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Near Misses

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NEAR MISSES

“Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
And the little less, and what worlds away!”
Robert Browning (“By the Fire-Side”)

I was recently invited to give a keynote address for a small academic conference whose advertised theme was “Near Misses, Contingencies, and Histories.” I have a rough and ready understanding of the near miss, the same kind of understanding we have of most words and phrases that spill out effortlessly in normal conversation. I use it and have heard it used by myriad others to describe a certain style of disappointment and regret. It is a concept generally available to us all, but when coupled with contingencies and histories, as in the title of the conference with its vague suggestions of Foucault and Lacan, then I began to worry that the usual sense of “near miss” might not have been meant to govern at all. I feared death by drowning in a sea of gibberish.

I ran it by my father who was visiting at the time. He is a businessman who harbors some small contempt which poses as large wonderment for how I make a living; he dismissed it all as just more evidence of the willful obscurantism normal people have come to associate with literary studies. “Why,” he asked, “do you academics so fear being understood? Do you believe that by being understood you are thus proved no smarter than the person who understood you? Or is it rather that you have something to hide, that something being, perversely, that you have nothing to hide?” I assured him not to worry, that this was nowhere near as bad a theme, whatever it might mean, as it might have been and that I would risk being as clear as I could be, that really the title was openly an invitation to shoot an arrow over the house and see what I hit or missed, at least that was how I was going to take it.

Please understand that my father is in real estate, and for him contingencies, as in a sales contract, are something to be removed and thus must be removable; they are manifestly not something to be celebrated. To my father, a world of unremovable contingencies would be not this world at all, but hell itself. There would be no sales or purchases, just people weaseling out of nearly missed commitments, of using contingencies as an excuse never to go beyond the point of no return, which point, as we shall see, has something to do with our understanding of near misses.

Near misses and contingencies, in fact, do go hand-in-hand. Near misses, after all, depend on the contingencies of qualifying as misses rather than hits, and then as near misses, rather than just plain misses, or screw-ups. And then we all know that near misses and its intimately related notion, the close call, are the very essence of the contingency in plots that make tragedies tragic and comedies comic, farces farcical, and history historical. And once in fact you start to muse on the notion of near misses, one thing begins to lead to another and you indeed have been presented by the purest happenstance with a theme for an essay.

It may be that the best an essay in the humanities can aspire to is a near miss, that it is less a matter of hitting the nail on the head than of fooling some critical mass of people for a critical length of time before the effort is relegated to oblivion or contempt. Too many appreciators and it will be noised about that one has aimed too low, making the hit more a miss than a proper score. And not all such grumbling is meanly motivated; literary studies, cultural studies, and depth psychology, for instance, have pushed an endless series of tricksters to the fore. But if we can't trust the verdict of those whose very generosity of opinion types them as camp followers, it is not at all clear we can trust the verdicts of peers either. In the academy (and in other settings too) our judgments about our relative ranking and status is largely in the hands of our peers, those very people with whom we are competing for rank and status. If a peer does an enviable job, we feel vaguely threatened, but we would be fools not to admit some success on his part, so we praise him, but faintly. We say "Yes, he did well, but. . . ." In other words, we concede him, grudgingly, a near miss; we claim that he almost got there, but not quite, and not quite in ways that we, in our astuteness, can recognize, but that he, exposing thereby the limits of his talents, could not, at least could not before he delivered the

talk or published the book or paper and had to confront our penetrating criticism. Faint praise might be the best we can aspire to among our peers and if we can see that it is motivated by envy, well then it is praise indeed.

How different the world of a field goal kicker. His near misses are verifiable and will pain people years after the event. Just ask anyone from Buffalo. Near misses, then, function differently in an analogue setting than they do in a digital one. In the analogue world a near miss might actually be perceived as a score or at least get some kind of credit; in the digital world, as a general rule, there is but the thinnest line between the most glorious success and the most abysmal failure, between being welcomed in at the last second or cast out forever in eternal darkness.¹ And for the most part academics function in an analogue world, where a hit is never considered to be the last word anyway, for each generation reads its classics in different ways and even redefines just what qualifies as a classic.

Closely related to the near miss, as I mentioned earlier, is the close call. And we might also want to distinguish other close cousins, like the “nice try,” the notion of “almost,” and the point of no return, that magical tripwire of true commitment. As a rough matter the near miss and close call exist in an equilibrium. Take a predator and his would-be prey. The prey, oblivious to the presence of danger, blithely approaches the point where the predator lurks, but one step from disaster she remembers she forgot to get stamps and turns on her heel and walks in the opposite direction. This is the standard suspenseful scene of a horror film or, for that matter, of a nature documentary. We say she had a close call or we speak of a narrow escape. What was a close call to her, however, was to our poor predator a near miss. The close call is usually understood to be a lucky escape from harm, the near miss an unlucky failure to attain a desired goal. The shot that rims out of the basket when trailing by a point at the buzzer is a near miss to the loser, a close call to the victor. The near miss is getting five of the six digits in Lotto; the close call is standing in the right place in line for the selections in a death camp. Close calls are the near misses of negative lotteries.

Yet, if this is so, why then do we refer to two jetliners that pass within five hundred feet of each other a near miss, rather than a close call? The airplane near miss has an explanation. Here the thing to be avoided is called a hit, not in the sense of hit as a

score, except perversely, but as a collision. The hit is what is to be avoided, yet the notion of hitting the mark still governs the action, and the failure of the hit will be understood as a miss, near or otherwise. The two airplanes in fact miss each other, miss hitting each other. They are not understood to have a close call. But as for the passengers on the plane we would still speak of their narrow escape and close call.

The near miss and the close call are further distinguished by the passions that define their particular experience. The close call elicits a certain kind of relief, the sentiment we have when disaster just misses. The near miss has a richer emotional life than the close call. That should hardly be surprising, given that negative experience is generally much more idea-rich than positive experiences. The near miss is variously accompanied by frustration, chagrin, disappointment, regret, at times even remorse, despair, and the demoralization that comes of seeing the desired object snatched away forever after having been but an arm's reach away.

It is the particularity of our emotional experience that also allows us to distinguish the *near* miss from a *mere* miss. And this is where the uncanny comes in, for there is something uncanny about the near miss and the close call both that is not generally part of the experience of the mere miss. Tobias Wolff, describing the close calls he had in Vietnam, described them as "personal, mysterious, and somewhat fantastic."² The same might be said of the near miss, except, of course, it carries a positive valence. The mystery and personalization of the close call is benign. Impending disaster, by some uncanny fortune, is averted, as if the heavens took a special benevolent interest in the fix you had either gotten yourself in, or that heaven itself, in a less benign mood, had put you in.

The mystery of the near miss, however, is malign, even cruel. The near miss brings with it a sense of having been teased and toyed with by an inscrutable power, tantalized, set up, conned, messed with. Mere misses, on the other hand, might, like near misses, be occasions for regret, disappointment, and frustration, but mere misses don't make us feel singled out as playthings of malevolent gods. True, a massive failure, really screwing up, not even coming close, can make us feel the object of divine judgment and punishment, but it cannot make us feel toyed with. We usually

are willing rightly to blame ourselves for the miss by a mile; but it is fate itself or the heavens that we curse for the near miss.

Consider too that the misery of a near miss is much more potent and is subject to a much slower decay rate than are the corresponding joys of the close call, if they are even to be called joys at all. Relief is not all that positive an experience. It is either the resigned pleasure we take in the knowledge that things could indeed be much worse, the sense that our prior state of well-being was purely a function of ignorance of impending peril; or, it is the pathetic, yet admittedly very real, pleasure we take in the cessation of pain—the pleasure we get when we stop banging our head against a wall. Relief, in other words, is not a simple joy; its experience demands either actual prior pain or possible pain just narrowly escaped.

The miserable passions that accompany near misses manifestly do not make near misses any more likely to operate in the tragic or epic mode than in the comedic and farcical mode. Near misses are the very stuff of comedy with its mistaken identities, outlandish coincidences, and equally outlandish missed meetings and misunderstandings. And not just burlesque and broad comedy make central use of the near miss; so does the comedy of manners, in which would-be wits, ne'er-do-wells, nouveau thises and thats never quite get it.

I have been assuming so far that the person who experiences the chagrin of the near miss must, of course, be conscious not only of the miss but of its nearness and at the time of the event. Suppose, however, that the consciousness of the nearness of the miss, or whether there was a miss at all, only comes years later. To the array of emotions that properly attend the near miss I mentioned earlier we might have to add wistfulness or bitter-sweetness or even, strangely, relief. Take the case of the man who returns to his 25th high school reunion and is told by the still very attractive woman, who was the class beauty and object of everyone's desire, that she had had a crush on him and always regretted that he had never asked her out. Back then the boy intensely desired to do so but never could muster the nerve for fear of rejection. What back then was not only not a near miss, but not even a miss, is now revealed to have been a near miss. Near, that is, because his desire was there and as it turned out the impediment to its fulfillment was not as he assumed it to have been. Just the smallest act of will back then, just a slight

lessening of his self-protective pessimism, just a slight bit more energy in acting on his own desires and presto: nirvana. This is the near miss as the elicitor of wistfulness, bittersweetness, and a comic sense of one's own wimpiness, in addition to some small chagrin. This is one near miss, if near miss it is, for which the man has only himself to blame, not those black-humored gods.

Change the facts a bit. Suppose that that teen beauty did not, to put it charitably, age well. Now what reaction? Relief? What was under one set of facts twenty-five years subsequent to the event a near miss becomes under another description of subsequent events, a close call. Because surely the desire for the past beauty must suffer diminution by its present manifestation. After all, one's desire back then did not have any discount in it for what changes future time might bring to the object of desire. This scenario also has different emotional settings dependent, obviously, on whether the parties are now happily married or not and whether we believe that the women in these hypotheticals were actually telling the truth about their earlier desires.

If we understand near misses to involve the malign interest of the gods can we be blamed for our near misses? We surely blame the ne'er-do-wells of comedy, the ones who never quite get their manner or their manners right, who are good enough to fool the uninitiated but not quite good enough not to lapse into vulgarity at the crucial moment. (There is a non-trivial matter here of whether I am rightly calling such comedic misses near misses. Surely Malvolio or Mrs. Elton and types like them are not even close. And the ones who get really close and still fail are not all that comedic, as, say, Silas Lapham, Charles Swann, and the various Jews brought on stage by Edith Wharton as objects of her loathing and contempt.) And then what of those near misses where we get some credit for coming close, for almost scoring? There are some near misses that are part of the cost of playing the game at a high level, where to be in the position to miss nearly is to be worthy of the attention of the gods and the esteem of one's peers and worshipers. Michael Jordan does rim out last minute shots; Clint Eastwood can make movies that don't quite succeed when he moves outside the revenge genre in which he never misses. And these people are trusted to try the next time and they trust themselves to try again, for we and they guess, quite rightly, that they are favored by the gods, but that even the gods and the incredible talents of those they favor are

bounded by certain rules of statistical probability, those blasted contingencies that will distribute even their attempts in some probabilistic array of hits, near misses, and misses.

With these types, though, we must contrast those whom we do blame for their near misses, whom we feel we have a right to expect either to vacate the field or to acquire the necessary competence so that their near misses are indeed excusable rather than sources of annoyance and embarrassment for everyone else and what should be sources of humiliation for them if they were more clued in. Consider that it is not always better to miss by a little than to miss by a mile. What if you are in William Tell's position? Moreover, missing by a mile allows for the excuse that you just weren't playing seriously or even trying, that you were not engaging your honor at all. Such big misses can be understood to be a kind of mockery of the contest, a contempt for it, a refusal to lower oneself even to play the game. The near miss, however, makes a claim to competence, and shows that one cares to win or to make good within the relevant frame. Once you are understood to be a player in the game, always to come up short discharging those tasks assigned to you suggests that you perhaps shouldn't have been playing in the first place.

Is it just me or is it not a fairly general phenomenon that the almost good looking, the almost witty, the almost cool, are more likely to draw our disapprobation than the plain, the average, the middlingly unassuming? Isn't it the case that "almostness" here registers greater moral and social culpability than the person who sits back comfortably in the middle of things? This phenomenon, if I may for the sake of argument assume that it is indeed a phenomenon, plays itself out differently in different domains. Take the case of physical appearance first. There is the erotic allure of a certain kind of imperfection, that sweet disorder in the dress. This style, whether natural or cultivated cooly, is not a near miss at all, but a hit in the domain of Eros. Moreover, the mere signs of sweet disorder seem to work independently of whether they originate in innocent artlessness or in coy contrivance. Contrast the perfect imperfection of sweet disorder with the person who has all the features of beauty but it somehow doesn't add up, or that in a certain slant of light we see not near beauty, something, in other words, that still looks pretty good, but failure, a marring so malignant that we can never see the person, who at first glance attracted us, as attractive again.

Sometimes beauty behaves digitally, on or off, rather than on that sliding analogue continuum descending through grades of ever lesser attractiveness. And we blame near misses in the digital ordering of beauty for not measuring up to what we feel they claimed for themselves. So what if they had no choice in the matter? We hold them to having been pretentious, aspiring to be seen as beautiful and missing in some small, but cancerous, way that brings the whole presumptuous edifice toppling down.

So too the almost witty. These people really end up generating annoyance, which annoyance can end up in real loathing. These are Alexander Pope's dunces, or the poetasters of the Elizabethan period, the posers execrated by Johnson and Swift, true men of wit. And likewise the almost cool. The person who just misses ever so slightly the posture, the expression, the scuff of the shoe, the brand of the shirt, the cast of the eye. These people don't quite make it and we hold them culpable, probably rightly so, even as we fear greatly that our monitoring of our own performance may not be quite as astute as our monitoring of others' performances. We may be competent enough in the rules of cool, wit, and beauty, to judge others contemptible as near misses, but we can never be sure we are not being looked at with the same contempt, as having just missed ourselves.

What we loathe in these near missing people is the pretense of their thinking that they have hit when they have missed. (Please pardon me for assuming some unidentified "they" are the losers, rather than using "we" here. But in all likelihood a good many of us are some other we's they.) It is the presumption, the self-serving errors of self-perception, that show they think they are doing better than they really are. Now I know I am telling this story in a one-sided rather bleak way, for we all know people so convinced of their own excellence and who carry off their own delusion with such style that they end up charming us and at the same time beating us down with their exuberant and passionate commitment to their inflated self-image, so that our annoyance ends up in a kind of benevolent amusement of admiring disbelief. So they, in fact, end up forcing the world to confirm the rightness of their erroneous judgment of themselves.

But let us imagine for instance the perfectly witty and perfectly cool. The witty surely have their bad days. Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, and Jane Austen couldn't have been on all the time. But presumably they knew when they were not on, unlike

would-be wits who are seldom if ever on and always think they are. Coolness raises different issues. The witty person can withdraw and sit silently or simply engage in conversation that makes no pretense of wit and still maintain his or her deserved reputation as a wit, but the cool must be forever cool. There is no relief. But to be perfectly cool is to raise the suspicion of unnaturalness, having to try too hard. Indeed most all human perfection suggests unnaturalness. Trees and tigers, in contrast, can be perfect and perfectly natural at the same time, no doubt because we don't quite subject them to moral and sexual demands. The cool person, and perhaps also the person of charm, must have their own sweet disorders in dress and in address too or they seem brittle, contrived, lifeless and programmed. Perfection in the social order then requires a certain kind of apt imperfection or we suspect sham and pretense. So in the social domains of manners and character, perfection, scoring, hitting it just right, means not always hitting it. But then the not quite hitting must still be just right.

This complicates somewhat what it means to miss nearly in the domain of manner and manners. The almost witty person and the almost cool person, the ones who almost make it but who never quite do and who do not have the good sense to bow out of the game end up blowing it, socially and morally, bigger than if they had missed by a mile. For their continuing succession of near misses in fact types them as inept, that is as big missers. Among their many failings, they do not have the competence to see sweet disorderings for the competence they represent, and no doubt they lack the discernment to see why their shortcomings are maybe not so much a function of not getting it right (surely they fail in this conventional way too), but of getting it too right, of looking unnatural, of trying too hard, of not having the confidence and poise of real cool, or the grace of real charm, which allows you to blow it, recover with aplomb, with dignity enhanced. Those almost cool, almost witty people are not really having near misses at all when they miss nearly. The very nearness of their misses, by one measure, is what reveals the complete failure of their expertise in the game at hand. For the game is played out in variations measured by millimicrons and timed in nanoseconds.

Not all failure is discrediting. Some provides the opportunity to show poise or to demonstrate that one's failures are the kind that are momentary, not the sort that will forever define one's rank

and character downward in the world of honor and esteem. There is another class of failure which is not momentary at all, but rather than lowering honor it raises it: this is the type of failure judged glorious and it is most often associated with heroic defeat. Heroic defeat can make for better stories than heroic victory; heroic losers are often more attractive than heroic winners. The courageous last stand in which the hero stands victorious at the end makes his deeds look suspiciously rational, even prudent, whereas glorious failure suspends rationality, dispenses with prudence and shows unambivalent commitment to grand action and the heroic order. Yet we would hardly call it a near miss if someone by sheerest accident, meaning to go down fighting, ends up carrying the day just because it is slightly less glorious to survive victoriously than to die nobly. Going down in style is delicately contingent on several key variables that mark the thinnest difference that separates glorious failure from dark comedy. And that thin line of separation puts us squarely in the domain of the near miss.

Here is a third-hand account of an incident that took place in Vietnam told by a vet to a student of mine. I cannot vouch for its veracity but whether it is true or not does not matter.

An American fire support base came under sudden overwhelming attack by elements of the Second North Vietnamese Army. The Americans were forced almost immediately to retreat to a final defensive line along a gentle rise. . . . Noncoms exhorted the men to return fire, and threatened with imminent death from both sides, Jack [the vet] began to fire sporadically at the quickly approaching NVA. From the corner of his eye, Jack saw a private wielding an M-16 charge forward from the defensive line spraying bullets in the direction of the enemy. Before he had gone twenty feet, he was cut to pieces by machine gun and mortar fire. Jack stopped shooting, cowered lower in his position, and awaited certain death. Just then an incoming NVA mortar round fell short and struck the ammunition magazine of the base just as lead elements of the NVA were passing over the site. The explosion which ensued killed many of the NVA and left survivors disoriented and in full retreat before the outnumbered and equally dazed group of Americans.

Battle stories are collections of many mini-stories of close calls and near misses. Here the North Vietnamese are wiped out by the near miss of friendly fire which fell a few yards short. Or more accurately, the infantry assault turned out to have been a bit more

successful than the NVA mortarmen had anticipated. And then this was not just any near miss, this was, in any other setting, the directest of direct hits: scoring the enemy's ammunition dump. Near misses and contingencies again, this time with a vengeance. But there are other contingencies more interesting in this account, the contingencies that separate the heroic and grand from the comical, stupid, and pathetic. Take the case of the private who knowing all is lost abandons his cover and charges out alone in a grand gesture trying to take down as many of the enemy as he can before he too must bite the dust. His gesture would surely count as heroic, noble, even glorious had the American base been wiped out. The private knew there was no American support to be had, that a host of NVA were overrunning their position; he knew that they were finished; how could he expect, even without his rationality impaired by the dire straits he was in, that fate would conspire to have the North Vietnamese obliterate themselves with friendly fire within seconds of complete victory?

The NVA's near miss is our soldier's near miss too. Instead of going out in glory, grasping at whatever purpose he could supply his life by dying grandly, he ends up going out not only meaninglessly, since he need not have died at all, but risibly in a black-humor kind of way. Such is the cost of tripping over the thin line between meaningful and meaningless death. What from his own interior position may have been all grand action grandly motivated (and indeed would have been ratified by all who heard tell the tale) turns out to have been an exercise in farce, playing at heroism, rather than being heroic, without any fault of his own. It is in the merest happenstance of that ill fortune that makes this private's miss a near miss. This particular kind of heroic action requires that it be played against a backdrop either of total defeat or a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat in some non-trivial way by the heroic action. The glory of this kind of suicidal death involves some serious risk-taking beyond the corporeal risk-taking that is the core of its glory. It is a bet that one has read the setting right, so that the timing will be right. It is more than just an act of supreme will-mustering that brings glory; it is the heroic act timed rightly.

Bearing some relation to the near miss is the nice try. "Nice try" is what we say to encourage, to keep up the spirits of those trying to acquire reasonable competence in a task they are learn-

ing or relearning. But the try still has to measure up to some kind of good-faith standard and even more than good faith is required. There has to be some evidence of an actual skill that is in fact emerging if saying "nice try" is to avoid becoming ironical or brutally sarcastic. You cannot just say "nice try" to any nice try, unless you are one of those souls who believes that people's psyches are so fragile that no matter how inept they are that fact is never to be hinted at.

In a more rational order only a very small set of near misses qualify as true nice tries. These are those *grand* efforts that just come up short. The shot rimming out at the buzzer doesn't qualify because the mechanics of taking a basketball shot are not that demanding, but the team coming back from a twenty-point deficit to tie the game with seconds remaining before losing at the buzzer would qualify. Such an effort is a nice try *and* a near miss, which maps on exactly to the other team's narrow escape and close call. But the "nice try" has pretty much been claimed by the world of ridicule and sarcasm. Only parents and physical therapists are more likely to say "nice try" encouragingly than disparagingly; and even then it is hard not to have a tone of exasperation after the second or third "nice try" doesn't yield some genuine improvement in performance. So the nice try comes to signify those misses that miss by a mile, but are not so far off that the incompetent bumbler can claim that he wasn't even trying in the first place, that he should, in other words, not be held to account at all. The "nice try" of hostile intent denies to its target any way out. He is simply an inept fool.

We might note that the criminal law has internalized the concept of the nice try. A try that qualifies as nice makes it as an "attempt" and is as culpable as a true hit, and although it may be punished less harshly it is punishable nonetheless.

We have seen how near misses in the realm of manners may in fact be a way of blowing it big and near misses in the criminal law of attempts might in fact count as hits. Now consider yet one more way of blowing it big whose moral economy depends on traffick-ing in a near miss that operates quite differently. The focus in this case is on a certain type of decision and the acts of will necessary to implement it. Here are two examples: Do I marry this person or think I can still do better by holding out? Or, do I live an entire life of virtue or do I convert on my death bed? But where is the

near miss in these examples? If I die before deciding to accept God I did not have a near miss. I didn't even have a miss for I didn't try. If there is to be an issue of near miss here it must arise in another way. Suppose I was just about in fact to marry X, but backed out for fear that the next person I might meet would please me more, or suppose I defer conversion to a life of virtue while right at the cusp of deciding to commit myself to it because I know I can't yet turn my back on all those pleasures: then we might begin to speak of near misses if I end up miserably single or miserably married to someone else or in hell because I die the next day. The near miss takes place within the subject's will.

These cases are about near misses and the refusal to make decisive acts of commitment; the case I will conclude with takes up the case of the near miss and making, not refusing, commitments. The notions of the point of no return, casting the die, crossing the Rubicon, are not themselves instances of near miss. But when the behavior triggered by irrevocable commitment turns out disastrously we think of those omens, warnings, or other happenstances that could have prevented the disastrous commitment as creating perhaps the most poignant sensation there is of the near miss. It is this near miss of the chance to avert disaster, to escape narrowly one's hostile doom, that informs the sensibility of the tragic. Take this case from *The Saga of Gísli*, a hauntingly tragic tale from thirteenth-century Iceland: Gísli sends messengers with a token to warn his friend Vésteinn not to visit him since Gísli rightly suspects that Vésteinn has been targeted for death by people in Gísli's vicinage. The messengers just miss intercepting Vésteinn as they ride by each other, they above, he below a grassy ridge. The messengers do finally catch up with Vésteinn later and convey the warning. Vésteinn, looking at the token, understands the reliability of the message and says, "You are telling me the truth and I would have turned back if you had met me earlier, but now all rivers flow to Dyrafjord. I shall ride there and am even eager to do so." Vésteinn is killed within three days.

This kind of ignored warning is a convention of tragedy and it does much to create that frustrating sense of what-if-ness, which sense is precisely the sense of the near miss. The grimness of fate seeming so fatelike depends bizarrely on creating the sense that it could have been otherwise, fate notwithstanding. That overbearing sentiment of being gripped by a doomlike fate would hardly be half as powerful if it were not funded by

the frustrated sense of the near miss, the sense that the gods have set us up, toyed with us in a cruel fashion by providing options and escapes that we just miss grasping. But the gods don't set up Vésteinn unless they did so merely by giving him a very recognizable human psychology. Vésteinn doesn't heed the warning because at some magical moment he commits himself to finishing his journey. He has already come so far and it is all downhill from now so the fact that he has sunk all these costs makes him continue ill-advisedly. It takes more discipline than Vésteinn can muster to act as our economists say we should: don't make decisions based on sunk costs. Vésteinn lives in a heroic world where behaving in such bloodless economically rational ways was not always the best way to gain honor. For if honor means anything it means defying the economist's advice regarding sunk costs: it means revenge and it means commitment. Vésteinn would look like a bit of a weenie if he turned back after having gone so far, especially when the reason for turning back was fear-driven.

Vésteinn's rationality is undone by more than his commitment to honor; there is something about his position in the landscape that gives it a magical decision-determining power. Had Vésteinn not crossed the divide into the Dyrafjord basin one suspects it would have been much easier psychologically for him to turn back. Once he crosses the great divide, once he reaches that magical point in real space which has a special significance different from any other point on the journey, the likelihood of turning back becomes not only contrary to honor, but contrary to nature. By crossing that divide Vésteinn's powers of choice are borne along by the force of the streams heading the same way to the farmhouse where he will be run through the heart. But what if the messengers had taken the low road around the grassy ridge and what if they had caught Vésteinn just *before* he crossed the divide where he could not so poeticize his commitments in the way he did? And suppose they did catch him earlier and he had turned back? There would have been no story to tell. And suppose that no messengers had been sent to warn him. Vésteinn would still have been killed, but he would have had no opportunity to commit himself to his tragic fate. We could still consider his death tragic, but it would be almost talking loosely and sentimentally to say so and we manifestly would not *feel* the tragedy. For it is hard to feel tragedy unless we see the gods take some

kind of malign interest in the course of events or unless the victim commits himself to his doom. In either case we seem to be in the bizarre realm of the near miss.

What unites the chagrin of the near miss, the relief of the close call, the mortification of the nice try, the sense of commitment and of its frequently accompanying fatalism as in points of no return? With the exception of the nice try, they raise the question of what-if, that there could have been other outcomes and other paths, if only. . . . But this question is not just experienced as an abstract exercise in the idea of paths not taken or in path dependency itself: it is felt and felt with a powerful amalgam of emotions we have come to understand as the sense of “what-if-ness” itself. Miserable as that sense can be at times, it still suggests we matter, even if only as the object of the gods’ laughter. And what of the nice try, the odd man out in this assembly? It works to provide the contrasting term, the ironical negation of the others. Its mode is coddlingly sentimental, denying tragedy, horror, commitment, and suspense, denying, that is, most of the possibility of a good story. Its style is the therapeutic in the self-help mold. It’s about I’m OK and you’re OK, with OK meaning that we passed judgment in a world which makes no demands to be anything but what we already are, that is, it is a world in which what-if is not a possible question. No wonder we use “nice try” to express contempt.

NOTES

¹In both the digital and analogue cases there is still agreement as to the rules and standards in play. When there is no agreement as to what standard or scale is being used to judge competence, then it strikes us that the purest drivel is scoring quite big among some people. Entire disciplines get captured by paradigms that are empty or wrongheaded.

²In *Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 88.