so defiantly frivolous. But I have no choice and take what comes. The charm of the line is in the word “pinochle” with its alliteration of the p in “play.” And “snout” is appealing, also, picturesque and rhyming with “the worms crawl out.” The image is somewhere between H. Bosch and W. Disney. No one gathered around the bed has any idea that I am off on such a tangent. This is both a relief and a disappointment to me, because it means that even members of my immediate family don’t know me well
enough to intuit such a thing. Or they don’t know me at all.

There is a Yale Online Course on “Death,” in which Shelly Kagan, an elfin professor of philosophy, argues that the saying “We die alone” is not necessarily true—and in some ways, his arguments are difficult to refute. He points out that those who die in suicide pacts, or in catastrophes like battles, plagues, famines, tsunamis, plane crashes, and volcanic eruptions have company in their demise. Where I think he gets it wrong is that we also live alone. (His argument here is that the aloneness is therefore not unique to death. And my response would be that it is only when we are facing death do we realize the depth of the isolation in which we have lived, sadly, all along. So we may not be more alone when we are about to die but we feel it more.) The saying only applies, then, to those who know that they are dying. (But who doesn’t?) Strictly speaking, when we face death we do so alone.

But however we untangle that problem, there is a singular and irreducible inner self we never reveal to other people, a kernel of personhood that is the repository of all our secrets. Even the friendliest, most gregarious, and most beloved people have from time to time a sense of isolation. It is in that persistent and inescapable solitude that we live and die and it is that inner being for which we mourn as our minds and bodies try to maintain their diminishing functionality.

Clear the room, then, of weeping relatives who are mostly a distraction, put on a kippah and a tallit, wash your hands (three times!), and then recite the prayer: “Modeh ani l’fonecha…” “Modeh” means, roughly, acknowledge. And “Ani” is the first person singular pronoun, which is important because after l’fonecha (before you) the prayer immediately changes to the first person plural. (“We have transgressed, we have robbed, and we have acted wickedly…””) This shift to the plural indicates that the prayer no longer comes solely from the dying individual but from and for the minyan, the congregation, the entirety of Israel. The whole broken world, even. These collectives are what we are fading into. No longer
are they merely the furtive and subversive thoughts of which we are about to rid ourselves but all thoughts, as if death were a cold body of water into which we venture a cautious toe, hoping to adjust gradually. This would account for the mention of sins the dying person has not committed. Have I robbed? Have I done violence? No, but some of us have, and the focus of the confession has now been broadened.

Is that what it means? Jews are good at grammar so it is unlikely to be a mistake. And in any case, we can tease meaning out of almost anything. Or am I whistling up the wrong tree of knowledge? Or barking, I should say. It's frogs that whistle up in trees. There must have been frogs in paradise.

§

These secrets need not be large or important. Small privacies work in the same way. I used to wonder why in so many movies and lately even TV programs men confide in each other as they stand at adjacent urinals. How does urinating underscore the significance of the dialogue? The implication is that the two of them are being candid with each other. This has become as much a cliché as the overturned fruit carts in high-speed chases. I can’t remember which film it was that had a scene in which an older man was taking a leak alone, not into a urinal but an ordinary toilet, and he didn’t just stand there but leaned forward and braced himself against the wall to let gravity help him empty his bladder without dribbling on his pants. There was a ripple of laughter in the theater from men each of whom had supposed that this trick was his alone and was slightly shocked by the small, recognizable truth and the realization that what each thought was his secret had now been revealed to the world so that women and younger men knew about it, too. For old men, peeing and also not peeing are important concerns, but few novelists have referred to these things, as they might do if only in the interest of verisimilitude.

Pissonyu, pissonyu, pissonyu. / In Russian this means, “I love
you.”/ If I had my way, I’d pissonyu all day...I don’t remember the next line, but the shape of the stanza suggests that there must have been one. Schoolboy humor. I remember singing the song on a day trip a few of us made to the Cape in the early fifties, a couple of girls, two other guys, and me. We were all in prep school and were packed into a large red convertible I’m pretty sure had cream-colored leather upholstery. One of the other guys, Larry something, took it upon himself to write to my parents to complain about my crudeness. Extraordinary! I hate to imagine what his toilet training must have been like. That he became a psychiatrist is not surprising. O Lord, have mercy on his patients.

There. That is—or was—a secret, if only because it wasn’t funny enough or important enough for me ever to tell anyone. The others in the car are all dead, and when I go, the incident will be gone, too, along with a host of other such moments, some embarrassing or shameful, some sad, and some splendid. They will have merged with the universal confession or acknowledgement of the prayer. Even transgressions I have entirely forgotten will be represented, and in that thought there is some small solace.

§

My relationship with prayer, this one or any other, is uneasy, which is perhaps a good thing. Just to recite the words and become a kind of whirling Indian prayer wheel or flapping Tibetan flag isn’t what most of us aspire to. There ought to be a self, as authentic as possible, offering the prayer. With me, the self makes its presence known, first of all, by my limited fluency in Hebrew. I understand less than most of the congregants around me, and this reduces some of the phrases to nonsense. But I believe in the nonsense—those wisps and fragments of Hebrew that circulate in my head. They make up in sincerity what they lack in meaning. Shantih, shantih, Eliot wrote at the end of “The Waste Land,” and I always have to fight to keep that from turning into “Sham-
poo, shampoo, shampoo,” which I did once as a joke but which now presents itself as an attractive alternate reading. Nutty, but then not so nutty because both words are derived from the same Indian language. Hindi? Kashmiri? Konkani, Malayalam? Guajarati? Tamil? Pali? Sanskrit, even? (I do not remember anyone having a shampoo in *The Mahabharata*, and I think I’d have noticed it.) Such an abrupt descent to domesticity reminds me of Milton’s effort in that direction when, in *Paradise Lost*, the angel comes to chat with Adam and Eve and, in an oddly considerate moment, Milton writes, “no fear lest dinner cool,” which is memorable only for its weirdness. Did Eve cook? Had they somehow discovered fire? And were there frogs, which aren’t kosher but which one can eat and even survive on?) One would think that the French were accustomed to famines. Why else would they have been driven to include frogs’ legs and snails in their culinary repertoire? Where were we? I was talking about my uneasy relationship to prayer. And nonsense. With a Rowley, powley, gammon and spinach, Heigh ho, says Anthony Rowley. V’imeru, amen.

Odd names some of those frogs have—Anthony and Ebenezer. Kermit, of course. And Dan’l Webster, Mark Twain’s celebrated jumping frog. Jeremy Fisher in some Beatrix Potter story. And I think one of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books has a frog named Trevor. “‘O Mistress Mouse, are you within?’/ ‘Can a frog fuck a mouse?’ she replied with a grin.” We have gone far afield, even allowing that she might have been a field mouse.

You have a phenomenal intelligence (otherwise you would not still be reading this), excellent taste, and a quick wit, too, I dare say. Also you are very patient, and I thank you for that. I expect that you have already come to a tentative diagnosis—that my problem is merely an attention deficit disorder. But don’t say that or think it as if it were a bad thing. It isn’t a lack of capacity with me but a low tolerance for pain and boredom that continued attention to almost anything in the outer world is likely to cause (outside my head, outside the room in which I lie on that deathbed we have been imagining, experi-
encing terminal ennui). I could pay attention but as Bartleby, my fellow scrivener, keeps saying, “I would prefer not to.”

I don’t care about sports. If I want to know what the weather is, I look out of the window. Good or bad, financial news is frightening. And the lead stories are generally unspeakable. (From headlines you can get lead poisoning.) What useful comment can there be about a massacre of children? “It happens.” That’s hardly adequate, and tender souls may think it irreverent, but it is the best the talking heads can come up with, although they disguise it as information by comparing it with the latest half dozen mass shootings, as if the death tolls were in some way competitive. The news of the maniac’s regrettable childhood and his dreadful deeds is unbearable enough without this further bit of dopey contextualization.

I have the feeling of not being from here. (Which is always a good answer if somebody asks you the time.) The natives speak a language I sometimes think I understand. They seem to behave themselves, but I might as well be from a distant planet. Lest they find me out (And tear me apart? And eat me?), I find it safer to retreat as far as I can to the interior where Mistah Kurtz is in critical condition. The brevity of my attention span is a well-developed defense mechanism, an evasive stratagem that has served me well. It avoids unpleasantness by keeping me from dwelling too long anywhere, with anyone, on anything.

Can you blame me?
Do I care?

§

Death itself is uninteresting. We know nothing about it and its nothingness is impossible to imagine. That “undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.” Bourn in the sense of boundary, but it also can mean an intermittent stream. With an e tacked on, it is a town down on the Cape, named after Jonathan Bourne, who became rich in the whal-
ing business.

Deathbed scenes are vividly in our minds because of the many nineteenth-century sentimental descriptions in prose and paint of the touching moment with the family gathered around the elderly, defunctative paterfamilias. They affect to be sad, he pretends to be comforted. Our own fears may be ever so slightly assuaged by the contemplation of what the writer or artist has set before us. My own preference (and I am in charge here) is to allow the geezer propped up on the pillows to be considering the life he has lived, however well or badly. He would not discuss this with the family and friends surrounding the bed. Indeed, he hasn’t the faintest idea whether they are there out of sadness or respect or as the first gambit in what will be a sordid, drawn-out wrangle over his estate. He therefore cannot trust the expressions on their faces or the words they say—at this moment or, as he realizes, any previous ones, which makes it more difficult to consider his life and the part he has played in the lives of others. He cannot trust his own guesses either, because he knows by now that these are based on faulty data and are almost certainly a function of his passing mood. Or the mood of his passing. (He makes jokes, too, I see, but then he is my improvisation.)

Perhaps even he is feigning, as in *Volpone*. Any attempts at communication are treacherous. Thought itself is treacherous. In which case, the problems of communication recede toward the vanishing point. But never mind, for if we cannot do anything about these difficulties, what good does it to do worry?

His name, of course, is Vernon Dewey although he generally signs letters as V. Dewey. No? Too much? There was some great musician whose advice to a young conductor was to protract the final chord just a little longer than good taste would allow. Which do you want, then, truth or good taste? And yes, you have to choose. We have to choose. I have to choose. I am about to have chosen…(How often do we come across future perfects?) I have chosen. Truth. Or
Consequences. There’s a city in New Mexico actually called that, even though the radio program for which it was named is long gone and mostly forgotten. (I do remember that the host was Raoul Phèdre, or something like that.) The town’s name is so cumbersome and embarrassing that the locals refer to it as “T. or C.” One of the embarrassing curiosities of Les Etats Zuni, it is near Elephant Reservoir, which is so named because elephants used to come there to drink and spray each other in hot weather.

§

This last was Dewey’s suggestion. Blame him. (Easy enough for me to say.) But we should indulge him at least a little, in extremis. And in flagrante. And in loco parentis, too. His mind, at the brink of the void, is vertiginous and tries to retreat. With all its strength and cunning. It is a futile undertaking, however, and there is the risk that, for no reason apparent to anyone else in the room, he will break into laughter. (Has he lost his mind? Can we use that to try to break the will? We should look that up in Schopenhauer’s authoritative textbook on testamentary practice.) The case would become well known and would be cited, as Dewey v Dewey. (Again? He is playing orthopedist with us, pulling our leg!)

Schopenhauer said, “Truth is no harlot who throws her arms around the neck of him who does not desire her; on the contrary, she is so coy a beauty that even the man who sacrifices everything to her can still not be certain of her favors.” This may not tell us much about truth but it suggests that Schopenhauer was a seriously disturbed fellow whose life and work give new meaning to the idea of a committed philosopher. I am horsing around. (Do horses make jokes? Do they play?) Arthur—as his friends called him, if he had friends—also wrote: “Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim.”

If there were a company that made anti-Hallmark cards, he could run it. Schope and Hauer, maybe?)