GEORGE ABBE

Is love at the universal center, or justice? Do we emphasize love to avoid the tough duty of aggressive good -- the changing that is made only by hate -- hatred of evil, the corrective action that must harm; for the wonder of relief from suffering is wrong from history and time only by the sublime surgery of hurt.

In moving too quickly from under the tree where I scatter seed, the clean gold of life, for birds -- as I turned, I broke a twig from a small birch I have nurtured out of shale and dry soil. I bent down and felt the torn end of the twig. The sickness of death was already there, no doubt; the tint of life, the sap, shone faintly. While the whole tree continued to breathe, this twig would die.

Or would it?

I saw a world, whirling at the air's center, where the twig, having played its former role on this earth, of impromptu gladness and simplicity, having given itself to growth and sunlit knowing, would find the tree of healing, its own branch again, the redeemed simply and structure of this same tree growing in indestructible and unsuffering form.

I saw the twig, rising toward light, impervious to breaking or to pain, and the full tree its green blood helped to feed sang mystical, undiminishing hymns to God, who reached out and blessed the twig with hands of flashing fire.

Thus the justice of love was fashioned. And I knew that what I kill or maim by mistake -- fly, insect, lichen, larvae -- all will revive, more quickly if I have pitied, have yearned not to hurt what lives; all will flourish again in their pristine principle, their immutable form, on wild and miraculous earths, in worlds where I shall encounter them again.

Compassionate justice -- ineluctable.

But what of that other mandate -- of punishment, of wrath, of hate for the clumsy, the arrogant, the cruel?

I took my skis and went to an open slope away from people and the sad chaos of traffic, the blind hours of our daily survival, the ritual of each self merchandised.

I could see the cars on the far highways, skis strapped on car-tops, people going to public, overcrowded slopes where tows made ascent comfortable and swift, and everyone glittered with high-priced equipment, latest attire; and many a woman from the city, outfitted flawlessly for sport, would never leave the lounge, but would lazy about, waiting for the facile overture, the male hint introducing sex for the night.

Here, on my separate hill, I wore old baggy tweed pants folded hastily around the ankle, and over them I had pulled ancient, long, green socks that, as I skied, would settle out rolls above my ski-boots -- boots bought for five dollars twenty years ago (this year's product was probably priced at fifty dollars). I wore skis with flat tips, rounded edges, scarred grooves -- age, fifteen years -- but old friends -- relaxed, amiable companions.
I climbed, myself; life pounded into finger-tip and scalp with the hard hot thrust of pulse as I strained upward, slapping skis on snow, leaning, bracing myself with both poles against the sudden backward slide. It was good to work — to labor for what I got -- the straight run down a half mile to the marsh.

Who wanted tows? I was ten times more alive from climbing on my own power as well as coming down the same. The sweat gilded my brow, froze in the wind. The long hill blazed in the late sun; the blue west brooded over our lonely companionship -- the skis and I. It was like my childhood again -- boyhood -- the good true wisdom and thrill of separate reflection and act. What more did men want, or need?

I decided to adventure, to fall, if it was fate, but to try the new; and so, I attempted the high leaps sideways in the middle of a straight run -- what I had seen the experts achieve in the moving-pictures -- a figure tautly clothed in flawless togs zooming into sight over a summit, scattering the dry whiteness to each side in pluming clouds, and then, at full speed, leaping outward on his poles and springing sideways -- almost at right angles.

I tried, but at less speed, and I didn't use my poles; I just crouched, then leaped. Falling made it all the better. I could curse and struggle back up, the blood lacing and tearing at my flesh, and try again, more grimly than the time before.

And now and then I succeeded. I sprang at an angle, slid, off-balance, regained control and curved around in a christie, drew the skis in closer together, swung to a halt, and stood there, triumphant. Then I'd whoop and holler a bit, stare back at the tracks I'd made, the way I had when a kid; then I hurried back to examine them more minutely.

It was March, and the sun was hot; and though only nine o'clock in the morning, the snow was melting perceptibly on this steep south incline. As I stood at the point where I'd jumped, I grew quiet; my breathing was quick, but satisfied, happy; and in the silence I could hear the jays, way off; in the hedge to the north, the chisadee who, on cold mornings, came to my special tree to eat from my hand, was talking to me; and over the shoulder of the hill, a bunting, lingering after the departure of his flock, was buzzing faintly. All around me I could hear the soft, collapsing sound of snow being burned to water and ghostly vapor.

I could not take my eyes from those marks my skis had made -- at exactly the point where they had landed at a sharp angle across the straight-down imprints. It was a good feeling, to know I had sprung that high and cut against the normal, easy course acutely; the heel of the inner ski had struck well outside the nearest groove mark of the straight-down run. It was rather extraordinary, I thought, that I had achieved that sideways motion, going at a relatively slow speed.

The sun beat down; the snow melted; and as I leaned there on my ski-poles, staring, the outlines of the ski-tracks began to soften and dissolve; and so strong was the glittering light, my vision blurred, and I had to glance to one side and then back again to regain my focus.

I seemed to be transported to my next existence, for I had, of course, already lived infinite numbers of them and would mature through infinite more. And I knew I must gird my powers, time after time, life after life, for many abrupt changes, points of growth -- sudden switches of direction -- exact, like this jump in the snow.

How perfect this metaphor I had inscribed in white actually was. I had acted out the first law of the immortal spirit -- change -- bold, radical departure from the obvious -- abruptly fresh direction.

Did love achieve this?

But I had made myself jump by hard, violent resolve, by a ferocity of insistence -- only by falling over and over -- by a hatred of defeat. Hate, not love, had wrought this sudden veering, this startling design in white -- so counter to the normal, easy, parallel marks down-hill. And so hate would fashion my growth in many a later clime.

Now, leaning in that warm, enfolding dazzle of light, I seemed to withdraw from the slope around me, to melt and mingle in the scintillating dreams of my next existence. And out of the white soil of that
time, I saw the birch tree whose branch I had broken, rising in its archtypical elasticity and rapture; the broken branch stretched inviolate and pure in the rays of daylight. And I saw that the lines of the tree drove outward at the fresh, the unexpected, the angry angle; and it was the simple and unperplexed impulse that achieved the original line; it was the cleanest departure from the straight norm of the trunk.

And I saw the birds I had fed in those boughs, birds who had died in the fields of the mortal world, on hilltops of human wea-

ther, and had nested in the small birch I nurtured, and dying, had come here to the original tree, the deathless, innocent conception, the idea of the tree, which lasted, which put forth fresh variations of itself in temporal realms, but endured in the core of its wood, its essential character, here.

As I watched, the billions of insects I had broken on my car’s indifferent wind-shield, had crushed with my hand out of discomfort, or stepped on, unheeding — the animals I had eaten, the flowers mutilated beneath my shoes — all moved, shone, sported, flew, sang, in the grasses and hedgerows of that country. Their pristine, invincible forms drew back the vitality from the deaths of the ephemeral bodies, and danced and spun like animate jewels, and procreated, and wrought across the immense heavens the mirth and sobriety and elegance of their art — their paintings, music, poetry. And each dart and spring and thrust of color or sound was wound in the reptile scales of hate as well as the soft tissues of love: the quick, original, sideways leavings of impulse, switches from custom, wild change, growth flowing out of anger — out of hate, as truly as out of mating gentleness, or compassion, or charity.

And now, as I watched, I beheld myself in that strange realm, and I was bleeding from the acts of cruelty, indifference, and blind injury I had committed. Those creatures whose pain had come from me now evoked a similar hurt in myself; and as I moved across the Elysian soil, I bled an equal torment from my heart.

What, then, must I do to atone? There, on the inclines of the future, as I drifted down congenially on my skis, I saw my body tighten, alerted by anger, by hate — hatred of myself and my complacency, hatred of the foul imbalance and mad corruptions of this earlier, mortal world; I saw the future poison of resolve sting my limbs and mind to the fierce act of radical change, the alteration of my course, the abrupt spring up and sideways and out and down — then at a sharp, diametrically different angle — a rustling, swerving, triumphant glide; a curving, gradual slowing, feet close together for balance and drive.

And it was hate that had spurred that decision to cut vividly across the usual, relaxed schuss of the slope; it was hate that shot the skis straight up, lashing the snow in clouds to either side, and whirled them, glinting and slashing, through the bloom of powdery white, and set them down again, clean and hard, at a defiant new angle, in continuing burst through snow, the unbroken rage away toward the side-hill, another goal.

And there, like blossomings in the white meadow, on the river banks, along ice and open dark water, were the birds and animals I had loved in this, my former life. It was like a garden in the cold. And there was that birch that I had aided, the twig torn by my clumsiness and remembered with remorse, with longing to restore. It was here, whole again.

Here it was, growing by the hedgerow, unchanging, the source for the imperfect, destructible replicas, offshoots of the undying, which burst through in transitory lands, one of which had been the birch I had known. Here was the matrix, the original.