A TRIBUTE TO JOHN UPDIKE

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Celeste Bartos Forum

LIVE from the New York Public Library

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VOICE OF JOHN UPDIKE: "He knew the way in his bones, but was slightly confused by the traffic lights, which had multiplied in Haysville since he was last there. A mall spread itself where there had been fields. A new high school, flat and low, reminded him of an airport. Along the low side of Chestnut Street, the trees had been cut down and the curb pushed back. Without the trees, his old street had a bareness that made the houses—some frame, some brick—appeared exposed and shabby. The curbside had "no parking" signs that hadn't been here. He parked anyway.

The cement retaining walls had developed bulges and cracks since he was a child, or else a child had never noticed such things, and the long flights of steps, with iron pipe railings, up to the porches of the semidetached houses on the high side of the street, had a gaunt, cockeyed look that was not part of his memories. To a child's eyes, these steps had appeared grand. You climbed them and found magical pleasures at the top. A squeaking porch glider from which to watch the traffic go by below. A plushy front parlor with its shade drawn and a tinted big goblet of hard candy on a polished end table. A backyard with a double garden swing, in a kind of bower of hollyhocks and morning glories, and a cement walk going back, straight as an arrow, toward the alley where the ice plant was. Beyond the alley had been a large vacant lot, where in the summer traveling amusement parks set up their tents and rides."

VOICE OF JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Can you talk about your own faith for a moment, because I know you're a regular churchgoer, and I'm wondering if you could put that into the context of your work?

VOICE OF JOHN UPDIKE: Yes, I plead guilty to going to church. I've always found it comforting. I've switched denominations. Born a Lutheran, raised a Lutheran, became a Congregationalist. My first girlfriend was a Baptist, a chaplain's daughter.

VOICE OF JEFFREY GOLDBERG: That must have its challenges.

(laughter)

VOICE OF JOHN UPDIKE: We tried to meet them. **(laughter)**

And wound up an Episcopalian.

VOICE OF JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Not because of that, obviously.

VOICE OF JOHN UPDIKE: I was not particularly pious. My head was in books and becoming a creator of some kind of art, either drawing or writing—that was my paradise. Nevertheless, even in college, when attendance drops way off, generally, I continued to go to church now and then. For me, it gives me energy and courage and relieves some anxieties, and when I've had religious crises, which have been a few, it was with a sense of panic and claustrophobia that I couldn't really move. I couldn't—anything so terrible as total obliteration was waiting for me. And I couldn't be I felt believing this myself or creative, so you might say that my religion is a kind of license that I've given myself to enjoy life and be creative.

Fiction ought to be a little more about being human, the tensions and paradoxes and unspoken agony of being a thinking animal. To be a human being is to be intrinsically under some stress between the appetites, the imperatives, our desires, our virtually boundless desires, and the real bounds that being a social animal creates. So *Rabbit, Run* was about that, about a guy who burst the constraints of his responsibilities. *The Centaur* was about a man who, while complaining loudly, plodded on under his responsibilities,

and this tension is always in my mind to a greater or lesser degree, and that's what I try to dramatize in my fiction.

VOICE OF JEFFREY GOLDBERG: This is your fiftieth or fifty-first book, I believe?

VOICE OF JOHN UPDIKE: Well, Jeffrey, it depends on what you call a book. **(laughter)** There have been five children's books which are so short that I can hardly count them at all as books. And there are collections like *Golf Dreams,* a collection of writings about golf, which—most of which have already appeared in other books, so we call that a full book or a half book, but I'm getting on toward sixty books, yes. I would never have dreamed as a child, as a young man, that I was going to write that many books, but I set up shop rather innocently, naively, as a professional writer. I didn't want to teach, I wasn't sure I could teach. My father had taught and that was enough teaching, I thought, for two generations. **(laughter)** And so I don't really do much else but write. And I write every morning and the books, the manuscript pages, do pile up.

VOICE OF JEFFREY GOLDBERG: At the Book Expo a few weeks ago in Washington, you created quite a stir with a call to arms for the independent bookseller and a call for a struggle, in a way, against Google. Could you talk about that? And talk about the place of the novel—I'm really fascinated by that—I mean, when you were coming up, the novel was *it,* and there's so much noise now, and I'm wondering if you could share with the audience a couple of your observations that you made to such acclaim at the booksellers' convention.

VOICE OF JOHN UPDIKE: Literature as we know it would become instead a kind of flow between the various composers of a kind of symphony of voices on the Internet, and snippets would come and go, snippets may be taken from somebody's writing, but, as far as I could gather, unascribed, uncredited, un-paid-for, so that I said to the booksellers, "you and I are done for if this scenario works."

It's sort of an ignorant speech to give, in a way, because what do I know about the electronic future? It is amazing what these computers do and ever more amazing what they can do, still, it does bode ill for the book as a saleable artifact and for the entire pleasure of books, which my life has been based on. I loved books as a boy, I continued to love them through college. I thought they were magical. I began to produce them and thought that was magical. So if the era of authorship and books is at an end, I'm on the one hand sad for those of you who had hoped to be writers but glad that I had my life before this grisly end.

(laughter)

VOICE OF JEFFREY GOLDBERG: Ladies and gentlemen, John Updike.

(applause)

DAVID FERRIERO: Good evening. I'm David Ferriero, the Andrew W. Mellon Director of the New York Public Libraries, and on behalf of Catie Marron, the chair of our Board of Trustees, and Paul LeClerc, the President of the Library, it's my pleasure to welcome you to the greatest library in the world. What more fitting place to be paying tribute to John Updike, whose works are represented in each of our ninety-one libraries, who has graced this stage in conversation and who frequented our glorious Reading Room on the third floor.

As one of our librarians recently blogged, "A number of summers ago, I saw John Updike in the Library. He was sitting in the back of the Main Reading Room, leaning over the table and writing with a small gold pen. I felt as oddly excited and privileged as someone else might feel who in the course of day-to-day activity had encountered Johnny Depp or Angelina Jolie. I ached to know what he was writing on that pad, if it was a story for the *New Yorker*, another episode in the chronicles of Harry Rabbit Angstrom or Henry Bech, or just a tally of his day's expenses in New York. I didn't ask—library professionalism, New York sangfroid, or maybe just temperamental shyness kept me from saying anything at all. When I looked again a short while later he was gone."

It's a personal pleasure for me to welcome the Updike family here tonight. I grew up in Beverly, Massachusetts, and I was also always very proud that John Updike had chosen my North Shore as home. And I had my own brush with celebrity many years ago in the produce section of a local grocery story, Purity Supreme, where we both reached for the

same head of lettuce. He won. I was in awe but asked for an autograph, which I still have, which says, “I am in Purity. John Updike.” **(laughter)**

I’ll new turn the podium over to Sonny Mehta, publisher of Alfred A. Knopf and tonight’s host.

(applause)

SONNY MEHTA: Good evening. Thank you for joining us tonight for this special tribute to John Updike. I’m the editor in chief of Alfred A. Knopf, the proud publishers of John’s books for more than fifty years. It’s a great pleasure to look around this room tonight and see so many of John’s friends and colleagues in attendance, but it’s an even greater pleasure to know that his entire family is here and we are honored that you could join us. I want to thank Paul LeClerc, David Ferriero, Paul Holdengräber, for their help with our tribute this evening. One of John’s favorite pictures was taken upstairs in the New York Public Library Rose Main Reading Room. He was at home here.

John was an extraordinary writer—prolific, meticulous, perceptive, generous to a fault. He was beloved not only by his publisher but also by readers, critics, and more than a few award committees. John cared about the process, about the mechanics involved in making a book. He paid as much attention to those details as he did to his writing. He was an author with the heart of a publisher and a frequent visitor to our offices. He cared about the weight of paper, the inking on the page. He cared about the size of the trim, the trim

of the book, the color of the top stain, he cared about fonts, and he cared about the images on a jacket.

John loved books. He loved writing them. He loved reading them. He loved holding them in his hands. He was a true believer in the power of books to transform lives. “Books,” he said, “are what makes us human.” I’ve had the good fortune to work in publishing most of my life and I’ve met a great many authors. John stands as a giant among them. For generations of readers, his writing will endure. But those of us who were fortunate to work with him through the years will also remember his charm, his grace, and his humor. And yet if I were to single out his most endearing trait, it would have to be this—his modesty. His place in the world of letters was always assured, but after all was said and done, John wanted to be remembered simply as a writer, as someone who made his living with words. It was his trade. And he was a master of that trade. We all miss him, and tonight we honor his memory. Thank you.

(applause)

DAVID REMNICK: Good evening. I’m David Remnick. Let me join Sonny in welcoming you tonight and most of all in welcoming the Updike family. Those of us at the *New Yorker* who had the honor to work in any way with John knew at lease something of the singular place in his life that Martha Updike occupied. She was his great love, his lion at the gate. Any artist who seeks to get it all down, as John did—sixty books, an entire ecosystem of imagination, emotion, history, critical thinking, humor, and

a sense of place—a rare writer like that must have rare protection and uncommon love. As John's constant readers, we should extend not only our sympathy to Martha Updike but also our thanks.

John was a writer of many worlds. I've been asked to say something about one of those particular worlds, his life as a devoted, almost crazily productive and finally singular staff writer for Harold Ross's comic weekly. John once said that New Yorkers are such chauvinists that they believe that anyone living anywhere else must somehow in a sense be kidding. **(laughter)** And John was not in the end a New Yorker. He left Babylon for north of Boston many decades ago, but anyone associated with the magazine has to admit that John was *The New Yorker*. He was the magazine. He enlarged it, he graced it, he gave it intellectual ambition and a particularly shimmery American tone. He gave it a horizon, just out of site.

He grew up in Pennsylvania an only, lonely child, whiling away sunny afternoons in muggy rooms, drawing, reading, writing, hoping one day to join in print his heroes, Thurber and White. And by the time he was in his mid-twenties he had joined the magazine and gently but unmistakably had overtaken those heroes. And while he left New York, he never left the *New Yorker*, which was for the magazine like an eternally young Joe DiMaggio forever playing right field. Center field—Roger Angell corrected me—center field and hitting in the sweet spot of the Yankee order. John would have preferred Ted Williams in that metaphor, but too bad.

From Beverly Farms he communicated with the home office by mail. Every piece he sent in was accompanied by a letter, its blurred blue address stamp above and the crisp angular signature below. E-mail was not his thing. On that score he said in one insisting note, “I’ll entrust this to the good old U.S. Mails. If they can deliver anthrax to the Senate, **(laughter)** they can get this to you.” **(laughter)** Note the Updikeian mix of nostalgic patriotism and a slightly menacing good cheer. **(laughter)**

As Sonny said, John loved print—plying it, looking at it, being in it. He once wrote his graceful editor Henry Finder about a new computer he’d just bought. “I finally found a typeface on this dratted machine that I like. Easy to read on the screen and not too bad when printed out. It’s called Lucida Bright, which sounds to me like an Evelyn Waugh heroine.” **(laughter)** Often there was the familiar, if temporary, tone of weariness in those notes, that of a man who’d just finished yet another big job and was wary of being given the next one. Accompanying the manuscript of his review of Robert Alter’s translation of the *Five Books of Moses* came this disquieting gesture of cross-cultural reach. “Oy vey, as Moses said to Zipporah, what an assignment!” **(laughter)** You see, the reason that’s funny **(laughter)** is, and any reporters in the room might want to get their pen ready on the notepad—John Updike was not Jewish. **(laughter)** He wasn’t. And yet in the voice of Henry Bech he wrote nearly as many novels *as* a Jew as perhaps did Bernard Malamud.

As a staff writer, he was infinitely suggestible. He said “yes” to nearly everything. His essays were his way of reading deeply and of thinking. His curiosity was limited only as

the universe is. But he did say no occasionally, as he did when Henry Finder sent him a stack of Tim LaHaye's Christian Rapture novels, called the Left Behind series. Zing came the return mail. "The sheer idiocy of their mix of Sunday school tract and adolescently bloody-minded scenes of muddled battle defeated my determination to undergo it. What remains of my life isn't long enough to devote any of it to such benighted claptrap." **(laughter)** Well, Tim LaHaye, there's your review, **(laughter)** zero cents per word.

(laughter)

John was obviously not merely a *New Yorker* writer any more than Dickens was a Blackwood writer. We did little for him; so little needed doing. And he did everything for us. And yet the magazine and his half-century-long association with it did mean something to John. It was his immediate outlet. As you know, he was writing to the very, very end. The final verses in a book of poetry that will soon be published, *Endpoint*, are some of the most determined, stubborn, and beautiful deathbed lines we possess. Writing was how he lived and dreamed and endured. And so he continued to write letters. We had an exchange, as many others did at the very end of his life. He replied to a letter thanking him for many things, not least for being, without question the foundation of the *New Yorker*, its core and irreplaceable standard. He was already very weak then but still able to worry and fuss over an essay he'd written about a new biography of John Cheever, and he replied this way:

"I fell in love with the *New Yorker* when I was about eleven, and never fell out, and never got used to the heavenly sensations of being in print there. I know of course that my niche in the canyon walls the magazine has carved through American journalism, literature, and comic art is a mere scratching, but I have taken an inordinate pride in it and a huge pleasure in continuing to scratch away. The Cheever review may be my last but who knows for sure? The journey, as they say, with lung cancer is pretty much one-way, but with some loops in it, maybe. As with life itself in its broad outlines, there is only submitting to it and trying to be grateful for what, as so much in my life does, warrants gratitude." Thank you.

(applause)

JUDITH JONES: I'm Judith Jones, and I have been John Updike's editor for almost fifty years. My first encounter with him, almost a half century ago, took place in Alfred Knopf's office. John had come down from Ipswich to meet with the Knopf lawyer to go over passages that might be considered obscene in *Rabbit*. It had been John's idea. Writers then could be hauled into court all over the country, and he was just starting out as a writer, with a family to support, and he couldn't risk being ruined defending himself. It was even worse in England, and he did want his books published there. So we had, although reluctantly, asked to have the manuscript vetted.

After Alfred received pages and pages back from the lawyer signaling offending passages, he phoned Updike and told him he'd better get down to New York, quick. But

John demurred. After a pause, he said, “It’s going to be hard for me to come, because, well, you see, I’m teaching summer Sunday school, but I’ll manage.” So he did show up and we were introduced. Then Alfred turned to me and said, “You’d better leave now, Mrs. Jones, **(laughter)** the language is going to get pretty rough.” **(laughter)** Of course I had read and relished every word of *Rabbit, Run*, and I loved the language. I loved the way John made sex such a natural part of revealing character and it pained me to see whole passages slashed. The consolation was that, little by little, with every subsequent printing, John sneaked back **(laughter)** those offending descriptions he’d had to cut, and many, many printings later, as the moral climate in America loosened up, the text was completely restored to the original. Alfred was beside himself. “How is anyone ever going to know which is the definitive edition?” he said.

I’m not really quite sure how I came to be John Updike’s editor. It was Sandy Richardson who brought him to Knopf. He had heard that John was unhappy at Harper’s, which had published the first book of poems, because some editor was trying to tell him what to do and John Updike was not a writer to be told, “You’ve gotta do this.” It wasn’t arrogance; it was simply that he knew exactly what he was doing and he needed to be in control. So Sandy got ahold of the manuscript of *The Poorhouse Fair*, and I remember—I still remember his standing in the door of his office reading to anyone who cared who passed by passages from it, and I, for one, was enraptured. But poor Sandy was fired soon thereafter—there were a lot of firings in those days—and I guess Alfred decided that I would be a gentle editor to take over.

Anyway, wasn't the editor sort of superfluous? Even the publisher? Listen to this from *Self-Consciousness*. John wrote, "The idea of writing a novel came even later and presented itself to me, and still does, as *making a book*. I have trouble distinguishing between the functions of a publisher and those of a printer. The printer, in my naïve sense of the literary enterprise, is the solid fellow, my own real partner, and everyone else a potentially troublesome intermediary **(laughter)** between him and myself. My early yearnings merged the notions of print, heaven, and Manhattan, a map of which looks like a type tray. To be in print was to be saved. And, to this moment, a day when I have produced nothing printable, when I've gotten not any words out, is a day lost and damned, as I feel it."

Anyway, after that, almost every year, for almost fifty, brought a new surprise, and they were surprises, because John was superstitious and never liked to reveal his thoughts until the manuscript was a fait accompli. Sometimes I'd get a hint of what was in store because, being a frugal man, he often recycled a manuscript page and wrote a letter on the other side. **(laughter)** So I would get a clue that there was going to be maybe a coup in Africa or a romp in Brazil or a pilgrimage to an ashram in the Southwest. Then the package would arrive, and we'd open it. It was complete with an image for the jacket, a sketch of how it should be designed, instructions to Peter Andersen about the type and once more we were plunged into the fun of making a book.

He couldn't resist coming to New York for at least one phase, such as looking at swatches and picking the cloth for the binding and—I have a picture of this one—rolling

on the floor with ribbons of galleys in his hands, looking at our miniskirted copyeditor. **(laughter)** Once, after visiting the office, he went home to Massachusetts and wrote a delicious poem about "the girls in their cubbyholes" in the office.

To me, it was always a treat to go through his first pass, his second pass, sometimes even a third pass, and see all the refinements he felt compelled to make, sometimes to sharpen what he called his "regrettable phrasing," sometimes to justify the line, and occasionally, because he got carried away with his own words, I was even asked to comment and tell him if I thought he had gone too far.

And then there were those postcards, wonderful, whimsical postcards from all over that he loved to "pester" me with, as he put it. All neatly typed, maybe a last-minute correction, or a "thank you, the book is lovely," or a glimpse of himself on some far-flung shore. "Be with me, words, a little longer," he wrote in his final poem, "Endpoint" and how we all wish those splendid words would keep coming. But thank you, John, for the many words you have given us and for the magic of making books with you.

(applause)

LORRIE MOORE: I'm Lorrie Moore, and I never worked with John Updike except twice and that was when we got ourselves together to put forward for inclusion in the American Academy of Arts and Letters two people we thought had been overlooked, and

he did this with the righteousness of someone correcting an injustice but also with the glee of someone who was sneaking rum into a convent, so it was fun.

I'm going to read from the short story "The Cats," which is one of his David Kern stories and shows of course that he wrote beautifully about absolutely everything but also that he wrote beautifully about mothers, which is even harder. "The Cats."

"When my mother died I inherited eighty acres of Pennsylvania and forty cats. 82.5 acres to be exact. The cats were beyond precise counting. They seethed in a mewling puddle of fur at the back door toward five o'clock, when they could hear her inside the kitchen turning the clunky handle of the worn-out can opener that jutted from the door frame beside the sweating refrigerator. One Christmas when she was in her seventies, I had bought her a new can opener, but in time it too went dull and wobbly under its burden of use. I thriftily wondered whether or not it would last her lifetime. In her eighties, she as well was wearing out, as each of my visits to the farmhouse made clear. Walking to the mailbox and feeding the cats were the sole exertions she could still perform.

"Was it my imagination or did my mother hum as she revolved the handle like some primitive repetitive musical instrument? She emptied one gelatinous cylinder of cat food after another into the set of old cake tins that served the cats as dinnerware on the cement back porch. Feeding these half-feral animals amused and pleased her, quite improperly, I thought. Their mounting numbers seemed to me a disaster, which grew worse every time I paid a filial visit, in spite of the merciful inroads of various feline diseases and

occasional interventionary blasts from shotguns of interested neighbors. Some neighbors threatened to report her to the Humane Society and others furtively dropped off unwanted kittens in the night.

"In deference to my asthmatic tendencies, she had never let the cats in the house, but on the day after she died, they could hear me through the screen door as I churned away with the can opener. I spoke aloud to them, much as she had. 'I know, I know,' I said, 'you're ravenous; the lady who used to feed you is dead. I'm just her son, her only child. I don't live here. I live in New Jersey. I teach Euro lit at Rutgers. I have a four-bedroom house, an elegant wife called Evelyn, and two grown children, one of them with a child of her own. I don't want to be here, I never did, and if you can think of a better place, go to it, because, my fine feline friends, the dole is ending. **(laughter)** The cat food is down to its last case, and I'm here just for two more days. What are you going to do then? Beats me, it's a real problem, frankly. Well, you shouldn't have gotten sucked into the system.' **(laughter)**

"The morning of the funeral I began to clean out my mother's crammed desk and found a little note on brittle blue stationery in an envelope addressed simply 'David.' It said, in her small, back-slanted handwriting, 'In the event of my death, I wish to be buried in the simplest possible ceremony, in the least expensive available coffin. Instead of flowers, I ask that contributions be directed to the Boone Township Humane Society, Ennis Town, Pennsylvania. I had done it all wrong. Flush with my inheritance, I had bought her the second most expensive casket in the undertaker's basement, cherrywood with shiny brass

rails to carry it by and had arranged with the Lutheran pastor for the usual Lutheran service with a catered lunch afterward. The announcement of the death in the Alton paper had said nothing about giving money to the Humane Society nor did her note say anything about what I was to do with the cats.

"In the months to come, as fall activity was renewed at Rutgers, I avoided going back to my mother's place. I was afraid of getting sucked in. Everything was handled over the phone. It was almost eerie to see society smoothly bring into play its perfected machinery for the transfer of property. My lawyer, an old high school classmate, arranged for the estate assessment and sent me forms to sign and return. The Realtor kept me apprised of prospects and offers. When I asked him if he, on his latest showing of the house, had noticed any cats around the back porch he pretended to search his memory before saying, 'Why, no.' Their mewing, furry, hungry substance had vanished like the matter of a dream.

"The last days of actually owning the farm were strange. It was as if I had a phantom limb. I could feel it move but not see it. The papers were being signed the first day of December, and I thought I should go over the day before, check out the house and barn for the last remnants of our years there, and spend the night in an Alton motel.

"Thinking there might be a little last-minute brush-clearing or dirty lifting, I hung my suit in the car and put on a wool-lined olive drab jacket from an army surplus store that my father used to wear on weekends and that my mother inherited and would wear in winter

with not too bad a fit. I hadn't had the heart to leave it for the auctioneers to clear away. I put on the jacket and threw a pair of loppers and work gloves in the car.

"But by the time I got away from my wife and my students and made my way around Philadelphia, not many hours of daylight were left. The place when I pulled in was still, as still as a picture. Green was gone from everything but the pines and the two glossy holly trees. The orchard grass was an even slope of tan, striped with shade. The woods beyond stood tall and silvery, the stalks of darkness between the trunks thickening. The region was called Firetown, and as a boy I had imagined it had to do with the way the day's dying sun made the tops of the trees in the woods flame.

"When I slammed the car door, it echoed off the barn wall in a way I had forgotten. When we first moved here, I used to stand in the yard and shout, marveling at the echo, like the voice of a brother I didn't have. The absence of an owner showed in a dozen little ways. I had paid a boy to keep the lawn mowed, but he had lazily left tousled fringes along the edges and where the black walnut had dropped its pulpy shells on the lawn hadn't bothered to mow at all. I carried the loppers, though I doubted I would find much to do. Perhaps just check the fragile weeping cherry tree for fallen branches or cut some raspberry canes out of the hosta beds my mother had planted when we were new here. Busywork to salve my conscience and the wound left when a piece of your life is removed.

"As I drifted in my inherited coat across the lank grass, a few shadows filtered out of the orchard and flickered toward the house, eagerly loping. Several more materialized from the direction of the woods. These cats had survived. They thought I was my mother and that good times had returned."

Thank you.

(applause)

ROGER ANGELL: I'm Roger Angell. I was John's fiction editor at the *New Yorker* for a long time, but we had one other connection. Here is a passage that John wrote forty-nine years ago after watching Ted Williams hit a home run at Fenway Park in the final at bat of his career. The date is Wednesday, September 28, 1960, and the lines are from John's "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," which ran in the *New Yorker* three weeks later. Most of you know them already.

"Fisher threw a third time. Williams swung again, and there it was. The ball climbed on a diagonal line into the vast volume of air over center field. From my angle, behind third base, the ball seemed less an object in flight than the tip of a towering, motionless construct, like the Eiffel Tower or the Tappan Zee Bridge. It was in the books while it was still on the sky. Center fielder Jackie Brandt ran back to the deepest corner of the outfield grass. The ball descended beyond his reach and stuck in the crotch where the bull pen met the wall, bounced chunkily, and vanished.

“Like a feather caught in a vortex, Williams ran around the square of the bases, at the center of our beseeching screaming. He ran as he always ran out home runs, hurriedly, unsmiling, head down, as if praise were a storm of rain to get out of. He didn’t tip his cap. Though we thumped, wept, and chanted ‘We want Ted!’ for minutes after, he hid in the dugout. He did not come back. Our noise, for some seconds, passed beyond excitement into a kind of immense open anguish, a wailing, a cry to be saved, but immortality is nontransferable. The papers said that the other players and even the umpires on the field begged him to come back out and acknowledge us in some way. But he never had and did not now. Gods did not answer letters.”

Let’s fill in a bit. The game against the second-place Orioles was won by the seventh-place Sox, five to four, an outcome that made absolutely no difference to either team. Attendance at Fenway Park that day was 10,454, and would have been 10,453, if the lady that John Updike—John had hoped to meet at her apartment on Beacon Hill that morning had not stood him up. He went to the Fens instead, bought a ticket, and wrote what turned out to be the most celebrated piece of baseball writing ever. In the words of Fats Waller, ‘one never knows, do one?’ **(laughter)**

The 1960 regular season continued for three more days, but this was Ted Williams’s last game ever. The home run was his twenty-ninth of the season, his 521st lifetime. Here comes a fresh statistic, one you’ve not heard before. From the beginning of the modern baseball era in 1901 to the end of the 1960 season, there were 66,112 *other* home runs

struck in the major leagues, all noted and described briefly or at length by a writer or writers on the scene, in attendance, not one of whom mentioned the Tappan Zee Bridge, or feathers caught in a vortex, or conveyed the event with such economic joy.

I think John got a little bit tired of the attention paid to this piece down the years. He never wrote about baseball again. Golf turned out to be his game. And I imagine he had many dozens of other pages and paragraphs that he liked more. Parts of *Rabbit, Run*, for instance, which he'd finished a year before Ted's last blast. When he and I talked about the article, as we did a few times, we each admitted, I with gratitude, he with his customary modesty and class, that "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu" might have set the tone for my own baseball writing, my own baseball stuff, which had not yet begun or even been thought of and perhaps also encouraged the *New Yorker* to publish a few more sports pieces than it had so far. Thank you, John.

In the preface to a special edition of "Hub Fans" that appeared in 1977, John wrote that he liked to think that love shows in the piece because of his boyhood attachment to Ted Williams and his more adult feelings for the woman who'd not kept their date. But I'll settle once again for joy, for the lift and lightness and intelligence that he himself showed in all his immense writings and conveyed right to the end. You can go back and read him almost everywhere—this is the consolation he has left us—and see this and find him there once again, and if you think of that feather one more time, you think of that feather one more time, it may come to you with another gleam of pleasure that the image also carries the float and even the mildly lifting and falling shoulders of the contented,

everyday home run hitter, suspended in time as he circles the bases and makes it safely back home again.

(applause)

ADAM GOPNIK: I'm Adam Gopnik from the *New Yorker*. In a letter that John Updike wrote in the last year of his life, he said that humor had always been and always would remain his default mode. He began his writing life writing often wonderful casuals and parodies for the *New Yorker*—everyone from Iris Murdoch to Harry S. Truman—and as years went on, that humor and that enormous instinctive sense of comedy irradiated everything he wrote. But we were lucky on a few occasions to have John writing pure humor again. Let me read you a piece that appeared as late as 1996, called "Paranoid Packaging," which John Updike said was of all the pieces he had ever written for the *New Yorker*, or the books he had ever published for Knopf, the occasion of the most mail he had ever received.

"Maybe the madness began with strapping tape. Its invention seemed to excite people, so that packages arrived more and more impenetrably wrapped in layer upon layer of the tough, string-reinforced stuff. Where tearing fingers used to do the job, an X-Acto knife and a surgical precision now had to be mustered. Domestic injuries mounted, but the tape kept coming, along with flesh-colored plastic tape that wouldn't tear, just stretched, like tortured flesh, no matter how hard you pulled.

“Then one day, in the long twilight of the Reagan presidency, the cereal and sugar boxes that had always said ‘Press Here’ ceased to yield when pressed, the little pouring holes we remembered from childhood. Rather, our thumbnails broke and turned purple overnight.

“Padded book envelopes, which used to open with an easy tug on the stapled, turned-over flap were now taped over the staples and the taping was tenacious, multilayered, and then sometime under Bush, with everybody distracted by televised bulletins from the Gulf War, the self-sealing book envelope was promulgated. Now there was no hope of a tidy opening and a thrifty reuse. Nothing less than a hatchet or a machete would free the contents in a cloud of fast-spreading gray fluff.

“All this time, childproof pill bottles had been imperceptibly toughening and complicating to the point where only children had the patience and eyesight to open them. **(laughter)** Though the two arrows were lined up under a magnifying glass, and superhuman manual force was exerted, the top declined to pop off. Similarly, the screw tops on the can of creosote and the bottle of Liquid-Plumr refused to slip into the grooves that, in theory, would lift them up, up and free. Instead, they rotated aimlessly, no matter how much simultaneous downward and sideways or semicircular pressure was applied. Occasionally an isolated householder did enjoy a moment of success with these containers. Manufacturers, swiftly striking back, printed the instructions in even smaller type or, less readably yet, in raised plastic letters. The corporations, it seemed, did not

want their products released into use. Any upsurge in demand might interfere with their lucrative downsizing programs.

“Either as a nation we have grown feeble or the policy of containment, once preached as the only safe tactic for dealing with the communist menace, has now refocused upon the output of capitalism itself in all its sparkling, poisonous, hazardous variety. They, the corporate powers that control our lives, apparently decided in regard to one product after another to make it, advertise it, ship it, but not to let us into it. Be it aspirin, creosote, salted peanuts, or varnish, it is too wonderful for us, too potent and too fine. We rub the lamp but no genie is released. We live surrounded by magic caskets that keep their tangy goodness sealed forever in.”

That piece not only I think exemplifies John’s extraordinary gifts as a natural humorist, but also the kind of minimalism, the attention to the tiny details of existence, that influenced so many generations of American writers.

Another corner of John Updike’s unbelievably varied activity was his writing about art. He wouldn’t call it art criticism, although it always was and of the highest kind. I once had the opportunity to walk through the Museum of Modern Art on this particular occasion with Updike, and I always had the feeling, which he at least did not deny if he did not affirm, that there was something about art and the practice of visual art making that spoke to his own condition as a writer more deeply perhaps even than other writing did. And in one wonderful piece he wrote about his first experiences of the Museum of

Modern Art when living here, he not only managed to evoke a couple of wonderful paintings with that skill at evocation that only he possessed, but he also wrote what seems to me as close to a testament of faith as he ever attempted.

"Between August of 1955 and April of 1957," he wrote, "I found myself a citizen of New York, working ten short blocks to the south of West 53rd Street. I walked here, to the Museum often, up Fifth Avenue, to clear my head and to lift my spirits. For me the Museum of Modern Art was a temple where I might refresh my own sense of artistic purpose, though my medium had become words. What made this impudent array of color and form 'art' was the mystery. What made it 'modern' was obvious, and it was the same force that made me modern—time. Indeed, some of the works that arrested me dated from 1932 and were thus just my age, which seems to me now very young.

"But it was among the older and least modern works in the museum that I found most comfort and the message I needed—that even though God and human majesty, as represented in the icons and triptychs and tedious panoramic canvases of the older museums, had evaporated, beauty was still left, beauty amid our ruins, a beauty curiously pure, a blank uncaused beauty that signified only itself. Cezanne's *Pines and Rocks*, for instance, fascinated me, because its subject—these few pine trunks, these outcroppings of patchily tinted rock—was so obscurely deserving compared with the traditional fruits of his still lifes, or Mount Saint-Victoire, or his portrait subjects and nude bathers. The ardor of Cezanne's painting shone most clearly through this curiously quiet piece of landscape, which he might have chosen by setting his easel down almost anywhere.

“The Matisses, too, attracted me with their enigmatic solemnity. Hardly monochromatic, yet usually with some strong single scrubbing of fundamental color, they expressed not so much a fanatic observation of nature as a blithe domination of it. Such freedom! How impudently in *Piano Lesson* does the painter take a wedge from the boy’s round face, flip it over, and make of it a great green obelisk, barely explicable as a slice of lawn seen through a French door. I knew of nothing so arbitrary in writing. A regal whimsy enforced by the largeness of the painting, whose green was already cracking and aging in another kind of serene disregard.

“The old-fashioned idea of mine that art should body forth the idyllic found confirmation in many corners of the museum. Its exhibition chambers, after all, formed a soothing shelter from the streets outside, which, though less so than those same streets now, were even then over-trafficked and clamorous. I was looking for a religion as a way of hanging on to my old one in those years and was attracted to those artists who seemed to me as single-minded and selfless as saints. Cezanne, brave man, pondered the scene, and saw it with passion as orange and green. And weighted his strokes with days of decision and founded on apples theologies of vision.”

“A religion reassembled from the fragments of our daily life in an atmosphere of gaiety and diligence. This was what I found in the Museum of Modern Art where others might have found completely different, darker, and wilder things. Gaiety, diligence, and freedom. A freedom from old constraints of perspective and subject matter. A freedom to

embrace and memorialize the world anew. A fearless freedom drenched in light. This was what I took away each time from my visits of an hour or so, usually in the afternoons, my day's journalism done before heading south to my wife and apartment and daughter on West 13th Street. I took away in sufficient-sized packets courage to be an artist, an artist now, amid the gritty crushed grays of this desperately living city, a bringer of light and order and color, a singer of existence."

(applause)

ANN GOLDSTEIN: I'm Ann Goldstein, from the *New Yorker*. In 1987 I became the editor of John Updike's book reviews. After I sent him the galleys of the first review I was to edit, I got a letter outlining the procedure. "Her procedure,"—he was referring to his previous editor—"and that of Rogers Whitaker before her was to send me as you have done a styled but not otherwise edited galley with always useful notations of unclarity, repetition, and male chauvinism, **(laughter)** giving me thus the benefit of her reactions and enabling me to reread myself in the cold light of print. I would send the piece back promptly. She even enclosed a stamped, big envelope—but this courtesy is not necessary—and wait for it to be scheduled. By Monday or Tuesday of that issue's week, she would generally have the page proofs to me, sometimes marked but usually not. And on Thursday afternoon we would simultaneously go over checking findings, other readers' points, and my own attempts at improvement. If none of this fits with your schedule or accustomed methods, I can cheerfully adjust."

With some variations as the pace of the magazine and the technology of its production changed, this was how we worked for the next twenty years. He sent in the review, it was put into galleys with minimal fixing up, I sent him a proof with various notations, and he sent it back with his responses.

From 1992: “My criticism inspires me with an increasing impatience. It seems simultaneously timid and reckless, a callow papering over of an invincible ignorance. Toward the end, on galley 12, I wearily brushed your suggested revisions aside, unable to rise to the occasion and finding my own phrasing more succinct and natural.” **(laughter)**

From 1989: “I noticed that somebody went through and deleted the Miss on I’m sure sound feminist or something grounds. It just seems a little discourteous to an elderly fellow like me to call her ‘Dillard,’ like some androgynous housekeeper or gruff governess. **(laughter)** The one beginning the paragraph on galley 9 seemed especially curt. It was our way in the days of Shawn to give all living female authors the courtesy of a Miss or Mrs.—Mrs. Spark, Miss Murdoch—but I am happy to go with the new ways if it seems important.”

He was attentive to everything—to *New Yorker* style, punctuation, typography, suggestions about sentences, and points brought up by the fact-checkers. In another letter, “It’s as if I write these things with mental mittens on and then we all have to labor at scraping off the fuzzballs.” He had a great appetite for and interest in scraping off the fuzzballs, and sometimes the proofs went back and forth several times, especially in the

days of computer revisions and FedEx. “It’s a thorny piece and I hope transcribing these changes doesn’t give you the headache it gave me to fiddle them through. I can’t trust my ear at the end—which is the snappiest punch line—‘sorry,’ ‘feel sorry,’ or ‘regret’?” “I seem to have been all thumbs in writing this,”—this is a different letter—“putting in one ‘who’s where they weren’t needed and leaving out 'the's where they were. The little Gordian knot at the end I thought could be cut by substituting ‘analogy’ for ‘equivalent.’

To a query about putting a comma after the word wine in the sentence, “Mrs. Levis sometimes brushes past that sense of music which makes some texts wine and whose absence leaves the rest watery,” he wrote, “let the reader rush on to the end of the sentence and be assured wine is not a misprint.”

He liked it when, on occasion, a piece had to be turned around quickly. “What fun, this sudden shuttle of proofs back and forth, as though I live in the real world after all.” **(laughter)** He wanted to get things right, whether the sentences or the facts, and he was constantly refining. “An intimate and lasting resonance” becomes “a resonant familiarity.” “The front tables at Waldenbooks groan under opuses nearly as thick as they are wide” becomes “opuses thicker than a strong man’s wrist.”

Much of his rewriting was in response to what he or I or someone considered unclarity. Rewriting is perhaps too strong a term. He changed a word or an image or the structure of a sentence or he added a sentence or, at times, deleted one that he thought got in the way.

In discussing a sentence on the phone, he would repeat it aloud in all its different versions.

After a piece was essentially finished—checked, edited, and put into its final layout, I would ask if he wanted to have one more proof sent for a last look. He'd say, hesitantly, "Well, I think maybe I've done all I can," I'd say, "Well, it's no trouble to send it," and he would say, "All right, it can't ever hurt." And almost inevitably, he would call the next morning with two or three small improvements.

And, finally, this is from 1992: "Knitting and purling at these reviews seems to be harder work for me than it used to be. We feel like field mice painstakingly weaving our little nests while the shadows of the hawks swirl all around us."

Thank you.

(applause)

CHIP MCGRATH: I'm Chip McGrath. When *Due Considerations*, John's last big omnium gatherum, came out, I mentioned to him my distress that it didn't include any of his golf writing. I can't remember now exactly what he said, but it was something to the effect that the publisher was concerned lest the book grow infinitely large, and a feeling that in such a weighty context, the golf pieces might seem a little frivolous. But nothing he wrote was frivolous, and oddly for someone so careful about collecting his work, he

let some of his golf writing fly under the radar, turning up in publications like *Golf* and *Golf Digest* that tend to be unvisited by readers of the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review*. On the other hand, there are people—I know several of them—who have read only one book by John, *Golf Dreams*, but they have read it many times.

John was a great golf writer. He was a great writer about almost everything, but he brought to this seemingly unlikely and unliterary pastime a particular passion and perceptiveness. He seldom wrote great tournaments, the way Herbert Wind, the *New Yorker*'s other golf writer, did, and he wasn't a celebrator of golf history or golf course architecture, like the overrated Bernard Darwin, but he wrote better than anyone else ever has about what it feels like to play this confounding game, so frustrating and rewarding both. No one has better described golf's mind/body duality, the way the hapless golfer's brain, overheating and hyperventilating up there in the control tower, tries vainly to send signals back down to the arms and hands.

Here's just a partial list of some of the swing thoughts you can garner from John's writing. "Arms like rubber, arms like rope, swing the bucket, turn your back, keep the wrist cocked, begin downswing with left heel, don't swish, think *schwoo*." The trouble, as he says, is that "the efficacy of such tips decays like radium and the end result is to make the golfer think of himself as rickety assembly of parts, any of which might go awry."

The Updike swing, it has to be said, was not quite as beautiful as the Updike sentence, though in some ways it was just as thoughtful and considered. He made a big full-shoulder turn, which is the good golfer's act of faith, that if you show your back to the ball and target, you will return to it then more forcefully. Many of us hover anxiously instead, as if afraid that if we turn our heads, someone will snatch the ball away. John was a much better putter than he gave himself credit for, and he had a nice touch with his short game, and he kept the neatest, most meticulous scorecard I have ever seen. **(laughter)** The handwriting reminded me of the little pencil changes he would make on a galley proof.

You could speculate on all the ways that golf is like writing. You start off with a general goal and sense of purpose, you move your cursor, or the ball, as the case may be, over an airy expanse, and you tap in your putt for punctuation. But I think the reason John loved golf is that it was *different* from writing and maybe even *harder*, or harder than writing was for John Updike, anyway. "The world conspires to flatter us," he wrote once. "Only golf trusts us with a truly honest report on our performance." He relished golf's exigency, and the puritan in him saw it as the price we pay for the occasional moments of success. He never cursed on the golf course, not that I ever heard, and I have never seen anyone who accepted golf's many unfairnesses—the bad bounce, the lousy lie, the rimmed-out putt—with more equanimity.

What he most liked about golf, I suspect, was that it took him out of his self and temporarily gave him another one. The landscape of American letters is littered with

writers who sought relief in drink, in drugs, in sexual hijinks. Golf was John's drug. He compared it once to a "trip," in the hallucinogenic sense. And as it has been for so many of us, golf was his mistress as well, the one he met a couple of afternoons a week and who teased him, flattered him, and cruelly used him, doling out just enough moments of ecstasy to keep him coming back.

He loved the camaraderie of golf, as you can tell from his writing, and he was the most gracious of partners, who remembered your own good shots even better than you did and mercifully forgot the bad ones. And he noticed things that others might miss—the color of a bush, the shape of a tree, the sudden flight of birds overhead. One of his loveliest poems, "The Great Scarf of Birds," is about a flock of starlings he spotted from the fairway while the other members of his foursome were, I suspect, staring down at their FootJoys.

"I am curiously, disproportionately, undeservedly happy on a golf course," he wrote once, and though that's true for most golfers at one time or another, I think it was truer of John. Of course it helped that he was a happy man to begin with, a blessed one, you could say, and his great gift to the rest of us, golfers and nongolfers alike, was that he allowed that happiness to spill out on the page. Not surprisingly John's alter ego Rabbit Angstrom was a golfer. He gets hooked on the game in *Rabbit, Run* and picks it up in earnest in *Rabbit Is Rich*, when he is finally able to join the Flying Eagle Country Club and to play at Caribbean resorts. I'd like to read a short passage from *Rabbit, Run*. It's from the chapter describing a round Rabbit plays with the annoying Reverend Eccles, the

Episcopalian minister who is urging Rabbit to reconcile with his wife Janice and also not very subtly trying to lure him back to the fold.

“Eccles sinks his. The ball wobbles up and with a glottal rattle bobbles in. The minister looks up with the light of triumph in his eyes. ‘Harry,’ he asks sweetly, yet boldly. ‘Why have you left her? You’re obviously deeply involved with her.’ ‘I told you. There was this thing that wasn’t there.’ ‘What thing? Have you ever seen it? Are you sure it exists?’ Harry’s four-foot putt dribbles short, and he picks the ball up with furious fingers. ‘Well, if you’re not sure it exists, don’t ask me. It’s right up your alley. If you don’t know, nobody does.’ ‘No,’ Eccles cries in a strained voice. ‘Christianity isn’t looking for a rainbow. If it were what you think it is, we’d be passing out opium at services. We’re trying to serve God, not be God.’

“They pick up the bags and walk the way a wooden arrow tells them. Eccles goes on explanatorily, ‘This was all settled centuries ago in the heresies of the early church.’ ‘I tell you, I know what it is.’ ‘What is it? What is it? Is it hard or soft, Harry? Is it blue? Is it red? Does it have polka-dots?’ It hits Rabbit depressingly that he really wants to be told. Underneath all this ‘I know more about it than you heresies of the early church’ business, he really wants to be told about it, wants to be told that is there, that’s he’s not lying to all those people every Sunday. As if it’s not enough to be trying to get some sense out of this crazy game, you have to carry around this madman trying to swallow your soul. The hot strap of the back gnaws at his shoulder.

"'The truth is,' Eccles tells him with womanish excitement in a voice embarrassed but determined. 'you're monstrously selfish. You're a coward. You don't care about right or wrong. You worship nothing except your own worst instincts.' They reach the tee, a platform of turf beside a hunchbacked fruit tree offering fists of taut, ivory-colored buds. 'Let me go first,' Rabbit says, 'until you calm down.' His heart is hushed, held in midbeat by anger. He doesn't care about anything except getting out of this tangle. He wants it to rain.

In avoiding looking at Eccles, he looks at the ball, which sits high on the tee and already seems free of the ground. Very simply he brings the club head around his shoulder into it. The sound has a hollowness, a singleness he hasn't heard before. His arms force his head up and his ball is hung way out, lunarly pale against the beautiful black blue of storm clouds—his grandfather's color stretched dense across the north. It recedes along a line straight as a ruler edge: stricken, sphere, star, speck. It hesitates, and Rabbit thinks it will die, but he is fooled, for the ball makes its hesitation the ground of a final leap and with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing and falling. 'That's it!' he cries and turning to Eccles with a grin of aggrandizement, repeats, 'That's it.'"

(applause)

DEBORAH GARRISON: I'm Deborah Garrison. I'd like to read some poems by John Updike, but I would just first say that his poetry has a very special place for us as readers, I think, because in the poems we feel that the distinction between the speaker's voice and

John Updike himself dissolves and rightly or wrongly, we have a sense that we're hearing directly from him as he contemplates earthworms or turning sixty-one or dream objects and we have a great sense of intimacy and for those of us who—for readers, of course, who would never meet him or those of us who were only privileged to meet him on occasion over the years in the city, this was a real gift to us, this sense of intimacy that we felt in the poems, that we were really hearing his own thoughts. I'll begin with an early poem of fatherhood, "The Stunt Flier."

"I come into my dim bedroom innocently and my baby is lying in her crib facedown; Just a hemisphere of the half-bald head shows, and the bare feet, uncovered, the small feet crossed at the ankles, like a dancer doing easily a difficult step, or, more exactly, like a cherub planing through heaven, cruising at a middle altitude through the cumulus of the tumbled covers, which disclose the feet crossed at the ankles à la small boys who, exalting in their mastery of bicycles, lift their hands from the handlebars to demonstrate how easy gliding is."

A Rescue

"Today I wrote some words that will see print.
Maybe they will last 'forever,' in that
someone will read them, their ink making
a light scratch on his mind or hers.
I think back, with greater satisfaction
upon a yellow bird—a goldfinch?—

that had flown into the garden shed

and could not get out,

battering its wings on the deceptive light

of the dusty, warped-shut window.

Without much reflection, for once, I stepped

to where its panicked heart

was making commotion, the flared wings drumming,

and with clumsy soft hands

pinned it against a pane,

held loosely cupped

this agitated essence of the air,

and through the open door released it,

like a self-flung ball,

to all that lovely perishing outdoors."

I'd like to read two poems from the *Endpoint* sequence. It's so remarkable at the very end of his life. I mean, I suppose not remarkable but characteristic, but still remarkable that he produced these poems and, again, a gift to us. This one is—they have names which also include dates, I believe, of their composition. This one has the names of childhood acquaintances as its title.

Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth, December 13, 2008

"They've been in my fiction, both now dead,
Peggy just recently, long stricken, like
my grandma, with Parkinson's disease.
But what a peppy knockout Peggy was!—
cheerleader, hockey star, May queen, RN.
Pigtailed in kindergarten, she caught my mother's
eye, but she was too much girl for me.
Fred—so bright, so quietly wry—his
mother's eye fell on me, a "nicer" boy
than her friend's pet pals. Fred's slight wild streak
was tamed by diabetes. At the end,
it took his toes and feet. Last time we met,
his walk rolled wildly fetching my coat. With health
he might have soared. As was, he taught me smarts.

"Dear friends of childhood, classmates, thank you,
scant hundred of you, for providing a
sufficiency of human types: beauty,
bully, hanger-on, natural,
twin, and fatso, all a writer needs,
all there in Shillington, its trolley cars
and little factories, corn fields and trees,

leaf fires, snowflakes, pumpkins, Valentines.

“To think of you brings tears less caustic
than those the thought of death brings. Perhaps
we meet our heaven at the start and not
the end of life. Even then were tears
and fear and struggle, but the town itself
draped in plain glory the passing days.

“The town forgave me for existing, it
included me in Christmas carols, songfests
(though I sang poorly) at the Shillington,
the local movie house. My father stood,
in back, too restless to sit, but everybody
knew his name and mine. In turn, I knew
my Granddad in the overalled town crew.
I’ve written these before, these modest facts,

“but their meaning has no bottom in my mind.
The fragments in their jiggled scope collide
to form more sacred windows. I had to move
to beautiful New England—its triple
deckers, whited churches, unplowed streets—

to learn how drear and deadly life can be."

And I would like to finish with the last poem, "Fine Point." I just need to note, because this is quite difficult to read and I want you to follow it, this is something that's again so lovely that only John Updike could get away with. He has used the adverbial form of the word "surly," so he has used the word "surlily," which I will do my best to read, but it's actually a very important word in the poem because of the word "lily," and. not to be pedantic, but it's very important in terms of its contrast with the word "surely," which you'll hear at the end.

Fine Point, December 22, 2008

"Why go to Sunday school, though surlily,
and not believe a bit of what was taught?
The desert shepherds in their scratchy robes
undoubtedly existed, and Israel's defeats—
the temple in its sacredness destroyed
by Babylon and Rome. Yet Jews kept faith
and passed the prayers, the crabbed rites,
from table to table as Christians mocked.

"We mocked but took. The timbrel creed of praise
gives spirit to the daily; blood tinges lips.
The tongue reposes and papyrus pleads,

saying, *Surely*—magnificent that 'surely'—

goodness and mercy shall follow me all

the days of my life, my life, forever."

(applause)

ZZ PACKER: Hi. My name is ZZ Packer, and I had the pleasure of meeting John Updike when he selected my collection of short stories for the *Today* Show Book Club, and what I'd like to say is that John Updike has written over as he said, sixty novels, published collections of poetry, art criticism, and yet he still somehow had time to read young, new authors, authors who no one else had ever heard of, and he would read them and at times write about them, so it was a wonderful, wonderful gift to have someone like him who made time to do that.

The way I ended up meeting him, finally, for the Book Club, was to go to the *Today* Show and eventually go to see Katie Couric, but at the time you had to go and do—and get sort of made up. And so, John Updike got made up and he came into the green room, and his face was entirely smeared with this peach kind of—I don't know, pancake makeup, and I thought, "Should I tell John Updike, the most amazing living writer, that he looks pretty much like an autumn squash?" and I decided not to do that, I just simply introduced myself and said, "I'm ZZ," and he shook my hand and said, "I'm orange."

(laughter)

Then we finally met up with Katie Couric, and she was a lot more bubbly in those days than she is now, and she came up to Updike and she said, “How does it feel to be the coolest writer in America?” and Updike kind of looked at her as though he’d been called many things, but maybe “cool” was not one of them, and then we went on to have the interview and afterwards we kind of wound down, and she asked us what we liked to read, what kind of books, what kind of magazines, and I didn’t really appreciate the question until much later, when Katie Couric interviewed Sarah Palin and asked her that same question. **(laughter)**

I’m going to read from *Rabbit, Run*. Unfortunately it’s not a cheerful piece. In *Rabbit, Run*, you see how Harry and Janice are a married couple, but as some married couples are, they’re together but also terribly alone. Janice has had to deal with Harry’s absence, and I’ll lead into that.

“She pushes herself up from the floor with a calm smile and goes into the kitchen, where she thinks she left her drink. The important thing is to complete the arch to the end of each day, to be a protection for Harry, and it’s silly not to have one more sip that will make her capable.

“She comes out of the kitchen and tells Nelson, ‘Mommy’s stopped crying, sweet. It was a joke. Mommy’s not crying. Mommy’s very happy. She loves you very much.’ His rubbed, stained face watches her. Then, like a stab from behind, the phone rings. Still carrying that calmness, she answers it. ‘Hello.’ ‘Darling, it’s Daddy.’ ‘Oh, Daddy.’ Joy

just streams through her lips. He pauses. ‘Baby, is Harry sick? It’s after eleven and Harry hasn’t shown up at the lot yet.’ ‘No, he’s fine, we’re all fine.’ There’s another pause. Her love for her father flows toward him through the silent wire. She wishes the conversation would go on forever. Daddy is just so capable and Mother never thanks him.

“He asks, ‘Well, where is he? Is he here? Let me speak to him, Janice.’ ‘Daddy, he’s not here. He went out early this morning.’ ‘Where did he go? He’s not at the lot.’ She’s heard him say the word ‘lot’ about a million times, it seems. He says it like no other man. It’s dense and rich from his lips, as if all the world is concentrated in it. All the good things of her growing up—her clothes, her toys, their house—came from ‘the lot.’ She is inspired. Car sale talk is one thing she knows. ‘He went out early, Daddy, to show a station wagon to a prospect who had to go to work or something. Wait. Let me think. He said the man had to go to Allentown early this morning. He had to go to Allentown and Harry had to show him a station wagon. Everything’s all right, Daddy. Harry loves his job.’

“The third pause is the longest. ‘Darling, are you sure he’s not there?’ ‘Daddy, aren’t you funny? He’s not here—see?’ As if it has eyes, she thrusts the receiver into the air of the empty room. It’s meant as a daughter’s impudent joke, but unexpectedly, just holding her arm straight makes her step sideways. When she brings the receiver back to her ear, he is saying in a remote, ticky voice, ‘Darling, all right. Don’t worry about anything. Are the children there with you?’ Feeling dizzy, she hangs up.

“This is a mistake, but she thinks on the whole she’s never been clever enough. She thinks she deserves a drink. The brown liquid spills down over the smoking ice cubes and doesn’t stop when she tells it to. She snaps the bottle angrily and blot-shaped drops topple into the sink. She goes into the bathroom with the glass and comes out with her hands empty and a taste of toothpaste in her mouth. She remembers looking into the mirror and patting her hair. From that, she went to brushing her teeth with Harry’s toothbrush.

“She discovers herself making lunch. Like looking down into a food advertisement in a magazine. Bacon strips sizzling in a pan at the end of a huge blue arm. She sees the BBs of fat flying in the air like the pretty spatter of a fountain in a park and wonders at how quick their arcs are. They prick her hand on the handle and she turns the purple gas down. She pours a glass of milk for Nelson and pulls some leaves off a head of lettuce and sets them on a yellow plastic plate and eats a handful herself. She thinks she won’t set a place for herself, and then thinks she will because maybe this trembling in her stomach is hunger, and gets another plate and stands there holding it with two hands in front of her chest, wondering why Daddy was so sure Harry was here. There *is* another person in the apartment, she knows, but it’s not Harry, and the person has no business here anyway, and she determines to ignore him and continues setting lunch with the slight stiffness operating in her body. She holds onto everything until it is well on the table.

“Nelson says the bacon is greasy and asks again if Daddy went away and his complaining about the bacon that she was so clever and so brave to make at all annoys her, so that after his twentieth refusal to eat even a bit of lettuce, she reaches over and slaps his rude

face. The stupid child can't even cry; he just sits there and stares and sucks in his breath again and again and finally does burst forth. But, luckily, she is equal to the situation. Very calm, she sees the unreason of his whole attempt and refuses to be bullied. With the smoothness of a single great wave, she makes his bottle, takes him by the hand, oversees his urinating, and settles him in bed. Still shaking with the aftermath of sobs, he roots the bottle in his mouth, and she is certain from the glaze on his watchful eyes that he is locked into the channel to sleep. She stands by the bed, surprised by her stern strength.

"The telephone rings again, angrier than the first time, and as she runs to it, running because she does not want Nelson disturbed, she feels her strength ebb and a brown staleness washes up the back of her throat. 'Hello.' 'Janice.' Her mother's voice, even and harsh. 'I just got back from shopping in Brewer and your father's been trying to reach me all morning. He thinks Harry's gone again. Is he?' Janice closes her eyes and says, 'He went to Allentown.' 'What would he do there?' 'He's going to sell a car.' 'Don't be silly, Janice. Are you all right?' 'What do you mean?' 'Have you been drinking?' 'Drinking what?' 'No, don't worry, I'm coming right over.' 'Mother, don't. Everything is fine. I just put Nelson in his nap.' 'I'll have a bite to eat out of the icebox and come right over. You lie down.' 'Mother, please don't come over.' 'Janice, now, don't talk back. When did he go?' 'Stay away, Mother. He'll be back tonight.' She listens, and adds, 'and stop crying.' Her mother says, 'Yes, you stay stop, when you keep bringing us all into disgrace. The first time I thought it was all *his* fault. But I'm not so sure anymore. Do you hear? I'm not so sure.'

“Hearing this speech has made the sliding sickness in her so steep that Janice wonders if she can keep her grip on the phone. ‘Don’t come over, Mother,’ she begs, ‘please.’ ‘I’ll have a bite of lunch and be over in twenty minutes. You just go to bed.’ Janice replaces the receiver and looks around her with horror. The apartment is horrible. Coloring books on the floor, glasses, the unmade bed, dirty dishes everywhere. She runs to where she and Nelson crayoned, to test bending over. She drops to her knees, and the baby begins to cry. Panicked with the double idea of not disturbing Nelson and of concealing Harry’s absence, she runs to the crib and nightmarishly finds it smeared with orange mess.

“‘Damn you. Damn you,’ she moans to Rebecca and lifts the little filthy thing out and wonders where to carry her. She takes her to the armchair and biting her lips unpins the diaper. ‘Oh, you little shit,’ she murmurs, feeling that the sound of her voice is holding off the other person who is gathering in the room. She takes the soaked, daubed diaper to the bathroom and drops it in the toilet and, dropping to her knees, fumbles the bathtub plug into its hole. She pulls on both handles as wide as they will go, knowing from experiment that both opened wide make the right tepid mixture. The water bangs out of the faucet like a fist. She notices the glass of watery whiskey she left on the top of the toilet and takes a long stale swallow and then puzzles how to get it off her hands.

“All the while, Rebecca screams as if she has a mind enough to know that she is filthy. Janice takes the glass with her and spills it on the rug with her knee while she strips the baby of its nightie and sweater. She carries the sopping clothes to the television set and

puts them on the top while she drops to her knees and tries to stuff the crayons back into their box. Her head aches with all this jarring up and down.

“She takes the crayons to the kitchen table and dumps the uneaten bacon and lettuce into the paper back under the sink, but the mouth of the bag leans partly closed and the lettuce falls behind into the darkness in back of the can, and she crouches down, with her head pounding, to try to see it or to get it with her fingers and is unable. Her knees sting from so much kneeling. She gives up and to her surprise sits flatly on a kitchen chair and looks at the gaudy, soft noses of the crayons poking out of the Crayola box.

‘Hide the whiskey.’ Her body doesn’t move for a second, but when it does, she sees her hands with the little lines of dirt on her fingernails. Put the whiskey bottle into the lower cabinet with some of the old shirts of Harry’s she was saving for rags and he could never wear a mended shirt, not that she was any much good at mending them. She shuts the door. It bangs but doesn’t catch and on the edge of linoleum beside the sink, the corked cap of the whiskey bottle stares at her like a little top hat. She puts it in the garbage bag. Now the kitchen is clean enough.

“In the living room Rebecca is lying naked in the fuzzy armchair with her belly puffing out sideways to yell and her lumpy curved legs clenched and red. Janice’s other baby was a boy and it seems unnatural to her between a girl’s legs, these two little buns of fat instead of a boy’s plump stump. When the doctor had Nelson circumcised, Harry hadn’t

wanted him to. He hadn't been and thought it was unnatural, and she had laughed at him and he was so mad.

"The baby's face goes red with each squall and Janice closes her eyes and thinks how really horrible it was of Mother to come and ruin her day just to make sure she's lost Harry again. She can't wait a minute to find out. And this awful baby can't wait a minute. And there are clothes on top of the television set. She takes them into the bathroom and dumps them into the toilet on top of the diaper and turns off the faucets. The wavery gray line of the water is almost up to the lip of the tub. On the skin quick wrinkles wander and under it a deep mass waits colorless. She wishes she could have that bath.

"Brimful of composure, she returns to the living room. She tips too much trying to dig the tiny rubbery thing out of the chair, so she drops to her knees and scoops Rebecca into her arms and carries her into the bathroom, held sideways against her breasts. She is proud to be carrying this to completion. At least the baby will be clean when Mother comes. She drops gently to her knees by the big calm tub and does not expect her sleeves to be soaked. The water wraps around her forearms like two large hands. Under her eyes, the pink baby sinks down like a gray stone.

"With a sob of protest, she grapples for the child, but the water pushes up at her hands. Her bathrobe tends to float and the slippery thing squirms in the sudden opacity. She has a hold, feels a heartbeat on her thumb and then loses it, and the skin of the water leaps with pale, refracted oblongs that she can't seize the solid of. It is only a moment, but a

moment dragged out in a thicker time. Then she has Becky squeezed in her hands and all is right.

“She lifts the living thing into air and hugs it against her sopping chest. Water pours off them onto the bathroom tiles. The little weightless body flops against her neck. And a quick look of relief at the baby’s face gives a fantastic clotted impression. A contorted memory of how they give artificial respiration pumps Janice’s cold, wet arms in frantic, rhythmic hugs.

“Under her clenched lids, great scarlet prayers arise, wordless, monotonous, and she seems to be clasping the knees of a vast third person whose name—Father, Father—beats against her head like physical blows. Though her wild heart bathes the universe in red no spark kindles in the space between her arms. For all her pouring prayers she doesn’t feel the faintest tremor of an answer in the darkness against her. Her sense of a third person with them widens enormously and she knows, knows, while knocks sound at the door that the worst thing that has ever happened to any woman in the world has happened to her.”

(applause)

DAVID UPDIKE: Thank you very much. I hadn’t planned to say this, but ZZ read that passage and I remember hearing from, I’m not sure if it was my father directly, or maybe my mother, but I believe that passage was written in a Vermont farmhouse owned by my

grandparents, and my father was typing in the afternoon and was writing furiously and stayed there longer than usual and after some hours he came down and said, “Well, I’ve killed the baby.”

But I wanted to thank you all for coming and thank the organizers for doing this. Despite what’s been said about his wariness of editors, I think he would very happily agree he had wonderful editors his whole career, and you’ve heard from five or six of them today. That said, I should also tell you that this past fall when I mentioned to him that something I wrote was getting rather lightly edited and I hoped they weren’t taking it too easy on me, he said, “That’s good. The best editors are the ones who don’t want to change a thing.” **(laughter)**

I am John’s second child and I wanted to introduce you to the rest of the family. His wife Martha, her three sons, Jason, Teddy, and John. Myself of course, and my wife Wambu is here as well as my sister Elizabeth and her husband Tete, my brother Michael, my sister Miranda and her husband Donald and our mother, John’s first wife, Mary, and her husband Robert Weatherall. Five of my father’s seven grandsons are also present, Sawyer, Trevor, Seneca and Kai and my own son Wesley. Missing are the two oldest boys, Anulf and Kwame, off seeing the world.

In spirit too are my father’s own parents, Wesley Russell Updike, a high school math teacher and coach and his wife Lynda Grace Hoyer, a bookish farm girl who gave her only child his first inklings of a creative life beyond their small Pennsylvania town. Their

son, Johnny, was not famous in 1950. He was a skinny, brainy boy with an abundance of creative energy, an aspiring cartoonist who also had asthma, psoriasis, and a stammer and in the high school hierarchy felt himself a considerable step down from the jocks, the athletes and their glamorous girlfriends.

Despite being first in his class, he was not accepted at Princeton—admissions office take note—**(laughter)** so went to Harvard instead and flourished there in class and on the *Lampoon*. But an unexpected obstacle remained to his graduation. All Harvard graduates must be able to swim and he could not. Inhibited as a child by his own imperfect skin, he had shied away from public swimming pools and the bullies there and never learned. And so he dutifully went to swimming classes his freshman year and eventually managed two lengths of the pool, an achievement he seemed as proud of later as graduating summa cum laude. But for the rest of his life he swam with what I would describe as a rather studied dog paddle.

In an art history class he met a smart and beautiful woman two years his senior, wooed her with kindness and wit, and spent his senior year in off-campus housing, a married man. His writing career began, as you know, a few hundred yards from here, but he was not yet famous then, either, in 1957, and it took a lot of chutzpah to pack his wife and two very small children into a car and drive north to set up shop in the small New England town of Ipswich. He borrowed money from his not-wealthy parents to buy a house and occasionally drove back to New York to write another talk piece to bolster their income.

Hints of fame began to appear in our small-town life. Interviewers from New York, articles and photographs in magazines, visiting Russians in fur coats and funny hats, **(laughter)** but for someone who was getting famous, my father didn't seem to work overly hard. He was still asleep when we went to school and was often already home when we got back. And when we appeared unannounced in his office on the second floor of a building he shared with a dentist, accountants, and the Dolphin restaurant, he always seemed happy and amused to see us, stopped typing to talk and dole out some money for movies or lunch, but as soon as we were out the door, we could hear the typing resume, clattering with us down the stairs.

As it grew, he wore his fame lightly as his due, like one of his old well-worn sweaters growing thin at the elbows. He loved public institutions—libraries, schools, the post office. Letters arriving and departing, the simple act of completion, dropping it in the slot. I did this for him this past January when he couldn't make it downtown himself. A small typed letter, a final correction for an English publisher who was reprinting the Maple stories. He had reread them in proof, he told me, not without some pleasure.

He played in the same poker group on Wednesday nights for more than fifty years, along with a local cobbler, a doctor, the owner of the auto supply store. He learned to play golf on a couple of scruffy local courses and looked most at home there, most himself. Later he joined an old fancy country club, but he always seemed slightly ill at ease there, like someone who had wandered into the wrong cocktail party and was afraid of being found out. In late October we played at the same marshy course where he had learned the game,

my brother and our father and a friend, but he looked a little frail and had a tough time on a long par four, and I watched from a distance as he topped a couple of fairway woods before he finally caught hold of one. “Come on, Dad,” I muttered to myself, “hit the damn ball.”

But he had a way of feigning disinterest in a match until it really mattered, and by the last hole, the match tied, I noticed in him a gathering concentration, newfound focus. Politely competitive and gracious in defeat, he much preferred to be gracious in victory. **(laughter)** He hit a decent drive and a useful second. Our opponents were up in some apple trees and I had plunked mine into a greenside bunker. So I watched him as he bounced a low, workmanlike chip to twelve feet. And while the rest of us bungled our way to sixes, he two-putted for a five. He walked off the course quickly and wanted to get home. No soft drink or pretzels today. He was already ill, but I don’t think he would mind my telling you he won the last hole and match he ever played.

Among the last books he was reading was *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama. He read it in bed in a sunny room overlooking the ocean and I believe for him it was especially poignant, trying to catch up on history he was about to miss, that was about to leave port without him. He was well aware, too, that Mr. Obama shares with his three oldest grandsons a parentage both of America and of Africa, of Kenya and Ghana, and so connected him in a personal, familial way to this transcendent moment in our history.

Through it all, his unkind illness, he remained, in his wife's words, dignified and noble. Continued to be what his own father would call a "gentleman," and he continued to shave each day, my sisters noted, even when it was perilous for him to do so. And as he so often did, he left for us a glimmer, a gift of himself, heart and mind conjoined. This is from his last published story, "The Full Glass," in the *New Yorker* of last May. This was written well before he knew he was ill. These are three paragraphs from the end. They're not consecutive.

"As a child, I would look at my grandfather and wonder how he could stay sane, being so close to his death but actually, it turns out, nature drips a little anesthetic into your veins each day that makes you think a day is as good as a year and a year is long as a lifetime. The routines of living, the tooth brushing and pill-taking, the flossing and the water. The matching of socks and the sorting of laundry into the proper bureau drawers wear you down.

"I wake each morning with hurting eyeballs and with dread gnawing at my stomach, that blank drop-off at the end of the chute. That scientifically verified emptiness of the atom in the spaces between the stars. Nevertheless, I shave. Athletes and movie actors leave a little bristle now to intimidate rivals or attract cavewomen, **(laughter)** but a man of my generation would sooner go onto the street in his underpants than unshaven. The very hot washcloth held against the lids for dry eye, the lather, the brush, the razor. The right cheek, then the left, feeling for missed spots along the jawline, and next the upper lip, the sides and that middle dent called the philtrum, and finally the fussy section where most

cuts occur, between the lower lip and the knob of the chin. My hand is still steady, and the triple blades they make these days last forever.

“The shaving mirror hangs in front of a window overlooking the sea. The sea is always full, flat as a floor, or almost. There’s a delicate planetary bulge in it, supporting a few shadowy freighters and cruise ships making their motionless way out of Boston Harbor. At night the horizon springs a rim of lights. More, it seems, every year. Winking airplanes from the corners of the earth descend on a slant, a curved groove in the air toward the unseen airport in East Boston. My life-prolonging pills cupped in my left hand, I lift the glass, its water sweetened by its brief wait on the marble sink top. If I can read this strange old guy’s mind aright, he is drinking a toast to the visible world, his impending disappearance from it be damned.”

(applause)

VOICE OF JOHN UPDIKE: “That night, he had the dream. He must have dreamed it while lying there asleep in the morning light, for it was fresh in his head when he awoke. They had been in a jungle. Joan, dressed in a torn sarong, was swimming in a clear river among alligators. Somehow, as if from a tree, he was looking down, and there was a calmness in the way the slim girl and the green alligators moved in and out, perfectly visible under the windowskin of the water.

“Joan’s face sometimes showed the horror she was undergoing and sometimes looked numb. Her hair trailed behind and fanned when her face came toward the surface. He shouted silently with grief. Then, he had rescued her. Without a sense of having dipped his arms in water, he was carrying her in two arms, himself in a bathing suit, and his feet firmly fixed to the knobby back of an alligator, which skimmed upstream through the shadows of high trees and white flowers and hanging vines, like a surfboard in a movie short. They seemed to be heading toward a wooden bridge arching over the stream. He wondered how he would duck it, and the river and the jungle gave way to his bed and his room, but through the change persisted, like a pedaled note on a piano, the sweetness and pride he had felt in saving and carrying the girl.”