

The Force of Spirit

Scott Russell Sanders

My wife's father is dying, and I can think of little else, because I love him and I love my wife. Once or twice a week, Ruth and I drive the forty miles of winding roads to visit him in the nursing home. Along the way we pass fields bursting with new corn, stands of trees heavy with fresh leaves, pastures deep in grass. In that long grass the lambs and calves and colts hunt for tender shoots to nibble and for the wet nipples of their mothers to suck. The meadows are thick with flowers, and butterflies waft over the blossoms like petals torn loose by wind. The spring this year was lavish, free of late frosts, well soaked with rain, and now in early June the Indiana countryside is all juiced up.

On our trip to the nursing home this morning, I drive while Ruth sits beside me knitting. Strand by strand, a sweater grows under her hands. We don't talk much, because she must keep count of her stitches. To shape the silence, we play a tape of Mozart's Requiem from a recent concert in which Ruth sang, and I try to detect her clear soprano in the weave of voices. The car fills with the music of sorrow. The sound rouses aches in me from earlier losses, the way cold rouses pain from old bone breaks.

Yet when I look out through the windows at the blaze of sunlight and the blast of green, I forget for minutes at a time where we're going and what we're likely to see when we get there. Ruth must forget as well, because every now and again she glances up from her

knitting to recall a story or a task or some odd discovery she's read about recently.

As we slow down for a hamlet named Cope — a cluster of frame houses gathered at a bend in the road — she describes a scientific article that she came across at the lab this past week. The author, a biologist, was puzzling over what distinguishes living organisms from dead matter, she tells me, and after years of experiments he concluded that the vital secret is the flow of electrons in association with oxygen.

I tell her that all sounds reasonable enough, but I wonder why oxygen goes hauling electrons around in the first place.

"He hasn't figured that out yet," she replies.

"Wouldn't it be easier," I say, "for oxygen to sit still and leave matter alone? Why stir things up?"

"In other words, why life?"

"Yeah, why life?"

She laughs. "Ask me an easy one."

"Think about it," I say. "Why corn? Why shagbark hickories? Why moss and wolves? Why not just rock and dust?"

Used to my pestering her with questions, Ruth normally answers with good humor and patience. But now she merely says, "You'll have to read the article."

A fly beats against the inside of the windshield. Suddenly the crazed, buzzing bit of stuff seems bizarre and precious. I lift one hand from the steering wheel, crank down a window, shoo the fly to freedom, then grip the wheel once more. Now my fingers seem utterly strange. How can they curl so exactly in the shape of my

thoughts? The lurching of my heart surprises me, as if a desperate animal has crawled inside my chest. All at once my whole body feels like an implausible contraption, and my skin barely contains the storm of electrons.

What I feel is not exactly panic, because I'm spared for the moment the chill of knowing I will die. What I feel right now is amazement that anything lives, fly or hawk, virus or man. The radiant fields and woods flowing past our windows seem farfetched, outrageous. Why all those leaves waving? Why all those juicy stems thrusting at the sky? Why those silky black wings of crows slicing the air? And why am I set moving through this luminous world, only to feel such grief when some patch of woods falls before the saw, when a farm vanishes beneath the pavement of a shopping mall or a valley beneath a reservoir, when a man withers in a nursing home bed?

"What are you thinking?" I ask Ruth, just to hear her voice.

"I'm thinking I only need two more inches to finish the front of this sweater."

"About your dad, I mean."

She turns her brown eyes on me, reading my face, which has grown transparent to her gaze over thirty years of marriage. Her own heart-shaped face draws into a frown. "I'm wondering if he'll still know us."

"Surely he's not that far gone," I say.

"Maybe not yet," she agrees.

I turn my attention back to the music, and gradually Mozart restores my composure.

After a while Ruth sets down her knitting and takes up a stack of her father's insurance papers. She's been working on them for months, yet the stack keeps growing thicker, each layer of papers recording another bout in the hospital, another round of tests. She circles numbers, places checkmarks beside dates, compares one statement with another, imposing order on this chronicle of illness. Congestive heart failure is the short name for what afflicts him. After coronary seizures, quadruple bypass surgery, the insertion of a pacemaker, and several strokes, and after seventy-eight years of faithfully pumping blood, Earl McClure's heart is simply wearing out.

Every now and again as she works on the insurance forms, Ruth sighs, whether because of the tedious papers, or because of the history they record, I can't tell.

Near a tiny settlement called Bud, we pass a white barn that bears a warning in letters six feet high: AT THE END THERE IS JUDGMENT! One side of the barn is painted with the silhouette of a man hanging on a cross, the figure entirely black except for two white rings marking the eyes, which glare out like searchlights. A caption explains, HE DIED FOR YOU.

Ruth and I have known since childhood who he is, this dangling man, for we both spent nearly all of our childhood Sundays in Methodist churches, singing hymns, memorizing Bible verses, listening to sermons, learning that Jesus saves. Although Ruth still sings regularly in a church choir and I sit in a pew on the occasional Sunday with a Bible in my lap, neither of us

any longer feels confident that the man on the cross will preserve us from annihilation, nor that he will reunite us with our loved ones in heaven. The only meetings we count on are those we make in the flesh. The only time we're sure of is right now.

"Whenever we pass by here," Ruth says, "I wonder why anybody would paint such a scary picture on a barn. Who'd want to look every day at those awful eyes?"

"They're meant to keep your mind on ultimate things as you milk the cows."

"They're creepy," she insists.

I agree, but I also understand the attraction of a faith that eases the sting of loss, including the loss of one's own precious life. Until I was twenty or so I embraced that faith, hoping for heaven, then I gradually surrendered it under the assault of science, and in dismay over witnessing so much evil carried out in Christ's name. I no longer believe that Jesus can do our dying for us; we must do that for ourselves, one by one. Yet I've not given up believing in the power that reportedly sent him to redeem us, the Creator who laid the foundations of the world.

For the last few miles of our drive to the nursing home, I study the land. There's a shaping intelligence at work here, I feel sure of it. I sense a magnificent energy in the grasses bowing beneath the wind, in the butterflies flouncing from blossom to blossom, in the trees reaching skyward and the jays haranguing from the topmost branches and the clouds fluffing by. I sense in this rippling countryside a tremendous throb and surge, the

same force that squeezes and relaxes my heart.

Everything rides on one current. As I listen to the music of grief filling the car, as I go with my wife to visit her dying father, the world, for all its density and weight, seems made of breath.

Legend has it that Mozart died while composing his Requiem, a few measures into the section beginning with the Latin word *lacrimosa*, which means tearful or weeping. "On that day of weeping," the verse proclaims,

again from the ashes will arise
guilty mankind, to be judged.

That much he orchestrated, but he never completed the remainder of the verse:

Therefore, spare this one, O God,
Merciful Lord Jesus,
And grant them rest.

Ostensibly, the one to be spared from God's wrath was the dearly departed wife of the count who had commissioned this Mass for the Dead, but the ailing Mozart must also have been mourning himself. Another scrap of legend claims that in his final days he said, "It is for myself that I am writing this." I suspect he was grieving as well for his own dearly departed, especially his mother, who had died some years earlier in Paris while he was there looking for work.

Ruth's mother died last October, not long before the chorus began rehearsing the Requiem. By the time of her death, Dessa McClure had been whittled away for half a dozen years by Alzheimer's disease, losing her memory, speech, balance, and strength, becoming again as a little child. This was not the sort of child she had aspired to become, for she meant to find her way to heaven by achieving a clear vision and a simple heart. Toward the end, her vision grew cloudy, and the world became a blur of strange rooms and unknown faces. And at the very end, while she was rising from a bath, her heart quit.

The nurse who'd been helping her at the time told us afterward, "She went limp all of a sudden and dropped right down and was gone."

Ruth's father, still able to get around fairly well back then, had just been to see Dessa in the special care unit, where patients suffering from various forms of dementia drifted about like husks blown by an idle breeze. She had seemed almost happy, he recalled. She even whistled a bit, and showed no signs of pain. And he was sure she'd recognized him by the way she squeezed his finger and smiled. He let that be his last glimpse of her, for he chose not to look at his wife's body after the nurses brought him news of her death.

But Ruth saw her laid out in the nursing home, still crumpled, as if, when breath departed, the body had collapsed like an empty sack. Ruth was so appalled by the image that she insisted on seeing her mother's body one more time before the cremation. And so, after we had finished our business in the funeral home, she and I

slipped into a back room to gaze for a moment at the shell of her mother resting on a cart, all but the face hidden by a white sheet, the skin pale except for dark rings under the shut eyes. We knew this face, yet it seemed aloof and slack, for it had been peeled away from the person to whom it once belonged. Beneath the sheet, the body lay as motionless as a piece of furniture covered with drapery in a vacant house. I put my arm around Ruth, not so much to comfort her as to comfort me, to feel the warmth and weight of her. She tilted her head against my shoulder and stood there for a long while without speaking. Then she leaned forward, ran a hand over that forsaken face, and turned to go.

The heart is only a muscle. It's a meaty pump that shoves and sucks the blood that carries the oxygen that hauls the electrons that keep us alive. It beats forty or a hundred and forty times a minute, hour after hour, day after day, until, between one contraction and the next, it falters and stops. When surgeons lay the heart open to repair valves and carve out damaged tissue, they find no spirit hiding there, no seat of the soul. Biologists can trace it back down the evolutionary path to the earliest twitchings of life in the sea.

Yet who can accept that we're merely meat? Who can shake the suspicion that we're more than two-legged heaps of dust accidentally sprung into motion? Whatever the doctors and biologists claim, we go on using the word heart as if it pointed to an emotional center, a core of integrity. We trust those who speak from the heart. We're wary of those who are heartless and hardhearted.

Have a heart, we say, begging for kindness. Home is where the heart is, we say. We're drawn irresistibly to our heart throb, who knows how to pluck our heartstrings. We long to feel heartsease by fulfilling our heart's desire. In our earnest pronouncements, we appeal to hearts and minds, heart and soul. Swearing most solemnly, we cross our hearts and hope to die, if what we say should be a lie. Heartfelt and heartsick, heartland and heartache, heartwood and heartbreak: the word, like the muscle beating in our chest, is indispensable. The beliefs we truly live by, the ones we'll die for, are those we hold in our heart of hearts.

At the nursing home, we find Ruth's father drowsing on his bed, arms outstretched as if he has fallen there from a great height. He wears a white shirt, brown dress pants, low knit socks that leave his ankles bare, and lace-up leather shoes. His hair, still dark and full, is neatly combed. Except for his gauntness, he might be a man resting after a day at the office. Yet he's too frail even to stand up for more than a few minutes at a time. His wrists are sticks. His cheeks are hollow. Blue veins show through the translucent skin of his jaw.

I can see Ruth hesitate before waking him, because she wonders if he will recognize her. So long as he sleeps, she remains his daughter. At last she lightly touches one of those out-flung arms, and he startles awake. Behind thick spectacles, his eyes are milky and uncertain. He looks bewildered for a moment, and then he beams, reaching out to grasp Ruth's hand.

"Hey, there," he says. "I'd about given up on you."

"Don't you worry," she answers. "If I say I'm coming, I'm coming."

"Well, I was thinking ..." he begins, then loses his way and falls silent with an embarrassed little shrug.

But he has said enough to assure Ruth that he knows her, that he's still there in his withered body. She asks how he's feeling, how he's eating, whether he's had any visitors, whether the nurses have been treating him well, and he answers each question in two or three words, staring up into her face and squeezing her hand.

To say that he is dying makes it sound as though he's doing something active, like singing or dancing, but really something's being done to him. Life is leaving him. From one visit to the next we can see it withdrawing, inch by inch, the way the tide retreating down a beach leaves behind dry sand. With each passing day he has more and more trouble completing sentences, as if words, too, were abandoning him.

I hang back, awkward before his terrible weakness. Eventually he notices me standing near the foot of his bed. "Why, here's Scott," he says.

I step closer. "I came to see if you're behaving yourself."

"I am, pretty much," he says. "How was the drive over?"

"It was beautiful," I tell him, lifting my voice because I can see he's left his hearing aids in a dish on the bedside table. "Everything's blooming. The corn's shooting up. Some of the hay is cut and drying."

“Good, good,” he murmurs. Then he asks if I’ve been watching the NBA tournament, which I haven’t, and so he tells me, pausing for breath between sentences, how the Indiana Pacers lost a play-off game to the New York Knicks. The Pacers had a lead going into the fourth quarter, but their legs gave out. “I understand tired legs,” he says, and gives a wheezy laugh.

Ruth and I exchange looks, amazed that he’s following basketball. He’s also following our children, Eva and Jesse, for now he asks what they’ve been up to since our last visit. After we tell him, he repeats what we’ve said, as if to pin down memory: “So Jesse’s working in the restaurant. Is that right? Eva’s studying birds? She bought a new computer?” His voice is thin and soft, like a trickle of water over smooth stone.

Since we saw him last, Ruth and I have attended a college graduation in Ohio. He remembers this as well, and asks if we had a good time. We did, I answer. And then I tell him about watching the graduates troop across the stage as each name was called, most of them so young and spry they fairly danced in their black robes, while parents and friends and fellow students cheered. A few waddled heavily or limped stiffly. Two scooted across in electric chairs. Then near the end of the ceremony, one slight woman who’d been waiting in line among those receiving degrees in nursing rose from a wheelchair, labored up the stairs, and slowly crossed the stage while holding on to the arm of a young man. When the president gave her the diploma and shook her hand, the audience broke out in the loudest applause of the afternoon. We clapped because many of us knew she was

gravely ill with cancer, she’d not been expected to live until commencement, and yet she’d refused to give up. Now here she was, on stage for a moment, drawing our praise.

When I finish my story, which poured out of me before I thought how it might sound in the ears of a dying man, Ruth’s father says, “She’s got spunk.”

“She does,” I agree.

“I like that,” he says. “You can never have too much spunk.” He rouses a bit to report that he’s going once a day to physical therapy. They wheel him down there in his chair, but then they make him stand up and push a walker across the room to build up his legs, and make him lift dumbbells to build up his arms.

“Pumping iron, are you?” I say.

“I need to get my strength back.” He raises an arm and the sleeve droops down, revealing the tender bruised skin of his wrist.

We learned from a doctor this week that his heart now pumps blood at twenty percent of the normal rate, and it will keep on dwindling. His eyes close, but he doesn’t let go of Ruth’s hand. She says we’d better let him get some rest. Does he need anything before we go? Yes, he answers, three things: his bathrobe, an extra pair of trousers, and his electric shaver.

I go to fetch them from his apartment on the floor below, a comfortable suite of rooms where he’s never likely to stay by himself again. Going there and coming back, I take the stairs two at a time. I rush down the halls past elderly residents who look at me as if I’m a lunatic. There’s no reason to race, except that I still can, and so I

do, savoring the bounce in my legs and the wild flutter in my chest.

I want a name for the force that keeps Earl McClure asking questions while the tide of life withdraws from him. I want a name for the force that abandoned the body of Dessa McClure and left it like a piece of shrouded furniture on a cart in the funeral home. I want a name for the force that carried a woman dying of cancer through her studies and across a stage to claim her diploma. I want a name for the force that binds me to Ruth, to her parents, to my parents, to our children, to neighbors and friends, to the land and all its creatures.

This power is larger than life, although it contains life. It's tougher than love, although it contains love. It's akin to the power I sense in lambs nudging the teats of their dams to bring down milk, in the raucous tumult of crows high in trees, in the splendor of leaves gorging on sun. I recognize this force at work in children puzzling over a new fact, in grown-ups welcoming strangers, in our capacity, young and old, for laughter and kindness, for mercy and imagination.

No name is large enough to hold this power, but of all the inadequate names, the one that comes to me now is spirit. I know the risks of using such a churchy word. Believers may find me blasphemous for speaking of the wind that blows through all things without tracing the breath to God. Nonbelievers may find me superstitious for invoking any force beyond gravity, electromagnetism, and the binding energy of atoms. But I must run those risks, for I cannot understand the world,

cannot understand my life, without appealing to the force of spirit. If what I feel for my wife or her father and mother is only a by-product of hormones, then what I feel for swift rivers or slow turtles, for the shivering call of a screech owl or the green thrust of bloodroot breaking ground, is equally foolish. If we and the creatures who share the earth with us are only bundles of quarks in motion, however intricate or clever the shapes, then our affection for one another, our concern for other species, our devotion to wildness, our longing for union with the Creation are all mere delusions.

I can't prove it, but I believe we're more than accidental bundles of quarks, more than matter in motion. Our fellowship with other creatures is real, our union with the Creation is already achieved, because we all rise and fall on a single breath. You and I and the black-footed ferret, the earth, the sun, and the far-flung galaxies are dust motes whirling in the same great wind. Whether we call that magnificent energy Spirit or Tao, Creator or God, Allah or Atman or some other holy name, or no name at all, makes little difference so long as we honor it. Wherever it flows – in person or place, in animal or plant or the whole of nature – we feel the pressure of the sacred, and that alone deserves our devotion.

A gusty breeze is pawing the grass and churning the ponds as Ruth and I drive back from the nursing home over the winding roads. Neither of us can bear to hear the Requiem again right now, so we talk. She remembers stories of her father from when he was

strong—how he lifted her in and out of bed when she was down with rheumatic fever, how he laid fires in a charcoal grill when the family went camping, how he dug up the yard to plant roses. She recalls how, in their last house before the nursing home, her father and mother used to stand spellbound at the dining room window and watch birds at the feeders. And she recalls how, even in the final stark days, her mother shuffled to the birdcage in the special care unit and watched the fierce, tiny finches darting about, squabbling and courting. From inside the Alzheimer’s daze, her mother would say nothing, but sometimes she whistled at the finches, and sometimes she laughed.

As if summoned by these memories of Dessa and Earl McClure, birds fill this blustery June afternoon here in southern Indiana. We see goldfinches dipping and rising as they graze among the waving seed heads of the tall grasses. We see red-winged blackbirds clinging to the tops of cattails that sway in the breeze. We see a kettle of hawks, a swirl of starlings, a fluster of crows. A great blue heron goes beating by, and six or eight geese plow the ruffled waters of a lake. Near the barn that’s painted with the crucified man, more than a dozen turkey vultures spiral over a field, a lazy black funnel pointing down toward carrion.

There’s an abundance in this teeming land that promises to make up for anything lost to vultures. The corn seems to have shot up higher since our drive over this morning. In the afternoon heat the woods bristle and the pastures heave and the fields are charged with light.

After a while Ruth takes up her knitting, clacks along for a few stitches, then puts it down again. Gazing out the window, she recalls in a soft voice how she thought of her mother at every rehearsal of the Requiem, and how moved she was at the performance itself when the conductor announced that the concert would be given in memory of Dessa McClure. Ruth had been forewarned of this gesture, but still she had to blink hard to read the opening measures.

We pass a hayfield where a tractor is rolling the cut grass into fat round bales, and I can’t help thinking of the verse in Isaiah:

All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people is grass.

These days, I’m in no danger of forgetting how swiftly every living thing withers. But I also remember that grass, once cut, sprouts up again from the roots. Whatever Lord breathes upon this world of crickets and constellations blows beginnings as well as endings. The Latin word for breath is *spiritus*, which also means courage, air, and life. Our own word spirit carries all those overtones for me when I use it to speak of the current that lifts us into this life and bears us along and eventually lets us go.

We pass more fields scattered with round bales of hay like herds of slow, ungainly beasts. When we draw

up behind a truck that sags under the weight of a single great bale, a stream of chaff comes blowing back at us, and loose bits float in through our open windows.

I reach over to brush some straw from Ruth's lap. She grabs my hand and holds on.

"I hate to think of clearing out Daddy's things," she says. "We'll have to find who wants what, then get rid of the rest."

"Let's hope that won't be for a while yet," I say.

She doesn't answer. We drive on through the lush green countryside. I remember when we cleared out Dessa's things, how we found more than forty Bibles and hundreds upon hundreds of religious books, which she had long since lost the ability to read. In drawers and cupboards and closets we found entry forms for sweepstakes, because she had decided, as her mind began to go, that winning some game of chance might set things right. And we found lists she had made of crucial events in her life — her marriage, her children's births, her surgeries, her husband's heart attack, the death of her parents, the moves from house to house — all the personal history that was slipping away from her. On page after page in a spiral notebook she wrote down in broken phrases what mattered to her, what defined her life, as if words on paper might preserve what the mind no longer could hold.

I make my own lists, in sentences and paragraphs rather than broken phrases, because language has not yet abandoned me. I am making such a list now, here in these pages. You've seen the long version. A short version of the story I've been telling you might say only:

Ruth, Earl, Dessa,
corn, crow, grass,
wind, dirt, sun.

Questions

1. What is the theme of the piece? Try to write it down in a single sentence.
2. What rhetorical strategies does Sanders employ to introduce and develop the theme? (i.e. anecdote, information, dialogue, diction, figurative language, etc.) How does each element relate to the theme you see?