

## Rick Roderick and the Fragile Dignity of Humanity

### Part 1 The Claim of the Dead

If I could only share one fragment of my father's work, it would be this story from his half-finished autobiography:

“It was a rainy Saturday night and I closed the hamburger stand a few minutes early. Two girls I had never met were visiting Buffalo Gap and they wanted to go on one of the drives they had heard about. Rita and Tate were very attractive and a year or two younger than I was. They were sisters and would be in town for a month while their father looked for work and considered the possibility of moving to Abilene. They knew Cynthia, a Gap girl who nearly always joined the crowd for a late night ride. Along with Danny and Randy, the '57 Chevy was soon full of giggling girls and excited boys. We pulled out into the night and the rain and I played the radio full blast. No one paired off into couples, but everyone seemed to like everyone else. The new girls were funny and smart and I especially liked Rita, with her short brown hair and twinkling eyes. I tried to talk to her and drive at the same time, but it caused me to go slower and everyone thought I should go faster. So I did. We passed some Dr. Pepper around and Randy called for beer, but we had none. The radio was playing The Rolling Stones and they wanted to 'paint it black...' It was fine rock 'n' roll and Cynthia moved to it although seated.

“I do not remember when I realized that I was lost. I knew almost all the roads around the whole county, but I had never been on this one. I slowed the '57 Chevy down and tried to see through the light fog and rain. Rita and Tate kept putting their heads out of the car window, yelling, and letting the rain fall on them. Up ahead I saw an ancient railroad underpass and I slowed the car a bit more. I would need to turn slightly on the dirt and gravel road to make it through. When I moved the steering wheel, the car drifted some. It could not have been more than a foot or two. The '57 did not hit the underpass, but I knew immediately that something horrible had happened. I could hear everyone screaming in an awful, inhuman way. It felt like it was raining inside the car, a flood of sticky liquid. I turned to look and Rita's headless body was shaking like a hideous cartoon character. A long and rusty steel bolt jutting out from the railroad trestle had taken her head off as she stuck it out of the car window into the rain. The smell of death was everywhere. It smelled like dirt and vomit and spoiled buttermilk. The amount of blood was unbelievable. I could feel my senses shutting down and the onset of deep shock. I stumbled out of the car and pulled Cynthia with me. I tried to turn back for the others, but I simply could not. I started walking down the road to get help, although what help could do now I had no idea. I do not remember how long it took me to get to the nearest farm, the Rackow place. They went for the telephone as soon as they saw me. The next thing I remembered was waking up in the almost perfect white

of a hospital room.

“Everything seemed unreal. I could not focus my mind and I actually wondered if I was dead. Some flashes of the accident would come back to me, but only as gruesome fragments. Finally, a nurse came in to check on me. She took my blood pressure and my temperature and smiled weakly at me. 'How long have I been here?' I asked. 'Three days,' she said. It was hard to believe. I remembered none of it. After she left, El [Rick's mother, Elwin Roderick] came in. I was glad to see her. She explained to me how I had almost died from the shock, how the other kids were still in the hospital too, and how we would be getting out in the next day or so. I tried to follow what she was saying, but it was very hard. 'She's dead,' I said. 'Yes, son, she is,' El replied. I began to cry quietly and for a long time. Finally, I was still. 'When is the funeral?' I asked. 'Tomorrow morning,' El said. She knew I would find a way to go, so she did not try to argue with me. The doctors may have felt the same way too, because I was released early enough in the morning to make it to the funeral. Rod [Rick's father] brought me a black suit borrowed from Tim Kelley and it almost fit. I dressed carefully and then walked out on my own. The early morning air was cold on my face. Had the seasons changed while I was gone? I looked back at the hospital, speckled with lights in the predawn dark. I felt shaky, so El helped me get in Rod's truck. We drove in silence away from there and down to the highway and back toward Buffalo Gap.

“It was a graveside service and half of Taylor County was there. I stood away from the crowd, but I could feel people looking at me. I did not see any of the other kids from the accident, but I did see Mickey and Sharon. They walked up to me and stood on either side like guardians. I wanted to say something very quietly to them, but I could not. The Baptist preacher from Abilene said a prayer and the music began. It was a single bass voice, singing 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...' I could see the lovely young girl's family crying. Her mother was inconsolable. It was cold that morning and all the voices made trails in the air. I shivered inside deep. 'That saved a wretch like me...' I wanted to hide from myself and from the world. The song trailed away and the preacher began. He explained how God let things happen for reasons that we did not understand but that it was all for the best in the overall scheme of things and how we would learn from it and go to heaven. Everything he said was absolutely crazy. Did anyone actually believe it? Did he? The words made me angry and I wanted to tell him how nothing in this world or out of it would ever make up for the horrible death of this young girl. I wanted to say how I would rather be dead myself than carry the guilt of having killed her for the rest of my life. But I did not say anything. I could not even cry. I looked up, but the sky was empty.”

The closing sentences of the book, entitled *Bury Me Not*, belong equally to my father as he was and to the mythology he encouraged and inspired. In the narrative, Martin Luther King Jr. has just been killed:

“I was alone the night of his death, because I did not want to be with my new white friends, the Yankees, and I did not have the right to be with my new black friends. I did not have the right because I had not fought hard enough or long enough or bold enough. Not yet. And so the dead call to the living and lay their claim upon them.”

Rick Roderick's unfinished account of his own life closes there, in the middle of April, 1968, with that suspicious non-sequitur. The rest of the story is up to the living to set straight.

I am Rick's youngest son, and was five years old when he was denied tenure at Duke University and the administration informed him he would not be asked to continue teaching the following year. My father's lectures had been recorded, and were released nationally on cassette tape by The Teaching Company. They were selling well. Rick's book on Habermas had been warmly received by philosophers and was published in five countries. When Rick lost tenure and his teaching position, he found that these achievements meant little for his future prospects.

Without the security of tenure, an academic philosopher must live an itinerant and unreliable life, teaching for hire at the pleasure of any institution in need of lecturers. Rick, then in his forties, had four sons to support. He'd put in about a decade pursuing Duke's tenure track, and starting over elsewhere was practically impossible. Shortly after the firing, Rick returned to his old friends in Texas and took my brothers and I with him. It was in Texas, just after the turn of the century, that he would die.

After the death of Rita Shull, my father writes that he "pushed [his] unschooled mind as far and as fast as it could go and still, felt lost," beginning the inquiries that would eventually lead him to his profession. *Bury Me Not* gives the impression that my father was a boy who wandered too far and too fast one night, driven by his own hand from a world that made firm, youthful sense to one that had no direction and no meaning. "It was too late," he wrote, "there was no road back."

Rita was buried in Buffalo Gap by her mother, father, and siblings in May, 1966. Rita's mother lived to see all her children die, and nobody whatsoever remains of her family line. My brothers and I remain for Rick, at least, as do a community of devotees influenced by his philosophy. Rick believed that the horrifying tasks of life can be made most bearable by the conscious and casual exercise of reason, and many people have since agreed.

Each of us owe something to that fourteen year old girl and to that accident in Buffalo Gap. To the nagging pains that outlive whatever we learn, whatever we love, until the pain itself becomes our only solid foundation for living. If there is any commonality among Rick's followers, it is some version of this essential wound. Rick's death defined my character, and Rita's death must have been a large part of his. History, in the words of T. S. Eliot, has many cunning passages.

Mickey, the boy who stood beside Rick at Rita Shull's funeral, had been close to Rick since early childhood. They paid for the old Chevy in which she died and built it together, piece by piece. Buffalo Gap in the early sixties was a brutal community and Mickey was one of the only kids willing to protect Rick from abuse. My father wasn't bullied in the modern sense; he endured beatings. Once, after his white family invited a trio of black baseball players to visit and play in their league, someone even shot Rick's dog through his bedroom window in the middle of the night.

*Bury Me Not* contains a recollection of a hunting trip Rick and Mickey took together:

"That December, Mickey and I borrowed a couple of Winchester Saddle Guns, rounded up a week's worth of provisions, and went deer hunting. Our parents thought we were old enough not to shoot each other and that seemed to be the primary issue. Mickey's dad provided the horses, if you could call those two swaybacked nags horses, and we left for the hill country of Lemons Gap, twenty or more miles from town and from school. We had both been hunting with Mickey's dad before, but this would be our first

trip on our own. Rod did not like hunting, so he took us fishing. Although we had caught plenty of fish and killed squirrels and rabbits and birds, neither of us had our first deer. So this trip was a kind of necessity and we truly enjoyed the riding and the camping out and being on our own. We took two days to get to the higher country and we took it easy on our horses, riding them slow and feeding them generously and often. We would stop at dark and camp. We would build a fire to keep the cold away and lay our ropes around the camp on the dubious grounds that rattlesnakes would not crawl over them. We would talk until late into the night and sometimes just sit and look at the sky and say nothing for hours. I would get up in the morning and throw a few small branches on to restart the fire and then cook scrambled eggs and salt pork and potatoes all together in our skillet. Mickey would make the coffee, strong and black. We would eat enormous amounts, sit back, and smoke the Camel cigarettes Mickey brought along. It was a great feeling. Some snow came on our third night out, and by the fourth it was white and icy cold in Lemons Gap. We were close to prepared for the weather, but we decided it might be best to tie the horses carefully and go start up Devil's Hill and make ourselves a deer blind. So we did. We sat nervously in the little stand of limbs and branches and looked out for deer crossing down into the Jim Ned Valley below. The first one came at ten o'clock or so that morning. Mickey could not get a good shot from the far-left side of the blind, so I waited and got ready. He was a beautiful animal, almost beyond description, with a tall and proud eight-point rack. I felt a dizzy sensation, which I recognized as what they call 'Buck fever,' some primal reaction to the mere act of killing the innocent. But it was not overpowering and so I shook it off and looked hard at the movements of the deer, almost still and less than eighty yards away. I leveled the rifle and used a tree branch to steady my hand. I fired and hit him heart high, killing him almost at once. The sound of the shot echoed in the hills and some snow fell off the branches around us. I was silent and I could hear my heart beat. Mickey scrambled out of the blind and said, 'You can shoot, son.' We dragged the deer down almost to our camp and it took both of us to hang his carcass in a crooked mesquite. 'You clean him. I am going to go back and try to get one,' Mickey said. I cut the deer's throat with my Buck Knife and let him bleed out. I filled my coffee cup with some of the blood and sat it by. Mickey's dad had showed me how to field dress a deer and I followed the routine he taught me as closely as possible. I stripped his skin, cleaned out his stomach, and packed the cold snow inside him. I used the snow to clean some of the blood off myself. It took me a long time and I remember it was late afternoon when I heard the report of Mickey's rifle followed quickly by a second shot. I went up the trail until I saw him. He had his deer. We brought the second one down and field dressed him together. Mickey saved a cup of his blood, as I had. We finished just as it was almost too dark to continue. The next day we would drag the deer down to Silver Valley, only a few hours away, on litters made Indian-style from tree limbs. Mickey's father would come to get the horses, our kills, and us. But that night, we pulled out the steaming cups of deer blood and the snow hit our faces and we drank down the spirit of the deer, if you happen to believe in such things, and it was warm and very salty. We cut a small line in our palms with the Buck Knife and shook hands, blood brothers and fellow killers.

Rick went to college at the University of Texas at Austin. It was there, attending a lecture by Herbert Marcuse, where he would discover critical theory and begin his studies of philosophy qua philosophy. According to Tom Zigal, another of Rick's close friends (the book on Habermas is dedicated, in part, to

him) there was a bit of graffiti in the bathroom of one of the campus bars, called the Hole in the Wall. It read:

“Everything in Texas either bites, burns, stings or breaks your heart”

It is with this quotation that *Bury Me Not* begins.

I grew up in Austin and visited the Hole in the Wall in my early twenties. I was with a girl I barely knew, trying hard not to be bored, and the stalls had no answers for me. My Texas was no longer the place circumscribed by my father's mythology, yet that quotation is the same sort of romantic thing I would have said about it myself when I was younger. In this way we are alike, though I went to Middle School in suburbia while he was drinking down the spirit of his kill.

Rick loved quotations. He used his computer to play clips from movies before even the sites that prefigured YouTube were invented. Most of his favorite quips were taken from westerns, and it was never out of place to hear him respond to his unruly children with the words of Kurt Douglas or Gregory Peck. This is a story of quotations. I've tried to let you in on the context as much as possible, but there's a hell of a lot of it.

*Bury Me Not* bears a subtitle: “And Night Fell Over Texas.” Rick's sky may have been empty, but his soil was full. The state, for him, was a hardscrabble land of limitless fascination: a territory whose natives, no matter their race or their profession, were bound together by a slow and almost Grecian doom. Rick's response to this fatalism was always off-handed and sardonic. One of his favorite phrases to repeat was “Life sucks, and then you die.” Even die-hard optimists must admit to this caveat.

Joanna Newsom, in her song *Emily*, promises a loved one that she will commit the difference between meteorites and meteoroids to memory. Because of the song that fulfills that promise I too have memorized “that the meteorite is the source of the light, and the meteor's just what we see. And the meteoroid is a stone that's devoid of the fire that propelled it to thee.”

Emily, Rita, Mickey – Rick. These were the sources of light. I can only tell you what I see.

## Part 2 The Self Under Siege

My father holds a well-deserved reputation as a teacher of philosophy. He is best known for three lecture series released on video and cassette tape by The Teaching Company in the early 1990s. Today you can listen to them at RickRoderick.org, a repository of information about Rick, his philosophy and his termination from Duke.

The site was started and is maintained by a man named Chris Laurence. Laurence never met Rick himself. He just heard the lectures, and wanted to transcribe them for his own reference. Without him, without the site, I would never have been able to listen to my father in the exercise of his profession.

In the final part of *The Self Under Siege*, Rick's series on twentieth century philosophy, he discusses the intellectual vertigo produced in human beings as they rush deeper into the information age. In this purgatorial state, the major obstacle between humans and reality is not a lack of information, but an excess of it. I am bombarded by information, little of it useful, and the result is a muddled existence staggering between lies, half-truths and scraps of propaganda. It is never clear whose truth we are consuming, or for what reasons it has been offered.

Take that quote from *The Hole in the Wall* as an example. In their college days, Tom Zigal would take Rick and my mother Irene to that bar to listen to his brother Frank play folk songs. They did it almost every weekend. They shared the graffiti then, but it was Tom who remembered it, and suggested Rick use it in *Bury Me Not*. I do not know who wrote that little poem about Texas or where they got it from, but I can give you a personal genealogy of its quotation, a record which must now necessarily include this essay. The current state of mass media turns everything into that sincerely read graffiti; a chorus of quotations put to various uses by obscured authors; words robbed of invention, of person. "Everything in Texas either burns, bites, stings or breaks your heart." In these words I feel both the necessity and the burden of heritage.

Twenty-First century humans no longer live on reality's ground floor. To even get a glimpse of reality we must sift through and decipher so much information that by the time we discern what is "real," it is often no longer particularly relevant.

Rick took on the task of boiling down western philosophy to its most significant, critical, and above all, useful ideas. I found each one relevant in my own life. My father's ideas pushed at the boundaries of my understanding, and I am not the only one. Rick was a captivating speaker and writer, a skill he considered paramount, and cultivated with purpose. Knowledge, for him, was useless if it could not be shared, and his greatest talent was in sharing knowledge in the form of a story that was always compelling, whether it dealt with our best, worst, or dullest natures.

In the first part of *The Self Under Siege*, Rick raises the possibility that the path towards self-definition in the information age has reached a level of complexity that makes it impossible. Rick gives the example of the JFK assassination. Our record of that event, compared to historical events preceding it, is thick with new complexity and superfluous detail. It took one lucky bullet to start the first World War, but even that uncertain war began with certainty as to who pulled the trigger. Kennedy died in a hail of singular gunfire; surrounded by spooks and button-men, patsies and Cubans. The only thing approaching truth in the whole affair is a car's upholstery, pink with misplaced brains.

The British comedian Stewart Lee is flummoxed by this overload as well, although his case study is less violent. In the eighteenth century, said Lee, the number of published books was small enough that a man could conceivably read them all. So someone did – a polymath named Thomas Young. Young, Lee says, "read all the Shakespeare and all the Greek and Roman classics and all the theology and all the philosophy and all the science." His modern equivalent, however, would have to read "all Dan Brown's novels, two volumes of Chris Moyles' autobiography, *The World According to Clarkson* by Jeremy Clarkson, *The World according to Clarkson II* by Jeremy Clarkson, *The World according to Clarkson III* by Jeremy Clarkson...

"In short, the man who had read everything published today would be more stupid than a man who read nothing."

Which cuts right to the heart of the matter.

Rick first talks about information overload in terms of our personal narratives, what we think of our own journeys through life. He gives the example of a Native American living in a traditional tribe. Such a man didn't have a lot of choice concerning his ultimate identity. A hunter was a hunter, a priest was a priest. For this imagined primitive, there was no need to figure out what it meant to be a priest and why it was important. The modern man by contrast, is racked with doubt. According to Rick:

"This is not cartesian doubt, you know, this isn't doubt brought on by an evil genie who makes me wrong to my clear mind, no, we doubt in a different way now. We doubt that we could know enough about the big picture to even make sense [of anything]. I mean that's why, you know, one of the battle cries of these lectures will be to 'just make sense', because that will be very difficult to do. Because we will be doing it in a situation in which there is way too much to make sense about... Even our purest motives get caught up in these systems."

This is coupled with the idea that our intellectual pursuits, at least in the American vein, have become deflationary. This is now self-evident. Proof can easily be seen in the artifacts of our generation, which always emphasize self-actualization over understanding. In *Seige*, Rick quotes the anti-foundationalist philosopher Richard Rorty. His article "The World Well Lost" seemed to Rick a prime example of intellectual decay. According to Rorty, any problem that has been around for 2500 years and remains unresolved is necessarily and correctly met by the modern person with the answer: "I don't care."

To Rorty the practice of philosophy was always a selfish one. He was looking for a philosophical replacement for God, but discovered that one could not exist for him. From then on he devoted himself to convincing others to stop chasing absolutes, saying in a 1992 paper "There is no automatic privilege of what you can get everybody to agree to (the universal) over what you cannot (the idiosyncratic)." In a sense what he argued for was the pointlessness of rigor, the emptiness of accomplishment.

Rorty ended up being right. No universal knowledge remains for my generation, all of our agreements, our "truths," are understood to be idiosyncratic and malleable. Solutions are temporary – but the problems persist. All of our problems, in point of fact, seem to have gotten worse at astounding speed since Rorty's views entered the zeitgeist. Under this influence, what good is philosophy? What good is anything other than pleasure and self-confidence?

In another lecture, focusing on Derrida, Rick articulates a response to this lack of resolution:

"Derrida's noticed, as one could hardly fail to notice, that the history of Western metaphysics has been filled with the attempts to answer the question "Being is \_\_\_\_\_" and to fill in the blank, and if you follow the history of Western metaphysics; Being is the demiourgos. Being is God, Being is whatever is uncovered by the empirical sciences, Being is this, Being is non-existent, whatever we have tried to fill in the blank with we have not yet reached closure. That's why I said that philosophy is a funny endeavor, it has a 2500 year history of failure and yet it continues. So obviously it's not quite in the spirit of capitalism to engage in this enterprise. That's a long time to run a failing business; 2500 years..."

That's the first thing we notice, that you know, the history of philosophy has not yet presented us with final wisdom, total coverage and ultimate truth. We know that, so that's step one... Deconstructive readings try to work this out in detail case by case. You

know, different attempts to answer it, and how they failed to answer it. And so deconstructive readings are not a single technique, or even a special set of techniques; they are more like housework.

“See, philosophy is not like building a house, where you start with a firm foundation and build it up and you are finished and you walk off and that’s philosophy. Philosophy under the heading of deconstruction is housework, which means every day the floors have to be swept again, the dishes have to be done again, and I’ll be damned, the next day its just like that again, and its just like that again, and its just like that again... That is at the heart of – I think – the best of philosophy in the late 20th Century... the idea that it’s not getting finished and it can’t be.”

The noise of modernity makes it easy to see questions of self as distant from the practical necessities of life. To continue living without studying that living we construct simple selves capable of surviving the onslaught of context: gamer and troll, activist and reader, Democrat and Republican. The work is too difficult, and since there is no longer any pretense of reward for solving life's complexities, the contemporary person is encouraged to adopt lives defined by jobs, tastes, and demographic ranges. An authentic self is just as good as any “identity,” any combination of imaginative narrative and costume which may be easily bought, abandoned, modified or commodified for a variety of obtuse social or political ends. To quote Rick again:

“We have life changes now, and they have become... not changes in our life – for example, to give you... to show you the distance that we have traveled – not like Augustine's conversion to Christianity when he hears, or thinks he hears the voice of God saying 'tolle, lege' – 'take, read' – and he reads the scripture and becomes a Christian and then he is a new man. He is born again. No, no, no, that’s over now. Now we change, alright.

“We change rapidly. We change, as I said, professions six or seven or eight times and we change who and what we are the way we used to change our clothes and our fashion. I mean, there are kids now who get through college and they are six different people before their junior year. Two months as a bohemian. Two months as a pre-med student. Two months as a preppy. Two months as a poet. A month and a half as a journalist. A month and a half as an ecologist... None of it felt. None of it part of *affect*. A fad. A personality formed as a fad, as a fashion, as an ornament. I mean, this really doesn’t overstate the case for me.”

What Rick couldn't foresee was how society would develop minute stations to support these fads. On the internet we can legitimize and actualize our illusions, and crucially abandon them as easily as they are created. This makes it very difficult, I think, to maintain real loyalties, or to work hard to become the sort of person you want to be. When everything travels in waves, there's no reason to build houses. The foundations serve no purpose, the tools abandoned.

This view of society isn't the whole story, though. On a personal level, between individuals, we are not so fickle or so gullible. What society does, even in private, is cast doubt over the entire enterprise of culture. It makes it seem more transitory, more useless than it actually is. Often, it makes all of our hopes and ambitions futile. In the words of Bukowski, “When the final hope goes, there remains but a



staring at the dance and a watching of the feeble intercourse of the idiots, with very little note-taking.”

My generation doesn't live beneath Rick's empty, Godless sky. We live beneath a sky so full of Gods that they have become mundane and meaningless. Our heritage collapses by the generation; my grandfather had America, my father had Texas, I have my father – what could my children possibly receive?

### Part 3 The Claim of the Living

It was one week after Christmas and two weeks before my birthday when Rick died. Our house had burnt down the year before, so we were living in an apartment barely big enough to hold Rick, myself, and two of my brothers. It was the middle of winter break, and the family was up late playing a card game. In the middle of the game we received a phone call – I'm not sure from whom – to tell Rick that Mickey had passed away. I didn't know who Mickey was at the time.

After that call we left the game on the table. Rick went to bed, my brothers and I went outside, and our guests went home. I don't remember the rest of that night, just whispered conversations that could make no dent against the fact of Mickey's death. I do remember being woken up by Rick early the next morning. He drove me across town to the campus. He was supposed to teach that day, and he needed me to run in and tell his class it was canceled. I don't know how much Xanax he took that morning, or why he couldn't just call the campus. I was too young to ask questions. Along the way he kept passing out in traffic, drifting off into other lanes. At the time I was scared to death. Obviously something was wrong with him, but I had no idea what. I was just a passenger. Somehow we made it home alive, and I fell back asleep.

The atmosphere in the house for the rest of the day was too quiet for comfort. No matter what I tried to do to pass the time it felt wrong or disrespectful. We got a call in the afternoon from my mom Irene, who had recently moved back to Austin to be close to us. My older brother Travis answered the phone and talked to her for a bit before trying to wake up Rick so they could talk about Mickey's funeral. I don't know if I was already in the room or if I only came in when Travis started shouting. I don't remember much about the next two years. Some flashes of that day would come back to me, but only as gruesome fragments.

I remember the tarp they laid his body under. A clinical yellow plastic not quite covering him. I remember a stain on the carpet, and I thought it was blood, but where would it have come from? He had congestive heart failure, they said, or a hole in his heart, where it was fat instead of muscle. I never really asked, and I never saw his death certificate. A counselor tried to talk to us in the house while the crew cleaned up the body. I didn't hear a word she said. Words were useless then, as I think they're useless now. What could I possibly say that would convey any of the reality of the situation? I remember looking down, and crying.

We held a service on our own at the park across the street. I didn't recognize everyone who came, and all I can recall are vague impressions of what they said. Some of them played songs, and I remember especially listening to Frank Zigar, brother of Tom, play “Bird on the Wire” by Leonard Cohen. To this day I associate it with my dad. “If I have been untrue, I hope you know, it was never to you.” I picture

him saying that to me, as if the words were his. Don't worry, I know. I don't exactly forgive you, but I understand.

Almost the whole time I was conscious of my father he was on Xanax and Prozac, drifting in and out of life at random, something less than the stories he told. I've seen friends become addicts of every description, and I know what happens to a person. Looking back I can't say I have any idea how closely the Rick I knew resembled the Rick he had been at Duke University, or at Frank Zigar's shows, or in Buffalo Gap.

Rick began to die at Duke, when he was denied tenure in 1993 and essentially fired. It was the same year that *The Self Under Siege* came out on tape. Those who remain romantic about his history claim that there was no reason for the firing at all, while more practical people point to the fact that he didn't publish as much as he was expected to. The student paper at Duke published a handful of stories about it:

“On the tenure issue, Roderick said tenure at the University is not given on the stated qualifications of published research, good teaching and community service.

“Some administrators argued that Roderick had not completed enough research in his field to receive tenure. Roderick claimed that, while research works nicely for the Medical Center, no one can research philosophy.

“Roderick said that research is plagiarism and simply means 'writing books with lots of footnotes.'

“Roderick said that if students want to protest his departure, they can try to force the administration to reverse their decision. Otherwise, he said he will teach next year at a school in Compton in Los Angeles where he will teach adults who have lost their jobs. He did not speculate as to his future plans after that.”

One of Rick's associates, Doug Kellner, got him a few seminar gigs at UCLA, and he accepted a position at National University, where he was told he would be helping working class people get their degrees. This was little more than a con-job, however: they wanted to legitimize themselves using Rick's name and reputation, but didn't care what he taught, or if his students learned anything at all. Duke and National University represented opposite sides of academia, and neither of them saw teaching as an important part of Rick's identity.

Being rejected by Duke isn't what separated Rick from his potential success, it was only a symptom of his disillusionment. He had considered teaching his life's calling, and thought that he had been earning respect for his skill. Duke and National in turn demonstrated that Rick's effect on the student body and their experience meant nothing compared to his effect on their own reputations. They did not serve humanity; they fed off it. They fed off him. So Rick gave up.

My mother left him shortly thereafter, but my three brothers and I remained in Rick's custody. We settled back in Austin in 1996, where he taught Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Texas and Austin Community College. It was in Austin that he died.

I'm sitting alone in a diner writing this just about seventeen years after Rick's death, thumbing through

his copy of T.S. Eliot's selected poems. Lately his death feels more recent. Each day that goes by brings it closer.

I've carried Rick's Eliot with me everywhere I've gone since I first read it and added a few notes to the ones Rick kept in the margins. I lost both the covers somewhere along the way. When I first picked it up I had written more poems than I'd read, but I remember the influence of poetry from a young age. I had a teacher in third grade who encouraged us to memorize couplets throughout the year. The last of these was the entirety of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost. It was a challenge I enjoyed, and a poem I can recite from memory to this day.

When I was a child, I recited it for Rick. When we were driving through the neighborhood one day he brought that poem up in conversation and started to recite it. Wanting to impress him, I interrupted, finishing the verse. He listened, then critiqued my performance. It was a strange and bemusing moment between us. That may have been my first real piece of artistic criticism, and I received it as a mark of respect.

In *Bury Me Not*, Rick wrote:

"I would run to the bus with a copy of Robert Frost's poems stuck in my catcher's mitt. I was a big fancier of poetry at the time and I remember winning a blue ribbon at school for reading 'Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening' aloud. I loved the way the words made me feel, as though very simple things could be important, and all that little secret life packed into this strange New Englander I would never know."

Rick was always supportive of my writing. Most children, at least of my generation, could have counted on the unconditional support of their parents in this endeavor, and there's a part of me that says Rick was simply a man of his time. There's another part, however, that thinks he could never shut down his critical faculties and give empty praise, even to his kids. Whatever the case may be, a few years ago I went through what remained of his old notebooks, and found some lyrics he wrote when he was twenty that were eerily similar to poems I wrote when I was fourteen. A rhyming couplet in a verse that never ends.

One our favorite movies was *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. There's a scene when Big Daddy has just found out he's dying. He says to his son Brick, "This was what my father left me, this lousy old suitcase! And on the inside was nothing, nothing but his uniform from the Spanish-American war. That was his legacy to me! Nothing at all!" But that's not the end of the scene. Brick helps him to see that a man's legacy is more than just the offal he leaves behind.

Whatever else he did with his life, Rick kept us with him. The man is dead. Perhaps the myth of the man will remain for a while longer, like Big Daddy's. I look over these pages and think, "who gives a damn? Who's going to care about any of this?" when so many of us seem not to give a damn about ourselves. I look at myself in the mirror and repeat the question. I know at least one person did. I reckon I never loved anything as much as that lousy old tramp.

I've listened to all his lectures now. I'm laying my claim to his death. To his remains. To his story. When I was younger, I had a huge collection of quotations, mimicking my father's. As I've grown into this society, in which there is no longer culture, only the quotations of cultures past, they've started to

disgust me a little.

Will the husk of information I leave behind offer anything in the generations to come? Is the thought of posterity completely pointless in Rorty's world, where heritage is merely an obstacle to invention? Is there anything to hope for – anything to fear?

The lines are fading in my kingdom. Rita is dying. The baptists in Abilene recite their mossy platitudes. Above their scrap of history, only an attitude remains. Amazing grace? All uselessness! I have seen her head [no color any more] brought in upon a platter.

Squint skyward and listen – everything in Texas either burns, bites, stings, or hits you heart high. He would not see me stopping here to watch his cup fill up with blood. If you wish to protest the firing, I'm sure she's heard it all at least a hundred times before. I have tried in my way to be lifted enough to see a beam of your sun, which banishes Winter. Let us go

then, you and I. See the sun blotted out from the sky, for which I cannot hold you totally to blame. Dumbstruck with the sweetness of Being, 'til – The dishes have piled up, the floor is carpeted with dirty clothes. Miles to go before –

Where was I? Thieves and fools, picking at this worried mind of mine! An obnoxious odor of mendacity, to prove our almost-instinct almost true. I'm so utterly lost, without you – –

Just make sense.

The last thing Rick said to me, in his final lecture, some seventeen years after his death, was this:

“For now that’s all – except be sure and fear death. I mean, that’s important to being human. Fear death and realize that even if you don’t smoke, and even if you jog, you are still going to die... that should come as a great relief to all of you.”

And in short, I am relieved.