

Here are all the letters, which number over a hundred, that I wrote to my mother between the time she suffered a serious heart attack and her death. Also included are the letters she wrote to me. There are only a few of them because, at my request, most of her news came to me over the telephone.

Letters to My Mother

From May 5, 1999 to
September 9, 2001

michael hunter

Contents

May 5, 1999	1
May 10, 1999	2
May 28, 1999	3
June 6, 1999	4
June 13, 1999	5
June 20, 1999	6
June 27, 1999	8
July 4, 1999	9
July 11, 1999	11
July 18, 1999	12
July 25, 1999	14
August 1, 1999	15
August 8, 1999	17
August 15, 1999	19
August 22, 1999	20
August 29, 1999	22
September 5, 1999.....	23
September 12, 1999.....	25
September 19, 1999.....	26
September 26, 1999.....	28
October 3, 1999	29
October 10, 1999	30
October 17, 1999	32
October 24, 1999	33
October 31, 1999	35
November 7, 1999	36
November 14, 1999	38
November 21, 1999	39
December 5, 1999.....	40

January 10, 2000	42
January 16, 2000	43
January 23, 2000	44
January 30, 2000	45
February 6, 2000	46
February 13, 2000	48
February 19, 2000	49
February 26, 2000	51
March 5, 2000	51
March 12, 2000	53
March 18, 2000	54
March 26, 2000	55
April 2, 1999	57
April 9, 2000	58
April 16, 2000	59
April 22, 2000	61
April 30, 2000	62
May 7, 2000	63
May 14, 2019	65
May 21, 2000	66
May 28, 2000	67
June 4, 2000	69
June 11, 2000	70
June 18, 2000	72
June 25, 2000	73
July 2, 2000	74
July 9, 2000	76
July 16, 2000	77
July 23, 2000	78

July 30, 2000	80
August 6, 2000	81
August 13, 2000	83
August 20, 2000	84
August 27, 2000	85
September 3, 2000.....	87
September 11, 2000.....	88
September 17, 2000.....	90
September 24, 2000.....	91
October 8, 2000	93
October 14, 2000	94
October 22, 2000	95
October 31, 2000	97
November 5, 2000	98
November 12, 2000	100
November 19, 2000	101
November 26, 2000	102
December 3, 2000.....	103
December 10, 2000.....	104
January 7, 2001	106
January 14, 2001	107
January 21, 2001	108
January 28, 2001	110
February 4, 2001	111
February 11, 2001	112
February 24, 2001	113
March 4, 2001	114
March 10, 2001	115
March 18, 2001	116

March 25, 2001	117
March 31, 2001	119
April 8, 2001	120
April 15, 2001	121
April 23, 2001	123
April 29, 2001	124
May 6, 2001	125
May 13, 2001	126
May 20, 2001	128
May 27, 2001	129
June 3, 2001	130
June 10, 2001	132
June 17, 2001	133
June 24, 2001	134
July 1, 2001	135
July 8, 2001	137
July 15, 2001	138
July 22, 2001	139
July 29, 2001	140
August 5, 2001	141
August 12, 2001	143
September 2, 2001.....	144
September 9, 2001.....	145
To My Dying Mother (September 11, 2001).....	147
Letters from My Mother	148
April 7, 2000.....	148
June 6, 2000	150
July 26, 2000	151
September 14, 2000.....	151
January 27, 2001	152

March 25, 2001 153

Letters to My Mother

From May 5, 1999 to September 9, 2001

Here are all the letters, which number over a hundred, that I wrote to my mother between the time she suffered a serious heart attack and her death.

May 5, 1999

Dear Mom,

Am settled in new place. Very content. Quiet. Hardly a stone's throw from old place yet different surroundings. I'm very close to a Portuguese church and a canal.

Had opportunity to take room in downtown Hull on the main drag (Rue Eddy). Decided it would be better for me here. Same proprietor owns both places. Transplanted Frenchman called Albert. Real gentleman. Has his finger in a few pies here.

Yesterday spent day cleaning mountain bike. The one I bought last November and used all winter to get to the University of Ottawa. Certainly needed the cleaning. Stripped it right down and regreased and repacked the bearings. Today I'll do the same with my road bike which I bought some fifteen years ago in Winnipeg and is still in good shape. It's much faster than the mountain bike.

My room is a bit bigger than last one. It also has a fridge, a hot plate, and a sink. So more self-contained, more private. All my problems at the last place originated in the kitchen. Rather dangerous place when confronting irrational people like I had to do – with knives, hot things on the stove, and so on.

Have my affairs now pretty much in order. Changed my address at the university the other day. Also did the same with Student Aid. Now I can get back to some serious work on my thesis.

I like this part of Hull even though it's shabby. (However, there signs of redevelopment and renovation.) It has a certain character I didn't find in that part of Ottawa (Sandy Hills) where the University of Ottawa is. Living in a university dominated community is really not to my taste.

Students have gone home for summer where they no doubt have free places to stay or at least ones at minimal cost. Around the university there are a lot of signs up for subletting rooms and apartments. Here in Hull, lots of vacant rooms because there are far less students looking for them and only a few being taken by temporary government workers. Frankly, I think this place remains undiscovered by the university crowd. In winter, however, the distance poses a problem unless you're hardy enough to ride a bike, in which case it only takes fifteen minutes.

Tremendous weather last few days. Hot and summery. Now I guess we could do with a thunderstorm. Air dusty.

I don't know exactly when I'll be able to use a phone. Bell Canada technicians on strike. Need a jack in my room. A lot of people in these rooming houses rely on pay phones to avoid charge of installation.

I hope your strength is coming back. Must be very boring always having to stay in the apartment. I know you get a lot of visitors, but you're still not able to get out and enjoy the fine weather.

Well, I shall leave shortly to do my chores and, once they're out of the way, I'll be able to get back to a serious regimen of study. The break was welcome because it gave me a chance to come up for air, to get my nose out of the books, to take life more easily for a while, and to see things with a new revitalized eye. Of course, as soon as I get a phone, I'll give you a call. Until then, I'll keep you informed by letter. Don't feel obliged to respond. You'll only be repeating what you tell me over the phone. Bye for now.
Love, Michael

May 10, 1999

Dear Mom,

Had a stretch of very warm days but now it's cool. I'm settled into my new place but been bothered by stomach pains. Appetite is off too. Don't feel all that strong and energetic. Maybe stomach flu, but I just got over a bout some two months ago. Different kind perhaps. Well, I hope it goes away.

Attended conference at university today. World's largest French-speaking get-together of scientists and academics. Every year it's at a different university. Lasts three days. A couple of fellow students presenting papers tomorrow. Will attend if I feel up to it.

Have met most of my fellow tenants here at 15 Rue Bagot. One young man is from Ivory Coast (Africa). We get along very well. He's a lawyer now ready to begin an MBA program. Will take him fifteen months. At the present time, he's studying English and maths. Has a definite philosophical turn of mind. In fact, I find it more enjoyable talking with him than most in my department. There, everything is specialization and professionalism. Something gets missing.

The African guy's name is Gilles. He speaks French better than English. In that part of Africa where he grew up, French is the first language. But it's not his maternal one. There are many different languages in a relatively small area, so French is the language these people use in common. Of course, this is one of the happier legacies of French colonialism.

Across the hall from me is a guy called Paul who works as a cleaner at the University of Ottawa. Seems like an alright guy in a rough sort of way. His room smaller than mine. Full of girlie pictures. Just recently his friend's mother died, so he drove to some out-of-town place for the weekend.

Took a couple of days to clean my two bikes thoroughly and regrease them. The mountain bike which I bought in November and the Miele road bike which I've had now about fifteen years. I look after them because both have done me royal service.

Two of my friends have asked after you. Puqun Li (pronounced *pooch-in-li*), the Chinese guy who's also a PhD student in philosophy at the University of Ottawa and Pablo, my Spanish friend, who sends me a message every so often via Hotmail.

I'm presently warming some chicken soup on my hot plate. Try a little supper. Can't eat much. Sit here, farting like crazy. Wish I had a medical book to check up on flatulence.

Looked at weather map for Canada in newspaper. See you've had cooler weather than here.

Still haven't got phone. Already told you about strike. Hope it doesn't drag out too long. Only good thing about it is not paying for the service.

Working hard doing thesis research. Will easily keep me busy all summer. I find it interesting, but I've still got a lot of reading and note taking to do. Imagine! I'm forty-eight years old and still don't know whether I'm cut out to be a scholar!

I'll end here. Already it's a letter full of chatter. I'd like to keep a stream of them coming to you. Helps me and perhaps you too. *Love, Michael*

May 28, 1999

Dear Mom,

Early Saturday morning. Just finished breakfast and smoked my pipe. Looks promising outside my window. Blue sky, birds chirping noisily. Hope it warms up today. We've been getting cooler temperatures than normal since the middle of May.

Working hard, as usual. Have letter written and ready to send to Paul Ricoeur. He's the French philosopher, now up in years, whose work I'm studying and will centre upon in my thesis. Since the letter is written in French, I had to get it looked at and corrected by others. I think it's near perfect now. Professor Feldspar, my thesis director, will have one last look at it on Monday. Then I'll send it to two different *maisons d'éditions* that publish Ricoeur's works.

I don't go to the university that much now. No classes to attend. If I do go, it's just to use the library or computer room. Received an email from Pablo recently (Hotmail). Says he won't be in Strasbourg, France much longer. Will go to England for a while to be with his girlfriend, Miriam. Then the possibility of getting a post at his hometown university as professor. As a joke, I told him the standards for being a professor in Spain must be lower than here.

Professor Feldspar expects my thesis proposal defense to come up in June. Still not sure what day exactly. Administration moves slowly. Will need at least a week to prepare for it. The objective of the thesis proposal defense is not so much to challenge your work as to make sure it's on the right track. Nevertheless, I would like to be well prepared. You're expected to give a short presentation, answer questions, and perhaps meet some objections. It's not something to take lightly.

Case in point: There's a young man who's a student in the doctoral program called Jody. He's built like a brick shithouse. (He lifts weights.) Jody, although only twenty-eight, has been in the program for five years and, for five years, continued to delay on the thesis proposal defense. Moreover, it looks as if he'll never do it. What happened? The professor who was his thesis director lost faith in his project. Abandoned him, and so has the administration. The fate of those who don't play the game.

He may have to go somewhere else to finish his degree, but It's not easy to get into another program unless you have excellent references. Talking to him, one gets the impression he's been left high and dry. It can be cruel if they think you're a fool or simply someone who doesn't tow the line. *Love, Michael*

June 6, 1999

Morning. I haven't heard from you for a while. I trust you're improving and have been able to get outside a bit. Otherwise, it cannot be a very happy time for you. I'm actually afraid to pick up the phone and find out how you are. I've always been like this. My spirit doesn't move well in such waters (i.e., where sympathy and concern are what's to be expected and expressed). My failing, I grant it.

Just a day or so ago, my friend from the Ivory Coast, Gilles (who, as I mentioned, is a fellow tenant) left to plant trees in Whiteriver, Ontario. This place is a long way off, closer to Winnipeg than here. I'm somewhat familiar with the place, given that it's on the No. 17 Highway, the Trans Canada Highway, that stretches across Ontario. The Greyhound bus always makes a short stop there for people to have a coffee or take a smoke. Or maybe it's a meal break. Anyway, Gilles is there to plant trees, part of the reforestation project the big lumbering companies undertake every year to keep their good name. It is sub-contractors that do the planting. Each May they go about the universities recruiting students. Period only lasts a couple of months. Gilles is late in getting started. He'll only have about a month of work. The work is very hard. You get paid eight cents for each seedling you plant. So, this means planting a lot of seedlings to make some decent money. Experienced planters do well enough. They can plant up to two or three thousand seedlings per day. For inexperienced planters, it's quite another story. I'd be tempted to go there if I wasn't so busy with my thesis. Anyway, I saw Gilles off. He's thirty-one and in good shape. He obviously needs the money.

He told me he's having a problem getting his savings out of the Ivory Coast. The government only allows you to take so much money at any one time, and he has to supply receipts for large purchases and tuition fees. The economy of the country is obviously very weak and fragile. I lent Gilles a hundred dollars so he could buy his ticket. I hope he makes out all right.

I sent my letter to Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher whose ethical theory I'm dealing with in my thesis. I thought I had it in perfect French. At least, my thesis director looked over the final copy and okayed it. But, later, I received another copy I'd sent to Madame Letocha, the Graduate Student Program Director, and she found more mistakes. In short, I sent off the letter too quickly.

In the meantime, I continue to study and prepare for my thesis proposal defense. The announcement could come any time and then give me only a week to make the final preparations. I'm actually taking a break from reading texts to write down and clarify my thoughts. I use a question-and-answer format. I ask myself questions and answer them. It gets me to the heart of the matter and forces me to consider objections.

I'm still reading the book I mentioned to you over the phone, the one written by a fellow student in the PhD program, Sebastien Charles. He's the one with the beautiful, gracious wife, Syliane. I find the book very good, a mix of monographs and interviews with a handful of contemporary French philosophers.

Some of them have become celebrities and go on talk shows on French TV. Of course, this runs up against criticism, this popularizing or vulgarizing of philosophy. No doubt there are two ways of looking at it. On the one hand, it does take it out of the ivory tower of Academia and place it before the public. On the other, it often becomes slight, trivial, trite, fashionable, and ostentatious.

It's certainly different for me now than it was exactly a year ago living in residence at the university. I was in Leblanc Residence with Pablo (good old Pablo!) two doors away and lots of other interesting people like Charlie, the thirty-something-year-old Inuit who made soapstone sculptures and was studying law in Montreal. He was anxious to go back to James Bay to do some hunting. Or this East Indian professor whose name I've forgotten and who was a visiting professor at the University of Ottawa teaching economics. Nice guy but bit of a dork: he was always drooling over the skimpily clad Ukrainian girls in the kitchen. (Maybe I was too but not so blatantly.) And, of course, there was the Ukrainian horde which hit us around the beginning of June last year. One of them, Vica, a bright twenty-two-year-old girl, I made good friends with. She had such a lovely Russian accent. (Russian is her first language.) Almost every day she'd go with the others to the Parliament Buildings. There they would do odd jobs in the MPs' offices. Vica told me she learned more about Canada from me than anyone else. Like the others in her group, she was a political science and economics student.

So, that should do for now. You can see I'm straining for things to write about. Still, what I just spoke of happened not too long ago – it's quite vivid! Monica Lewinsky last year on TV. Now Kosovo. Last summer I watched TV in the common room of Leblanc Residence. Now I'm in a little room without one.

Love, Michael

June 13, 1999

Sunday morning. Very hot outside. Sunny. It's been like this for a few days. Beach weather. I run by a little postage stamp of a beach every day when I follow the cycling path along the river. Yesterday it was well populated. I myself haven't used it. I run instead, in the 30 degree-plus weather, right by and through the bathers and sun worshippers. Beach part of a little park. Playground and school close at hand.

I just finished writing a letter to Sebastien Charles, the student in my program at the U. of O. who has already got a book published. Quite an accomplishment! It contains interviews with several prominent French philosophers, some of whom do TV appearances. Told him more or less I think his book is a marvel but none of the philosophers he interviewed. I'll leave the letter in his mailbox at the university. I have to go there tomorrow morning.

Fellow I know is defending his master's thesis. It's about an American philosopher, but, because he's a francophone, he's written the thesis in French.

The days pass by so quickly. It seems like I just sent off my last letter to you. Of course, I'm always very busy: reading, reading, and more reading. I'm trying to get as much done as I can this summer. I think I'll be in a good position to start the writing of the thesis come September. This would put me on course for finishing the program in a year, making it three altogether. Most people take four or five years to finish.

Professionally speaking, there are advantages to prolonging the program. One then has more opportunity to get things out and published. To get teaching experience. To pad the good old CV. Which reminds me of a saying repeated to me at Leblanc Residence last year by the visiting economics professor from India: *"No longer do we hear the proud boasting about past victories but merely the weak whimpering of a resumé."*

Last night I took my usual walk around Hull. Went through a part of the old section where I live towards the Museum of Civilization. An impressive edifice directly across the river from the Parliament Buildings. From the outside one, can look into the museum. It has windows which run up the whole building. One can see, for example, the Haida totem poles within. And on the river behind the building small boats and sometimes excursion craft with music and boisterous revellers. The music carries a long way down the river. And two bridges, one near (Alexandra Bridge) and one further off (MacDonald-Cartier Bridge). When I see them, I can't help but be reminded of the bridges destroyed in Belgrade by the NATO bombing. What an inconvenience for the people!

Already problem with the peace forces: who's in command over who. The Russians want their independence. This definitely will be a stick in NATO's wheel. The Russians are largely sympathetic to the Serbs and NATO certainly can't risk getting in a tiff with the Russians. This would raise things to an extremely dangerous level.

A very badly managed affair, but once the NATO countries got involved, they'd no real choice but to see it through and along the lines they'd set out. This is to say, bombing the country and leaving the UN out of the picture. Now the UN is presumably in the picture. This is one of the concessions the Serbs wrung from the NATO countries.

I keep thinking about how the quality of your life has changed with the heart attack. As if you'd been in a serious car accident! The loss of your incredible vitality and mobility! To think what you were planning to do this summer! And how I'd already the image in my mind of you staying on campus and bounding about in your usual high-spirited way. A remarkable feat that you managed to keep it up as long as you did. Most people have faded long before they hit their late seventies. I just hope your recovery turns out to be more than a prolonged hope.

Speaking truthfully, I'd rather see you living ten more years with some appetite and verve than twenty without. I know no other way to express it. Let others think that prolonging life is the ultimate goal. In my mind, if there's no longer the enjoyment of life, there's no reason to dread a good sleep. *Love,*
Michael

June 20, 1999

Dear Mom,

Time passes. Tomorrow longest day of summer. It's Sunday morning. Has become my regular time to write you. It's cool outside, though sunny. Has been so for a few days. Listening to some classical music. To think that John Sebastian Bach produced all his great music while raising a family of twelve children! And to think that two of his sons later became famous composers in their own right. In fact, they even

eclipsed their father while they were alive. But posterity has decreed Bach senior to be greater than they.

I received a reply from Paul Ricoeur, the world-famous French philosopher. It came amazingly fast since I'd posted my letter only ten days before. That's the good news. The bad news is he hardly said anything. However, if one tries, one can wring out a note of encouragement.

Dear Monsieur,

I appreciate that you're exploring the heroic dimension which you notice is absent from my theory of the ethical self. One cannot do everything.

Best wishes,

P. Ricoeur [My translation]

There it is! Short and sweet! It came on a white card, hand-written, and very hard to read. This guy's in his mid-eighties and yet he still keeps on top of his mail and in touch with his past work. My thesis director was pleased I'd received this response. Many years ago, while studying in France, he had Ricoeur on his thesis committee.

I put in another week of hard work. My thesis proposal defense should be coming up shortly. Not only have I read a good deal and taken notes, but I've also put down some of my own thoughts.

I've expanded my walk recently in the evening. Now, instead of staying on the Hull side and following the river, I cross the Alexandra Bridge and follow the river on the other side. Underneath the Parliament Buildings there is part of the old Rideau Canal with a section of locks. It's a historical site with all the structures built before Canada was even a country. I walk further along the river till I hit another bridge and cross back to Hull. It's certainly much more visually interesting now. Around the university it's rather bland and nondescript.

I received an email the other day from a fellow who stayed at Leblanc Residence last summer. His name's Greg Rose, and his first name suits him – he's quite gregarious. He's doing his PhD in waste management. Last summer he was working temporarily for some government agency that helps countries with this sort of thing. So, Greg had an opportunity to visit Palestine, Jordan, etc. and consult with experts involved in environmental projects. He showed me some of the film he'd shot with his camcorder. I remember seeing a big reservoir full of weeds that live on waste and are periodically harvested and used to feed livestock.

Wow! Was my last phone bill ever big! Over two hundred dollars! Owner gave me thirty dollars towards the line and sixty-five dollars towards the jack. I thought he was going to pay the whole of it.

I'm finally getting new glasses. Bifocals. Should be ready by next week. Over two hundred dollars. Eyes getting rather tired doing so much reading. Sometimes it's hard to focus.

I think that should do for now. Is it still cool in Winnipeg? Some prefer it not too hot. There was one day about two weeks ago it got really hot – 33 degrees and equivalent to 43 degrees with the humidity factor. I nearly wilted while running at noon.

Read in the newspaper that, according to statistics, crime rate is considerably down in Hull. Apparently, some ten years ago, it had the highest rate in the province. *Love, Michael*

June 27, 1999

Dear Mom,

Day after your phone call. Morning. Sunny and hot. Have already done a bit of work. Still early. Just put on some Tchaikovsky – old tape of mine from taxi days. Using radio cassette recorder that Gilles left with me before he went to plant trees in Whiteriver. He should be coming back shortly. It'll be interesting to hear how it went.

I'm busy trying to finish the presentation for the thesis project. The standard procedure is to spend fifteen minutes outlining it to the members of the committee before answering their questions. In truth, they received a formal outline several weeks ago, so the presentation is somewhat redundant. (But it does function as refresher and ritual.) I'm presenting it in a self-applied question-and-answer format which, although not usually done, should help to focus it and get to the point.

My allergies are driving me crazy! The other day I was sneezing for hours and my nose running like a faucet. Finally, I thought, maybe it isn't my allergy, maybe it's a cold. In any event, the next day it was much better.

Usually I recognize my sneezing to be a cold if I go outside and it persists. When it's only an allergy, it stops. I seem to be sensitive to indoor pollutants such as dust, mold, mites, and mildew. Certainly not pollen or anything like that.

God, the summer's flying by! I'm stuck in a routine I basically like but still yearn for the little extra: the chance encounter, the entrancing person, the elevating mood or moment. I'll die a romantic, or, if not, then this is just one more romantic longing.

Haven't been going on my walks of late. Still run every day, even in the infernal heat. One of the few who does. Haven't used any of the local beaches even once. No pleasure there by myself. Run by one every day. Little postage stamp of a beach. Sometimes gets pretty crowded. There's another one close by I haven't visited – old quarry like the one in Bird's Hill.

Listen to this! In order to get your appetite back, why don't you try pot? What've you got to lose? It works for a lot of people who have to take medication. I'm sure Earl could get you some. You could try it as an experiment, but, of course, I don't think the doctors would approve. They'd rather fill you up with prescription drugs.

Anyway, the idea comes to me from Philip, a young man who's a tenant here and works as a carpenter's helper. He told me his mother committed suicide when he was nine years old. He doesn't seem to have

many thoughts or feelings about it. She must've been a little older than Sharon when she died. And speaking of Sharon and her sad ending, it'll soon be ten years.

I'm getting somebody at the university to help me translate a Spanish text. We're doing a bit at a time. Actually, right now I'm translating it into French because the woman who's helping me doesn't speak good English. So, I translate the text into French before checking it with her. She's not a professor but works in the philosophy department doing administrative stuff. (She's been there for twenty-five years.) Her husband is from El Salvador and Spanish is the language they speak at home. (They have two daughters.) It's amazing how quickly I'm starting to feel at home in it. Of course, I still have to use the dictionary, but a number of words are close to French or English.

Canada Day coming up. Big affair here. Last year went out with Pablo in the evening. Huge crowd around Parliament Buildings. Could hardly move. Then fireworks. A good healthy display. Then home. Leblanc Residence. So easy for me now to picture Pablo's handsome, friendly face. In his last letter, he invited me to come to Europe. He told me I'm always welcome. He told me his brother Alonzo is anxious to race me again. Alonzo is his older brother whom I met last summer. Twenty-nine and a policeman. Very nice but more serious than Pablo. But once you get to know him, he's quite friendly and personable. Anyway, we went running together a few times along the Rideau Canal. Alonzo a bit stronger than me but not by too much. A former athlete. Ten thousand meters. But now he smokes and doesn't run that often. That's what equalized it between us.

I would dearly love to visit them in Europe. Maybe get a university job there – it'll sure as hell be hard here! Have to practically kiss someone's ass for a position. *"No longer is there heard the proud boasting of former victories, but the weak whimpering of a resumé."*

So, that's it for now. Remember what I said: a few tokens might do wonders. *Love Michael*

July 4, 1999

Dear Mom,

Today very hot. Humid. Going to above 30 degrees. Now it's almost 11am. Of course, thinking of Sharon. Ten years ago it was very hot too. I visited Carla and Earl's factory that day July 4, 1989. It was Monday and you were in Vancouver visiting your sister. Later in the afternoon, I got Carla's worried call. Sharon, she told me, hadn't shown up for work. She wanted to check on her, so, she picked me up shortly thereafter and we drove to the house on Campbell Street.

Gilles still hasn't come back from Whiteriver, but it could be any day now. He owes me a \$107. After working this long, he should be able to pay me off.

Canada Day! Didn't go into Ottawa. Not even for the fireworks. Can see them go off from Hull anyway. It was raining heavily before it let up some. Then fireworks. Then storming again – nature with its own fireworks on display!

Nurses still on strike. Talking about bringing in an arbitrator. Forty-seven thousand off. Puts the government in a tough spot. What do you do with all of them? Right now, they're supposed to be getting fined hundreds if not thousand of dollars each day.

No, not a good time to be sick. Lots of noise outside the hospitals. Stupid fools blowing their horns! You would've loved that while you were in, wouldn't you?

Pretty soon, I'll start doing some research at St. Paul's College. Beautiful library there. Catholic. World famous. Used to be part of the University of Ottawa. Now a theological institute. They've lots of stuff on Paul Ricoeur, so that should keep me busy for a while. I don't see why I shouldn't finish my research by the end of summer. Maybe I'll be able to write my thesis during the fall and submit it by Christmas. Then wait three months or so for defense. I'm sure I could keep busy doing something I've failed to do up to now, namely, publish some articles.

I noticed the cool weather is persisting out West, especially in Calgary and Vancouver. Not at all the same here.

Yesterday I sneezed and sneezed. My nose was running from morning till night. I pretty well used up a box of Kleenex. Today I'm okay. It's weird! I've never gone to the doctor about it. Some people, I hear, get hooked on antihistamines. Can't live without them. But it's such a nuisance with this allergy. It's hard to imagine working in an office day after day like this. It'd look pretty stupid using up a box of Kleenex.

Running seems to relieve it. At least, it did for a while yesterday. But then it started again. It's always just a ticklish feeling in the nose. Never blockage of nasal passages or coughing.

I sometimes imagine myself driving a taxi with my PhD and \$25,000 in debt. Better get out of here after the third year.

But I work like the devil and always try get the best out of myself. For me, this means being an original thinker and not just a scholar.

I've already written out a presentation for that thing I'm supposed to do (i.e., the thesis project defense) but still don't know when I'm doing it. I'll certainly be prepared or, let's say, I'll have no excuse for not being prepared. It's good to periodically stop all the reading and research and take a few days to formulate one's thoughts. It helps to give a clear direction.

Yes, I'll go out shortly. It's very hot and sticky. My little fan whirring away pushing around the warm air. Outside noise of the Sunday traffic. Soon I'll be on the bicycle path along the river. Lots of cyclists and people on rollerblades. I can outrun some of the pokier ones when they go uphill.

Yes, Gilles will be coming back soon. I'm sure he'll have had lots of practise speaking English, but I'll continue to speak French with him so I can get better.

Now I'm not sneezing. What a relief! Thank heaven for small favours! It's a veritable plague to have to reach for a Kleenex and blow every thirty seconds.

Not much but chatter in this letter. What do you expect from somebody who lives alone and whose thoughts are of interest but to a handful of people?

I cannot believe how the time has gone by. In some respects, I resent and resist it. Vain hope! We're carried along whether we like it or not. Dylan Thomas, the English poet, well understood this as well as the difference between being a child and being an adult. "Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea." *Love, Michael*

July 11, 1999

Dear Mom,

Here we are another Sunday morning. Cool this time. Something like the weather you were having. It's sunny out though. Did have some heavy rain recently. Even some destructive storms around Montreal. Very high winds bringing down big trees. One young man killed in his tent by falling tree.

Spoke to both Aunt Olive and Aunt Jane after talking to you. Not much to report. I just told them what I've been doing to date. And their lives run pretty uneventfully. "*Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream . . .*" (This was one of the songs I listened to over and over again when I was a child and swinging with Carla [We had two swings in the basement.] of our Chambly bungalow. Others were "Clancy Lowered the Boom," "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling," and "Let the Rest of the World Go By.")

Gilles is back from Whiteriver, Ontario. Do you remember I told you he went tree-planting for a month? Very hard work. Many people quit. Many students, most inexperienced. Lots of girls, some better workers than guys. More endurance or expertise. Little camp of about sixty people. Isolated. Get to know everybody practically the first day. Everybody friendly, welcoming. Like a war zone with nature as the enemy. Insects are ferocious. Everybody sleeps in pup tents. Common kitchen and dining area under large tent. Very good food, but you have to buy your own stuff like shovel, tent, sleeping bag, etc. Still, Gilles was happy to have the experience. The most he planted was three thousand trees in one day. But just to give you an idea: there was an old Indian guy in his sixties who could plant five thousand trees per day. Shows the difference that experience makes!

Still waiting for my thesis project to happen. Trouble getting third member for the thesis committee. Two outside professors approached but both begged off – perhaps scared off. My approach to Ricoeur is somewhat irreverent, so, if a scholar happens to be big on Ricoeur, as was the case with at least one of these professors, he might feel threatened. (Scholars, generally speaking, aren't "heroes boasting of past victories.")

The other day I was running and, all of a sudden, I came upon a young deer, calmly munching some grass and standing not more than twenty feet away. It just continued to look at me as I stood there, and, even when a young woman whizzed by on roller blades, it didn't budge. I imagine it's been fed when visiting some backyards. How else to explain it's almost complete lack of fear?

Summer whizzing by now, approaching mid-July, and often I think of past summers where I'd been. Like Europe, for example. June 1976, northern Germany. A month in Kiel with some German girls I'd met in

Paris. The nudist beach. A bit of a romantic affair with one of them. Sailing on the Kiel fiord which hooks up to the North Sea. Practically a whole month there. Free place to stay in the room of one of the girls who went home for the summer. I was only twenty-four then but still a student of life. And now I'm double that age and even more of a student. As if I were living a life turned completely around!

After Kiel, I moved west towards Holland. Stayed with my friend, Joy, in Amsterdam for a while. My second visit there, I'd first visited her in February when I'd just come over from England to the Continent. Very nice, very gentle, very hospitable young woman of twenty-seven. Later, she wrote me after I'd returned to Canada and, to my great surprise, told me she was a lesbian.

In Paris I climbed the Eiffel Tower while Karen and Barbara, the two German girls who I visited later in Kiel, stayed below. I paid to go only two-thirds of the way up. However, they still looked very small when I peered down and waved at them. Later, after I came down, we strolled off, each girl taking me by the arm.

My state can be described as one of perennial dissatisfaction. Even in Europe it was no different. Things don't stay at the same high level. There is always a falling off, a falling away, a dying of one thing and the birth of another.

By and large, people were good to me throughout my trip. And yet I was always expecting something bigger and more exciting. Expecting more from myself too.

So, here I'm using this opportunity to outline some parts of both my life and myself. Besides being a romantic, I'm also incurably egoistic. But save these documents, Mom. They have a certain style to them. I can plumb things better than most. Honesty always drives me to see things as they are, including the less attractive parts of myself.

You sounded much better and Jane said the same. She also told me you'd been taken off some of the drugs. That's good news, indeed! *Love, Michael*

July 18, 1999

Dear Mom,

Received your check. Thanks very much. Just paid my tuition fees for the summer. Thirteen hundred dollars! A lot of money considering I don't get many services now – just library and computer room. It made a sizeable dent in my bank account. And I've been tardy in sending out my application for a loan (yet another one). Still should be no problem. It's just that I'm going ever more deeply into debt. That's why I'd like to finish off this program in the coming year (my third). Lucky are those who get scholarship money! And had I not run into serious problems at Concordia, perhaps I would've been in line for one. With respect to publishing articles, on the other hand, I'm not anywhere on the map.

Gilles is back, as I told you. He still owes me money. A bit slow paying me back. However, it's true he did have to wait a week to get his check processed and the money put into his account. I didn't realize it took so long. A bit of an embarrassment for me because I chastised him for his delay. A certain way he

was acting made me think he was being negligent. However, now he's paid off the bulk of the loan and I can only hope he makes it a point not to drag out paying the rest. (He also owes me a few dollars for making a long distance call.)

Very hot and humid the last few days. The equivalent of 40 degrees. Still, I go out running at mid-day. It doesn't seem to affect me, I've grown used to it. Others, of course, would never think of doing such a thing. But, actually, it's not as bad as trying to work in an overheated room. Fortunately, I can keep my door open and another door immediately close to it which leads to the fire escape, so there's movement of air. Plus I have my little fan going all the time. Gilles doesn't even have a fan and usually has the door of his room closed. It's rather messy and not as bright or airy as mine. Yet he himself is always dressed neatly, much more than me. Very fastidious with his personal appearance and yet – it's funny! – so uncaring about the room!

The same routine of working every day. Still no word on when my thesis project defense will be. At this rate, it may not take place till the beginning of the fall semester. By God, I certainly should be ready for it! Every day I add to my notes and the number of articles and books I've read. I also periodically take time to organize and write down my thoughts. Whether this effort will be appreciated or not remains to be seen.

I like the look of my bifocals or, actually, the frames. If I had the money, I'd get a second pair only as regular glasses. I don't need to wear the bifocals except when I'm reading or writing. The rest of the time, they're a nuisance.

Just read in the newspaper that Alberta got snow. Amazing! In the middle of July! Here we're the furthest thing from snow.

So, you went to Sharon's gravesite with Carla, Gillian, and Ezra. I remember us going there shortly after Sharon died. Or was it the year after? We stopped at Gerd Lohre's house for some reason. Perhaps it was just a question of a visit. Anyway, he's no longer with us either. (The list is starting to add up.)

I recall those days when she was alive and present in this world. All the ordinary concerns – nothing particularly dramatic. At least, everything on the surface was so. The way it is with everyone, struggling with various tasks and responsibilities. And the time devoted to leisure, to family, to friends, to honour, so to speak, all the good things of life. But all the time something at work relentlessly below. Something that most of us manage to keep away. Which we prevent from breaking out onto the surface. Her line in the letter never sent to Dad: *"Yes, I've finally realized that life is UNFAIR!"*

A metaphysical judgement. A person, perhaps, who wanted a loving God but, for various reasons, couldn't find Him. A super-sensitivity to the barrenness which the modern world presents to us. *"Is that all there is?"* Her life, after all, was far less trying, outwardly speaking, than a good many others. This is what makes me think it was a spiritual crisis, though not one she ever articulated. For, perhaps, if she could've done that, it would've been better. Things wouldn't have been quite so horrifying, so relentlessly dark. But she sought the comfort of darkness finally as if the horrifying had always been her secret love, the unadmitted attraction.

I'm glad to hear you're progressing – getting on and so forth. It's good Carla's in the city. What a difference this makes! I remember thinking a long time ago, when she first hooked up with Earl, that she'd soon be lost to the family. How wrong I was! Nothing could've been further from the truth! Mind you, if they'd continued to live in California – well, that's another story. *Love, Michael*

July 25, 1999

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Promises to be another hot day. And another day of work for me ahead. No let up. The more I read and study, the more seems to be still ahead of me. In a way, it's kind of depressing. Knowledge of what and for what? Maybe too much knowledge. One thinks one has a better idea about something. One wishes to cultivate it, develop it, and perhaps win over others to it. Perhaps a desire for power in the end.

Had an experience earlier this week while running. Up ahead of me a young woman on a motorcycle ran into a pickup truck backing out of a driveway. I didn't actually see the accident, but I heard it and then looked up immediately and saw the results. I was still a couple of hundred yards away, so I picked it up and shortly was upon the scene. Young woman in her early or mid-twenties. Quite conscious but her leg badly injured just above the ankle – broken, I suspect. And what's more, the flesh stripped completely from the bone. The driver, a big fellow, was pacing about nervously in shock. Ambulance was on the way. The woman gave me her husband's phone number at work, and I called him from a neighbour's house just after the ambulance arrived. It took them about fifteen minutes to get her properly fixed up before putting her in the ambulance. Oxygen, splint on her bad leg, stretcher, etc. By this time, a few people had gathered. Then the police arrived. I imagine the driver of the truck wasn't too happy because he was at fault for backing so quickly onto the road. A dangerous manoeuvre but not so different from what many of us do when in a hurry.

Time flies. Summer flying. And I don't think I've ever spent one that was more given to books. In Montreal, after the first year, I spent the summer largely cycling around the island and the South Shore. At that time, I didn't have an idea what I was going to do for my master's thesis. It's fair to say that getting the right idea is half the battle. So, during the summer of 1995, I did some writing on my own as a kind of therapy. Asking myself, "Where are you going? What're you doing?" It's what I needed at the time. (I'd had such a dismal year after getting into a serious fight with one professor, crossing swords with a second, and harshly criticizing a third.) I was still trying to find out whether the game was worth the candle. In philosophy, there's a kind of thought only a minority share which is essentially anti-philosophical. It's characterized by cynicism and scepticism with regard to looking for absolute truth or knowledge. I certainly have strong tendencies in this direction, and no doubt I'm always trying to come to grips with them.

It would be nice if I could take two weeks off and go on a cycling trip to Montreal. Visit Mr. O'Connor (the old family friend of ours from way back) and some others, if they're still around. I lost my phone book, so I'm missing some numbers. However, there isn't much summer left, and I'm still waiting for my

next student loan. Don't want to be caught short for the rent. Well, we'll see. I might just decide at the last moment. (That's usually my way.)

Gilles is a bit distant nowadays. I leaned on him a bit for my money. Anyway, he used to drop by my room almost daily. It has crossed my mind he might be gay because he seemed to want a level of intimacy beyond what's normal or, at least, what's normal for me.

There's another fellow here, Gilbert, who has a room down below. Forty-five-year-old welfare bum, but he's alright most of the time – friendly and agreeable. But I made the mistake of talking religion to him twice. The last time we almost came to blows. Believe me, the guy actually thinks he has the last word on such subjects as the Bible, Christianity, and institutionalized religion. While denouncing all varieties of the latter, he becomes very belligerent, dogmatic, irrational, and long-winded (not to mention tiresome and repetitive). In short, he's a fool and I'm a fool for trying to carry on a serious discussion with him.

He had it all, didn't he? And then he got a little careless and it was all taken away. John-John (John F. Kennedy Jr.) I can't help but think being a jetsetter is far removed from where I am.

My walks in the evening – very beautiful around the river. I see lovers, couples in the dark. I'm envious, but I know it's illusory. They're just happy moments in certain lives, not the lives themselves. And yet it seems all the world has known love and I've missed out somehow. Yearning for romantic love, *Eros*, as if I were still in my twenties. Have I departed from them? My face shows it – more than my body. Now, I wear bifocals and peer over the top of them like other old folks. And yet, I've hardly known a day of ill health in my life.

So much for my meanderings. You can see what an egotist your son is. He who, as some might say, hasn't really accomplished anything. (Doesn't have nice career, wife, home, children, etc.) Oh, maybe I'll end up with a PhD degree. For what, I'm not sure. *Love, Michael*

August 1, 1999

Dear Mom,

Morning as usual. Bright and sunny. Has been quite hot lately. Today cooler though. Bit of a relief. Nice fresh breeze running through my room. Clouds skipping by in the sky. Now we're into August. One more month before the fall term starts. One more month before I'll have been in this region two full years and one full year in Hull.

Incident the other day at the university. I'd just gone to the library to take out some books. Then I decided to lie on a bit of grass not far from it. About four in the afternoon it was – hot and sunny. There were some Chinese pre-schoolers playing around in the area. It was amusing to watch them at their games. My books were in my packsack. I was dressed comfortably in those red shorts you gave me, a white T-shirt, sandals, and baseball cap. I hadn't been lying on the grass more than ten minutes when two security guards, both young men, came up. One addressed me, asking questions like: "Is everything alright?" and "Are you a member of the university faculty?" Of course, I answered yes to the first and no to the second. Then he asked me a second time if everything was alright. This time I answered a bit

impatiently by saying I was enjoying the summer day and would appreciate his leaving me alone. Then he asked me to produce some identification. When I wanted to know the reason, he merely answered he was doing his job. I then told him I didn't have to show him ID. However, he informed me that, not being a member of the faculty, I would have to leave the campus. The fool didn't even think of asking me if I was a student. By now I was angry and so, pulling out a notepad, I asked him for his name as well as his boss's. Next, I showed him my ID while his partner looked on like a member of the goon squad. Remember, this was all happening in broad daylight in the middle of a public space. People were going by left and right. After he was satisfied with my ID, he said, "Have a nice day!", as if by now it hadn't been ruined. Then he and his cohort took off.

The next day I went to the office of the Graduate Student Association and told the Vice-President what had happened. I also told him I'd sent a registered letter to the Director of Protection Services calling for an explanation. I was pissed off, of course, because the security guard didn't supply me with a reason for having singled me out. But I can certainly guess what some of the reasons were. First of all, that I'm in my forties and don't fit the image of the typical student. Second, that there were young children playing in the immediate area. Third, that I wasn't in motion, doing something, and not even reading a book but just looking around at others. However, none of these reasons were, of course, strong enough for them to state openly.

So, I'll wait and see what kind of response I get. A relatively minor incident but I still want to hold them to account.

Best thing that can be said is that it shakes up the humdrum, day-to-day business of life. When I related this incident to the woman who works in the philosophy department as a student advisor, she told me a rather funny story. About three years ago, there was some trouble about mysterious fires being lit in the washrooms of the Arts Building and other buildings. Of course, the security people had to investigate, and they told this woman and others who worked in the building to be on the lookout for anybody who was acting suspiciously. Well, this woman told me that, when you're given such an instruction, practically everybody looks suspicious. Nevertheless, she did spot one fellow outside who was lurking about and oddly peering through windows. When she told a security guard about this, she was promptly informed it was another security guard who was on duty but not in uniform. But that's not the end of the story. The security people were dead certain it must be somebody with a key. So, they suspected a member of the cleaning staff. But the woman asked, "Why just the cleaning staff? Why not one of your own?" The security guard immediately assured her this wasn't possible. "Oh no, it can't be one of us!" he said. "We're all highly screened!" About a month later, the story broke in the local newspaper with the headline: "Mysterious Fires on Campus Caused by Part-Time Security Guard."

I read and read and always there's something more I should read. What a way to spend a life! Reading more intensively and for a longer unbroken stretch than I've ever done! Well, after all, it's a PhD thesis, right? It's supposed to be something special. And I want mine to be extra-special. I want no holes in this effort.

I'm taking books out of libraries from two universities: University of Ottawa and Carleton University. Pretty soon, I'll start looking at books in the library of a third university, St Paul's. They have a fairly large number of books on Paul Ricoeur. It's a beautiful library, like a seminary, but you can't take the books out. You have to read them there.

The dog days of summer! People dying in the United States because of the heat wave! And another madman who, in Atlanta, Georgia, kills twelve or so people – including members of his family. Ticking time bomb! People don't see it or don't want to see it. Feeling his impotence, rage. The imagination at work. Murderous towards those who succeed, who can't bring him succour. Who perhaps condescend to him. It doesn't matter. What matters is the final show of force, mastery in the world, however murderous, however fleeting, and not really to achieve anything but this.

Pan-American Games in Winnipeg. Must be good for the taxi business. I wonder if that young lady from Chile I met almost a year ago in Leblanc Residence is at these games. She's the champion table tennis player of her country. (She hated it when I called it ping pong.) She's already competed at the Olympics in Atlanta. She told me she would be in Winnipeg for the games.

Enough for now. I hope you're getting out a bit more. Nicer there now, isn't it? *Love, Michael*

August 8, 1999

Dear Mom,

Mid-morning. Dull and cool outside. Just had some rain. The seasons seem to be already changing. Much cooler this last week. Have already done some work this morning. Started an essay which Paul Ricoeur (the French philosopher I'm working on) wrote some twenty years ago. In fact, he presented this paper at – would you believe it? – the University of Ottawa. And I just came across this bit of information quite recently. The article is among a collection of essays that were published as a book. And I also noticed that one of the people involved in Ricoeur's address at the University of Ottawa is Professor Geraets, a semi-retired professor here. I don't know him too well, but he is nevertheless one of the members of my thesis committee. The others are my thesis director Professor Feldspar, Professor Denis Dumas, and Professor Danielle Letocha.

The way things are going, it looks like I won't be doing my thesis project defense, which is the first formal step of the thesis project per se, before September. In the meantime, I'll have gathered together over a thousand pages of notes, so I shall be adequately prepared.

Still no word from the security people. You recall, two security guards made it their business to investigate me in broad daylight and in an open place on campus by asking me to show ID. I'll be interested to see how they handle my complaint. If they don't answer in the near future, I'll fire off another letter to these stormtroopers.

Not much to report about this past week. Just the usual stuff – reading and note taking. I sometimes wish Ricoeur hadn't written so much. I still have one major work of his to finish and a few essays. This should be all that's necessary, for the most part. Then I'll concentrate on people who've written books

on him. Already I've looked at a number of journal articles – but looking at full-length books on his life and work, a number of which are in St. Paul's library, will definitely be the next step.

Should be getting a new loan shortly. Woman from the Student Loans Office phoned me the other day to ask me some questions. So it's getting processed rather quickly. That's good because I was late in applying for it.

Soon I will go out to run. It's amazing but I've grown so used to running daily that I actually experience both a physical and mental craving for it. This would be incomprehensible to a lot of people because they generally associate it with pain and boredom.

And to think that the knee I injured skydiving some twenty-eight years ago has never given me trouble. Or, to be more precise, not beyond the first year in which it was slowly healing. How lucky I was to have the doctor I had – Dr. John Hazlett, who later ran in Kingston as a Liberal candidate for the federal government and lost to the Conservative, Flora MacDonald. I wonder if he's still practising. He not only operated on me once but twice. The second time after I got into a fight in that dive called The Grand Hotel (it was anything but grand) with a roughneck called Kenny Arlie. He'd also beaten up on Dad, believe it or not, but this happened before I'd come to Kingston. A short fellow but powerfully built. A friend of my other rough friend there, Carl Whitmore, who'd at one time been president of the Kingston chapter of the Satan's Choice Motorcycle Club. Certainly a different company from the university set.

I can still see Dad sitting in one of the beverage rooms, a big pitcher of beer in front of him, smoking incessantly, and sometimes playing bumper pool on those small tables they had in the Lasalle Hotel (another dive). Seemed little enjoyment in the whole business, just the proverbial escape. No plans, no projects, nothing. Or if they came, they were ephemeral things with little or no follow-through. And for some reason he loved crime detective magazines. You know, those magazines with a lurid picture on the cover of a half-naked woman who's been murdered. Trash! I don't recall him having any worthwhile books in his apartment in Kingston. No *Books of Knowledge* and *Books of Popular Science* like we grew up.

But I feel lucky we were exposed to such things while growing up. Like in Chambly – how different from Dad's life in Kingston! How much he'd lost! Chambly in my mind now seems almost idyllic by comparison. What was missing? Why couldn't he hold things together?

It's time to go out. After 11am. Rain has stopped. After running, I'll come back and have lunch. How little my condition has changed over twenty-five years. I live alone in a small place with books as my main companions. I live ascetically, for the most part, but as a voluptuary in my imagination.

So, I've almost filled up my four sheets of foolscap. Not much to report, as I said. Have to stretch back over a life to fill up these pages. Otherwise end up with commonplace pronouncements. I try to avoid them. *Love, Michael*

August 15, 1999

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Cool but sunny. Feel a change of seasons already. A few yellow leaves on the tree outside my window. Blue jays have already arrived from North. In Winnipeg it's the same thing. They always arrive in August. Their raucous cries unmistakeable. I remember those cries when I was working for the Lohre brothers. Usually I'd start back with them in late August or early September. And ninety per cent of the time we were working on houses in the suburbs: Westwood, Charleswood, River Heights. It was all quite pleasant. Small company and you get along with everyone -- you enjoy their company. Humble life, to be sure. Then I still had the dream of transforming myself into a great artist, so I could assume the labourer persona or identity without difficulty. The dream was always in the background as my link to another one.

I received a response from the head of the security at the University of Ottawa. You recall, I was lying on a grassy area on campus some three weeks ago when I was approached by two security officers who, after some inane pleasantries, asked me to present my ID. Later, I wrote a letter to the Director of Security asking him to clarify their policy. Well, I received the letter and it was polite and respectful, but, ultimately, it appears the security can make these spot checks. They just don't like to advertise it. I suspect it's infrequent and they certainly don't like to mistake students or any other respectable-looking person for street people who periodically wander onto the campus. Being almost smack downtown, the University of Ottawa has more problems with them than isolated campuses like Carleton. Later, I talked to the Assistant Director on the phone. I told him I sympathized with what his people were up against, but, all the same, I would think twice about relaxing on the campus grass in future. (Ironically enough, he encouraged me to do so.) By the way, hardly anyone I talked to knew about this power invested in security officers.

Presently involved in restructuring the outline of my thesis. I handed in an outline with my thesis proposal many months ago. Now I'm dissatisfied with it. A complicated business but it's got to be right. What I'm doing is difficult and I shouldn't make it more difficult for other people, particularly the members of my committee. So, I'd like to get a new outline into their hands before the defense which, by the way, should take place in September.

I feel like I'm involved in a major philosophical work. Am I deluding myself? I know I've done this only too often in the past with respect to my playwrighting. How many years I spent writing and rewriting drafts, calling them finished until it dawned on me what I'd written was largely shit. I doubt whether anybody with so little talent has worked so fiercely for so long with so little encouragement. From the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven to the age of forty. Imagine! All those years and with so little to show! Of course, I'm talking strictly about playwrighting. After all, I did go to university part-time and led a reasonably decent, fruitful life. If it hadn't been so, could I possibly have arrived where I am now? Sure, it's not the prime minister's office, but neither is it the land of broken dreams.

The Prime Minister can have his office. I wouldn't want to be him. It's nothing more than the top managerial position. It has nothing to do with creativity, with trying to bring forth something new.

I received my loan from the Student Aid the other day. I was surprised because it was much more than I expected. I asked for the loan for the summer months but, to look at the statement they sent me, they're covering my expenses over the past year. However, I already received a loan for this period, so I'm not sure what's up.

Doesn't look like I'll be cycling to Montreal. I'm too concerned about my thesis work and upcoming meeting with committee. After that, it's another matter. Maybe in September I'll take off a week. I can only enjoy such holidays if my mind is free of worry. I feel myself at a critical point in my life. Who knows if I'll ever get the same chance?

I finished translating a Spanish article into French with the help of a woman who works in the philosophy department. It was fun and I got to know the language a little, but ultimately the article proved disappointing.

I trust things are not too bad with you, Mom. Signing off is always rather difficult. One doesn't quite know what to say. *Love, Michael*

August 22, 1999

Dear Mom,

Morning as usual. 9am, to be precise. Nice day outside. I've already done some work. I'm working out a detailed outline of my thesis. It's slow going but, when I'm finished, I think I'll essentially have it. It's something I plan to give to the members of my committee to look over before the defense.

Same old type of week. Weather's been good. I still go for walks in the evening though I've changed my route somewhat. Now I go both below and around the Parliament Buildings, that is, behind and in front of them. Usually there are at least a few tourists in the front even after dark. A flame burns there twenty-four hours. Sort of a meeting place. It's smack in the centre. You can look directly at the main building from it. Quite often there's an RCMP cop there more for public relations, I suspect, than anything else.

Haven't taken in any of the art galleries even though they're close by. No doubt I would've gone to them with you if things had worked out differently. After spending so much time with the books, I find it hard to get interested in anything that requires concentration. Maybe some others take in high art as easily as cartoons, but I don't.

It reminds me of when I was in Europe. Met a young American woman touring in France. She told me, "I'm all museumed out!" Well, this is the way I sometimes felt too. Too much to see, to take in that demands your appreciation, admiration, and attention. The Japanese saying: "One thing of beauty in a room." And this saying, because I first heard it from him, reminds me of Ross, the young man who was looking after Uncle Carl's ranch, and who, at thirteen years of age, I got to know when I stayed there for a couple of weeks the very first summer we were in Winnipeg. Of course, Ross, I should tell you, was, along with being critical of Uncle Carl, critical of his ranch house, specifically, the interior which, as you remember, was full of stuffed animals: bear, moose, wolf, and deer heads on the walls as well as stuffed

birds and fish. He must have given the taxidermist a lot of business. And I remember being amazed at the number of pairs of dress shoes he had. I wondered why he needed so many. I would be thinking this while I was shining them. Ross, I remember, didn't work very hard, but he was quite nice and very interesting. He was nice to a shy, introverted thirteen-year-old boy. He would tell me stuff like various manoeuvres to protect yourself from a dog attack. And there was a pretty young woman that visited him from a nearby farm. But I hated the wood ticks out there – my first experience with them. I imagined them crawling on me at night.

Yes, there's lots to remember. Have you ever thought, Mom, of writing down some of your life experiences? I'm sure your grandchildren would relish them. I'd suggest writing very short pieces, not more than a page or two. And there doesn't necessarily have to be any chronological order. One experience can be from when you were twelve, another at forty. It would also give you something to do besides reading other people's stuff.

Back to Uncle Carl (why not?). Do you remember Nan, his girlfriend? What a bitch she was! Rather like Aunt Vi. Ross certainly thought so. He told me the only reason Carl was shackled up with her was because she had money (pathetic!).

Aunt Vi, my God! Her and that stupid miniature French poodle called Chi-Chi! What a pair they were! About as cuddly, both of them, as porcupines! Is the woman still alive now? I know the dog isn't.

Yet they took us in and looked after us, didn't they? And Uncle Harold told me, quite frankly, if I hadn't been a good worker, he wouldn't have bothered with me. No, he wasn't all that bad but not all that good either. I was a sort of stranger to him – just your child.

Yet they opened up a lot of new experiences for me. The beef cattle ranch or, at least, what was trying to be one. The racehorse farm a more convincing affair but still no grand success. Uncle Harold's beautiful ranch-style bungalow with its three-sided limestone (Tyndall Stone) fireplace and three walnut panels on the far wall of the living room. I did a lot of work on that house: painted the trim outside, helped Matt, the German carpenter put down plywood on the floor, and also did the horrible job of insulating the attic with fibre-glass while fighting the dust and sweltering heat of summer.

I loved the horses! They're such beautiful animals! Rico Star, the mare blind in one eye. Grey Jerry, the first horse I rode, a retired racehorse, a gelding, and who, as I was sorry to hear later, finished his life at the fox farm.

So, that's my stroll down memory lane for this week. Gee, I sure hope you get some enjoyment out of these letters. I know my memories are in some sense yours and vice-versa. In philosophy, they call it intersubjectivity. *Love, Michael*

August 29, 1999

Dear Mom,

Day after your call. Early morning. Another bright Sunday in store. And with the likelihood of its being hot. Would you believe it? I've got my waistline on my mind (still vain about my appearance). Despite my running religiously every day and eating moderately, I still seem to have accumulated some fat. So, I plan to be even more careful about what I take in. For example, instead of hot cocoa at night, cup of tea. One slice of pumpernickel bread in morning instead of two. Half-glass of wine at supper instead of whole. If all this doesn't all work, I'll go for a liposuction (just kidding, of course).

About this letter writing, you know, you shouldn't try to discourage me from it. I know you have my best interests at heart, but so many things only get done promptly because we've made them habits. Writing once a week is not a great burden. It offers me a sort of distraction. Whatever is done purely out of duty – and habits are not the same thing as duty – surely must degenerate over time into a mere formality, into something without zest and inspiration.

Sharon's missing out on middle age. She was just at the threshold of it when she died. Her children now where she said she wanted them to be, that is, nearly adults. I remember her telling me this was what she was waiting for. I felt it to be rather strange, but it must've had something to do with the pressures and burden of raising small children. She was looking ahead to when there would no longer be such a burden and perhaps thinking it would bring some sort of peace.

I'm reading a book that's pessimistic to the point of being funny. It's title in English is *The Inconvenience of Being Born*. I'm sure Sharon would've related to many of the sentiments expressed by the author, Cioran, who, despite his bleak outlook, managed to live a long life.

Sharon, however, is frozen at a particular time in her life. I still remember those photos taken of her in Chambly by, I believe, a professional photographer. A series of black and white photos in the kitchen. Spilt medicine on table. Her tasting it as if for a commercial. (Maybe it was for a commercial!) Very young – four or five. Do you remember how smiley and giggly she was then? We called her freckle-face because she'd so many freckles over her nose.

Like another life. We can hardly recognize ourselves. We have many lives, not just one. The stages of life are like so many different lives and we so many different people within them.

I wouldn't mind visiting Chambly again. Thought I might do it this summer. Cycled there two or three times the two summers I spent in Montreal as master's student. Vivid in my mind. The smell of summer, pungent, bringing back childhood memories. When going into Chambly, things looked pretty much the same. Still lots of undeveloped land, but inside the town it was another story. Hardly recognizable. So many new buildings and roads. Just things like the Chambly Basin remain unchanged, the old post office with its tiny park and statue of De Salaberry, and the old fort where soldiers were quartered who ate a species of soft-backed turtle now endangered. (This is what I read in the newspaper.)

And the dirty old canal, of course, is still there. I remember Dad swimming in it and you calling to him but his not hearing. (Apparently, his ears were full of water.) Steady, strong strokes. Something he was good at. Threat of catching impetigo there. And still today pleasure boats go through it.

The first time I revisited Chambly while studying in Montreal, I went looking for St. Stephen's School. As a child, so much time spent in the playground. Over six years. No longer a school but administrative building. I wandered about the playground, a forty-four-year-old man in cycling shorts with bicycle. The would-be artist, the would-be writer.

By God, do hold onto these letters, Mom! I think I'll give you most of my life in them. Compensation for not having got all I wanted, though I've always worked towards it. I wrote down an aphorism the other day. It goes: "Few, indeed, must there be who get what they want out of life, and very few, indeed, who get more." Or, to put it another way, the pinnacles and peaks of life are never crowded places. Some must even wait till after death before occupying one of them.

So, that's about it for another letter. Why draw material from one boring week when a whole life is there to be capitalised on? *Love, Michael*

September 5, 1999

Dear Mom,

Rather overcast this morning. Muggy. We've been having some unseasonably hot weather lately. Thirty degrees yesterday. Visited my Chinese friend, Puqun Li, on the other side of the river in Ottawa. About a twenty-minute bicycle ride. There are an incredible number of Chinese people where he lives. They've practically taken over the whole neighbourhood.

The Chinese are very practical and ambitious. Many of them end up in the high tech industry. They want to get good jobs. My friend is an exception to the extent that, while wanting a good job, he's devoted to the risky business of philosophy.

His wife and son have recently gone back to China. They'll stay with family for four to six months. Now he lives like a bachelor. His kitchen and stove are a mess. I told him, if you came into his apartment and saw his kitchen, you'd turn around and walk straight out.

Spent the late afternoon in the park near Dowd's Lake. Part of the Rideau Canal system. Beautiful day. Warm, sunny, and slight breeze. Flowers all over. A couple of wedding parties there taking photos. We talked about philosophy and other things. He asks about you occasionally. I told him you were making some progress and how resilient you were to the buffets and blows of life. Then he said to me, "I think you take after your mother."

He prepared a delicious Chinese meal after we got back to his place. Puqun Li, like many of his countrymen, doesn't appreciate North American cuisine.

Recently registered for fall and winter sessions. Updated library card. Student loans in order. Everything on track. Finished the detailed outline of my thesis and submitted it. I'm glad I had the chance to take this step so as to assure my project's acceptance.

My friend, Gilles (the young African living here), just recently received some good news. He's been accepted into a six-month program in international law (he's a lawyer) in Rome, Italy. It's a full scholarship too. This is where his interest lies, so he's quite pleased. Now he must change his plans because he was going to enter a fifteen-month MBA program at the University of Ottawa. The program in Rome starts in February, so he must decide what he's going to do until then.

Leaves are coming down more abundantly now despite the balmy weather. They strew the bicycle path where I run every day. Fall is always for me a time of thinking back, a certain nostalgia regarding life's passage. Twenty-four years ago, at this time of year, I headed out on my great personal odyssey across half of Canada, across the Atlantic Ocean, and then a long circular trip around Northern Europe. I visited my father after a bit of detective work in Ireland, which took me from the city of Cork (where he'd originally been) to the capital, Dublin (where I finally found him).

A connection running from 99 Glenlawn Crescent (where you and Sharon saw me off on the morning of September 15, 1975) to having first contact with my father almost exactly a month later. His room, I'll never forget, was nothing more than a garret with a sloped ceiling and a little window. What a far cry from 1084 Rue de Salaberry! From our modest little brick bungalow in Chambly! Truly, what we had then was a palace compared to what I found him in. There's only one word for it – squalor. No attempt to keep this coffin-like room reasonably neat. Dirty clothes all over the place. His hot plate encrusted with spilt food. Old newspapers lying about. His psoriatic scales infesting the bed covers, clothes, floor, everything. I remember telling this to Bill one time and he said it made him depressed.

But Dad did not act like a depressive, and perhaps this is what made his attitude both irritating and admirable. Irritating because he wasn't interested in improving his situation. Admirable because his indifference made him look like a modern-day Diogenes. I stayed with my father nine days that first time in November. (As you know, I also visited him near the end of my trip.) And then I left to see more of Ireland (heading for Galway) before going back to England (from Belfast, Northern Ireland). I wrote a few letters to him while I was there as well as on the Continent. He'd put an ocean between himself and his former life.

And now I'm almost at the age he was then! All quite strange to think about. My situation, of course, is quite different: I didn't get married, raise a family, and buy a nice comfortable house in the suburbs. Neither did I ever have the responsibilities of being a husband and father. On the other hand, I've maintained my equilibrium throughout life, thus avoiding his premature decline.

Nonetheless, I largely owe what I am and where I am to him. (Of course, this is apart from any serious consideration of what my situation is.) I feel myself to be an extension of him but perhaps in conditions more "fortunate," that is, more conducive to being difficult, obscure, stubborn, and non-conformist.

But not to have the experience of a wife and family is leaving out a lot. It's my own little cross to bear, I suppose, or, rather, something to dramatize so that, in my own head, at least, I can play the martyr.

Well, there's another letter concluded. More in the confessional vein this time. Crossing oceans of one kind or another seems to be what it's all about. *Love, Michael*

September 12, 1999

Dear Mom,

Bit chilly this morning. Change of seasons. Sunny though. Should warm up. Sneezing as usual. Always this way in the morning. I sure go through a lot of Kleenex. Do you remember that Braun automatic toothbrush you gave me? It's still working after two years with the original batteries. Haven't been to a dentist in two years. How's Dr. Lachance doing? Carla, Patricia, and you must still see him once in a while.

Carla's birthday coming up. Have to phone her. Guess she's getting to the point she doesn't want to be reminded of them.

Passed a routine week. Courses still haven't started – they're a week later than usual. (Tomorrow is the starting day.) Not that I'll be sitting in on any. My thesis work occupies me enough. Soon I should be having my thesis project defence. Some preparations I'd still like to do. Reading goes on forever. Ricoeur wrote so much and, indeed, sometimes I think *too* much.

Started reading an interesting novel called *The Man Without Qualities* written by Robert Musil. It's set in Austria. I've just started it but find it quite good. It's three volumes and so very long, perhaps too long, because the author never finished it. Written between the 1920's and the 1940's, but it's set in 1913, the year before World War One.

The sky is terribly blue outside my window. I hear church bells softly pealing in the distance. An occasional crow caws. Traffic from Rue Montcalm, the nearby busy artery. Pretty constant, though sometimes it's less so. The other day, a fellow who lives in the area called Ben confessed to me he was a gay sex addict. This came up during an ordinary conversation when I asked him about his new job. (He'd recently got on as a dishwasher at a restaurant.). He then told me he'd been canned and his life was a mess – he was thinking of getting drunk. Only trouble is, he's an alcoholic so this would only make things worse. Then he came out with his being gay and having sex fantasies all day. (I'll leave out the details.) He also told me he was looking for help and, given there was nothing in the area, he'd have to go to Montreal for treatment that's supposed to make you stop thinking about sex. A form of mental castration, I suppose. (He was vague on details.)

Just heard the distinct sound of a goose honking. Could it be they're already back?

Yeah, there are a lot of people on welfare in *Le Vieux Hull*. A least three of them are in this rooming house. A lot of people feel contempt for them, especially if they're able-bodied, but, of course, their infirmity, the real one, is inside. Loss of motivation, purpose, desire to struggle, especially if the

government makes it easy for them. Most countries in the world don't have social assistance. You've got to hustle for a living or else be part of a family where at least one is doing this.

Yes, as I mentioned in my last letter, it's almost twenty-four years to the day since I left on my personal odyssey in the prime of life, half my life ago – a trip by boat across the Atlantic. *“Eine Seereise ist wirklich dans schönste auf der Welt.”* A sea trip is truly the loveliest thing in the world. (This is a line from a German grammar book I studied before the trip.) I met some young Germans in Quebec City where I visited before I got on the boat, the *Stefan Batory*. (Boy, they fed us well on that ship!) Yes, young Germans doing in North America what I'd be doing in Europe except for working overseas. (They'd spent the summer picking tobacco in Ontario.) And I remember we went out and met some French-Canadian girls including a pretty seventeen-year-old who I managed to get to smooch with. Later that evening, she drank too much and puked her gut outs! So unladylike! At least, this is what I suspect she felt later. (But it all ended quite respectably.)

Quebec City – very charming. I'm glad I visited it because it was a preview of Europe with all those little narrow streets like the ones in French towns I later saw built in centuries past for pedestrians and not for cars. No wonder the Europeans stayed with smaller vehicles. Norman's old Buick Electra 225 wouldn't have been able to manoeuvre in traffic or get parked.

Europe with the very old and the very new always rubbing shoulders. And one even feels the gap between Western and Eastern Canada. Soon it'll be almost four hundred years since the first whites came paddling up the Ottawa River. Samuel de Champlain, the founder of Quebec City, was the first. Connection to Chambly in this exploit because he was also the first to enter Chambly Basin.

So, there it is for another week. I hope you have a nice crisp enjoyable fall. *Love, Michael*

September 19, 1999

Dear Mom,

Another Saturday morning. Cool but sunny. Probably will warm up nicely. Flock of geese just flew straight over the house. They have a landing spot not far from here at a point along the path I run every day. It's a little postage stamp of a beach and park near an elementary school and playground bordering the Ottawa/Outaouais River. The geese enjoy the water and beach area. Now, of course, the beach is deserted by bathers, so they get to occupy it. They're rather used to people. When I run into their midst, they just waddle out of the way, keeping a wary distance.

Reminds me of a goose that was on a farm in southern France (Languedoc) that I visited. This place was being run like an unofficial youth hostel in some rugged, hilly, hard-to-get area by a German guy called Klaus. It was in a valley where you could barely grow anything but only raise a few sheep and goats. The buildings were all quite old and made of stone. It had been a village at one time, some two hundred people, but apparently they gave it up because the land couldn't support them. Anyway, this German guy owned the property and had a few sheep. Bush wood all about. Lodgers there were expected to gather it in exchange for cheap accommodation. Getting back to the goose – there was one there, very

aggressive, that would always go after you hissing. It spent all its time in front of a piece of glass where it could see its reflection. Apparently, he had lost his mate the year before.

Met with Madame Letocha Friday. She's the third member of my thesis committee. I was a little worried, thinking she was bothered by something, but it turned out to be nothing. She claimed not to have received the updated outline I'd handed in earlier.

So, within a few days I should have a date for my thesis project defense. The end of September or beginning of October.

Gilles is heading for Rome. Has scholarship (\$20,000) for six-month International law program. Thought he'd be starting in February but now they tell him he has to come for September. So, it's a last-minute rush to get his affairs in order. Needs visa from Italian embassy to study there. Also to get his one-way plane ticket. What a difference in prices! It really pays to shop around. All the way from \$430 to \$1200.

Bumped into a young man the other day called Anoop. He's Canadian but his parents are from India. He was down-in-the-mouth over his thesis project. First of all, his first thesis director left a half year ago to go teach in Europe. So, he got another one but found it hard to modify his project to suit him. Then he was waiting all summer for this director's approval so it could be submitted as a proposal. Now he tells me that one of the committee members doesn't like it. This means he'll have to reorganize it and try again. (He looked rather depressed over the whole business.)

I sometimes get the feeling these young people grow old prematurely in their pursuit of a professional career. The enforced seriousness and dampening of spontaneity, the stamping out of the earlier idealism to make way for practical concerns, the loss of that special kind of ardour over ideas replaced by ambition. (The artist is forever in some sense the child.)

Shortly, I'll go out to do a minor repair on my mountain bike. I noticed that a spoke was broken when I was cleaning it yesterday. Will of course use this trusty bike again throughout the winter. Other people – young people even – think it's such a strange or miserable thing to be cycling in the dead of winter. But I find it quite the contrary. As long as the bike is running properly and you can change gears and use the brakes, it's quite enjoyable. One of course must be dressed sensibly: good boots, layered coat, scarf, and tuque and hood for head. Do you remember when you and I went to see the ice sculptures in St. Boniface a few years ago? *Festival de voyageurs*? It was a bitterly cold evening. Great blocks of ice and glazed snow in all sorts of shapes and sizes representing many things. You couldn't stay outside very long because you weren't dressed warmly enough as usual. We had to go into a big tent and watch some natives dancing while beating drums. (You made the same mistake when we went to the light show in Assiniboine Park.)

Here the leaves stay green longer than where you are. And after turning yellow, they become gold, purple, and red. Haven't heard from Pablo since mid-summer. He must be very busy with his entrance examinations for diplomacy school.

About this time of year two years ago, a busload of University of Ottawa students, Pablo and I included, went to Gatineau Park. We walked around Pink Lake together and had a splendid time. I could almost imagine myself being his age. This is the kind of rapport we had – a rare thing.

Of course will keep you posted on upcoming events. So far, the prospects are good. The horizon is clear and beckoning. My bark sails on. *Love, Michael*

September 26, 1999

Dear Mom,

Early morning as usual. Sunny outside. But quite cool. Room is cold now. Phoned Carla after speaking with you. We'd a long chat that ended with her at a gas station where she had to shut off the car to fill up.

Talked about Ryle but I won't go into our discussion because it just repeats an old story. He phoned her after talking with you and put on the same performance. He really missed his calling. He should've been an actor.

My friend Gilles is having a lot of problems. I don't know whether to blame him or not. Certainly part of it is back luck, but the rest is poor organization. It started with his finding out he'd won a \$20,000 scholarship to go to Rome and study international law. He didn't receive this news until September even though he'd been formally notified four or five months earlier. Apparently, the institution in Rome sent word by courier to the law office where he worked in Ivory Coast. For some reason, this office didn't tell him about it but, instead of contacting the institute to find out what was going on, he apparently assumed they'd rejected him and, in due course, he ended up entering the MBA program at the University of Ottawa. For this program, he is using a loan that comes from his own country where they keep tight controls. Anyway, why he left this matter to the last minute is beyond me. The program in Rome started September 21, but now he tells me there is the same program in English starting in February. So, he tried to get into this one and was eventually successful. He then withdrew from the MBA program and sent off a bunch of letters, including one to the bank in his country that's financing his studies, informing everyone of his change of plans. Then, precisely on September 19, he receives word (so he tells me, for who knows what to believe now?) that he must attend the September program or else forfeit his scholarship. Without any hesitation, he decides to leave for Rome. It's as if he's burned all his bridges behind him. Now he needs to get a visa, a round-trip plane ticket, and some money. But in order to get the visa, he needs documents from the Italian institute which, upon request, agrees to fax them to the Italian embassy in Ottawa. This is Friday. He has to wait till Monday when the embassy reopens. But then on Monday he finds out the embassy didn't receive the documents, so he has to phone or email the Italian institute to find out what happened. He ends up sending them another fax number (I don't know whose) simply to get the documents. He waits a couple of days. He finally gets the faxed documents, goes to the embassy, and promptly gets into a fight with an official because she insists on originals. So, guess what? He hops on a bus and goes to Montreal to the Italian consulate where he gives someone a sob story who ends up accepting the faxed documents and processing them for the visa. But, in order to pick up the visa, he needs a round-trip ticket. A round-trip ticket! Apparently, the

Italian government wants to make sure he leaves the country after his studies. So, now he has to run around and make numerous phone calls trying to get the best deal. He goes to some travel bureau where he puts down \$500 even though the ticket costs \$800-\$900. (Some of these details might be inaccurate.) Then he comes back to Ottawa. He's spending all kinds of money running around and making long distance phone calls (some from my phone which I'll likely end up paying) and the poor guy's got nothing to show for it and nothing in his back account. So, now he's looking around for even cheaper flights. But then he finds out he will lose the 40% deposit he made in haste for a return-trip ticket while he was in Montreal. In the meantime, the days are passing. He's already missed a week of classes for the September program. He's phoning even his friend in the Ivory Coast who knows a businessman in Montreal to see if this person, someone who Gilles has never met, will give him a loan. People say they will help and call him back, but they don't. It all seems like a great big mess! I didn't seem him yesterday, so I don't know what's the latest. He still hasn't got his visa because he has to present his plane ticket first. He found a cheap flight out of Montreal, but they won't grant him a ticket till the time of departure. And so on and so on.

Otherwise everything's okay (for me). Spoke to Caroline, the secretary Friday. My thesis project will be scheduled this week or some time the following week. But it's definite now. I'll keep you posted. *Love, Michael*

October 3, 1999

Dear Mom,

Afternoon now. Got busy with something in the morning. Took me up to the time of my morning run. Fairly cool though sunny. Alright when running though. Geese have already moved on further south. No longer hanging out at that little postage stamp of a beach.

Finally heard from Pablo. Guess what? He's shelved his plans to become a diplomat. Now he's a professor, but I'm not even sure what he's teaching. He was very scant on details. Presumably he got on at the university he once attended in Spain. Connections. Though I'm only guessing.

After all his work to prepare for the examinations to get into diplomacy school! And his coming here to Canada for that express purpose! But he tells me he's happy with what he's doing, and he's still with .Miriam. Wonderful girl! He tells me she wouldn't be able to work if he became a diplomat. In addition, he didn't seem optimistic about his chances. Perhaps he'll tell me more in the future.

I have acquired a wonderful poster: an aerial view of the University of Ottawa and environs. You can even see Hull. I'll take it with me to Winnipeg. Next door neighbour gave it to me. He's part of the cleaning staff at the U. of O. He found it in the garbage.

This is amazing news! Paul Ricoeur, the world-famous French philosopher on whom I'm doing my thesis, will be giving an address at the University of Montreal on October 13. Isn't that a marvellous coincidence? I just wrote him in June and received that short-handwritten note from him a few weeks later. Now I can kill two birds with one stone.

As far as Gilles goes, it's all over. I mean to say, his scholarship and plans to go to Rome to study international law. Too many complications got in the way. Frankly, I'm starting to have doubts about his sincerity or, at least, the strength of his commitments. I really don't know what his future plans are. However, he told me recently he hasn't even enough money to get back to his own country.

This time many years ago, I was on the ocean liner *Stefan Batory*. Sailing to Europe. Full mostly of older Polish people, but I quickly met some young ones and we hung around together for nine days.

Saw a film last night called *The Emperor's Shadow*. Chinese. In Mandarin with English sub-titles. About the first emperor of China around 200 BC. The building of the Great Wall of China. A veritable warlord. He wanted the unification of China. Needless to say, very violent. He succeeds but ends up having to sacrifice his beloved daughter. She in a sense betrays him out of love. Her father ends up making her a slave. She gets branded on the forehead by the end of the picture.

I really recommend you getting a hold of the novel *The Man with No Qualities* by Robert Musil. I find it very good and not at all difficult to read.

Will go to the university library this afternoon. Still part of my research. I'm now about as well prepared as I'll ever be. I've even put together a little indexed notebook. Something to consult and find key words or thoughts. Will make it easier if I have to answer some difficult questions.

It looks like I might get away without doing a lick of work for my teaching assistantship. Seems nobody needs me. At least this fall term. It's paying my tuition and putting some money in the bank. Almost like having a scholarship. I'll make myself available but won't bend over backwards to earn it.

Sat in Puqun Li's class last Wednesday (which was like a tele-conference). He's teaching a first-year philosophy course from September to December. It's called *Critical Thinking*. Big screen at front of classroom. Shows other students in other classrooms. One at University of Pembroke and one at University of Cornwall. Switches back and forth from one to the other. It's a kind of jerky motion, not like TV. Occasionally they ask Puqun Li questions. Occasionally there are problems with the audio-visual. First time I'd seen such a setup. Puqun Li is a good teacher, very conscientious. He told me that, when he spotted me in the classroom, it made him nervous for five or ten minutes. As if I'd come there to judge his performance or ask him some tough questions.

Well, I should get moving. It's almost 2:00pm. Day slides by quickly. There are three university libraries within biking distance: University of Ottawa, Carleton University, and St. Paul's University. The last one has a lot of material on Ricoeur, but you can't take the books out. One of the finest libraries in the country, I'm told. *Love, Michael*

October 10, 1999

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Foggy outside. Yesterday was rather nice. At least, warm enough that I went running in shorts. Have lost a few pounds. Now between 150-155. Waistline of jeans was getting tight on me by the

end of summer despite running every day, so I tightened up on my diet. Nothing excessive. Call it a banana diet. I simply rely on a banana every day for a snack rather than cheese or a bowl of cereal.

Otherwise, I eat well enough though, admittedly, not with great diversity. It's always the same: one slice of pumpernickel plus bowl of cereal in morning, a cheese, tomato, onion, lettuce sandwich (bagel) at noon, and a full plate of rice, tuna, tomatoes, onions, and green peppers at supper. A slice of pumpernickel with honey serves as dessert. Plus the banana whenever I need it. Oh yeah, a hot cup of cocoa before going to bed. And, of course, I like my coffee with each meal (easy on the cream). My stomach is as flat as can be.

Will go to Montreal on Wednesday to hear Paul Ricoeur, the world-famous French philosopher, who's speaking at the University of Montreal. I tried to arrange getting introduced to him but no deal. The organizer told me his schedule was full. As I wrote to my former thesis director in Montreal, who I'll be meeting Wednesday morning, "Boy, what an opportunity he's passing up!"

But if there is a question period after his presentation, you can be sure I'll take advantage of it.

Have been told my thesis project defense is being scheduled for late October but still haven't got an exact date. This I should receive in coming week. (Otherwise, something's really screwy.) I'm about as prepared as I'll ever be. Notes coming out of my ears!

Haven't seen Gilles too much lately. He's got some new contacts in town, but what he's up to God only knows. He still owes me \$10 for a long distance phone call. He's a sluggard when it comes to things like this. He's made full use of my phone, and I've even taken messages for him and posted them on his door. He's an agreeable enough fellow, but I'm starting to think that much of what he says is practised.

None of it, of course, is of any great importance. The main thing is the work goes ahead and I get the best out of myself. So it's always been with me. I feel this thesis business to be at a critical point. I'm laying it all on the line.

Went to hear a couple of visiting professors at the U. of O. Both spoke in French. Both rather flat and boring. They rapidly read their written-down thoughts and marshalled arguments. Then a question period. These are usually short but most informative. Too bad it wasn't a major part of the whole process. Speakers should give their principal ideas as clearly and trenchantly as possible. Then invite questions and thrash it out. The way it is, audience plays too much of a passive role.

Today is October 10. On October 9, 1975, I landed in Southampton on the south coast of England. Spent the first day tramping to Salisbury. Then spent the night at a youth hostel that was officially closed for fall and winter. (The manager graciously let me and another traveller stay the night.) Next day, exactly twenty-four years ago, I visited Salisbury Cathedral. My first experience of a magnificent edifice built in the middle ages (twelfth or thirteen century). What a piece of art! Clustered marble columns and high narrow pointed windows with stained glass throughout. The place was practically empty except for important personages buried in the church. I felt I was in illustrious company. But, of course, all dead and gone. And mostly forgotten. What an impression it made on me! What a reminder of the ephemeral

lives we lead! Each and every generation. And there I was, young and in my prime. Our products or creations outlasting us. The grandeur of it all which seems to say both something for and against man. For he is the one who sets the measure and yet (in some way or other) cannot measure up.

For some reason, I passed up visiting Stonehenge. (What was I thinking? That it was just a pile of rocks?) It was only five miles away. I kick myself now for it. Something very much older than the cathedral.

It was a day very much like today. Rather dreary. Everything looked so quaint and archaic both in the town (Tudor houses side-by-side with their wooden beams and projecting fronts) and country (rolling grassy hills with hedges). People there grow up with it. They don't even see it. By coming from the New World, seeing this "forgotten" past still standing, still signaling its presence, makes one feel reverent and a bit humble.

There was a time when people generally felt that way about the past. Now we search the future for signs – of what? Some new and latest improvement? Some new discovery or invention? Development? Technology and science, more than anything else, have produced this frame of mind. I doubt whether it can go on forever. All things dry up. Eventually, we need new myths, new configurations of ideas by which to live on both the individual and collective levels.

So, that's it for this week. I'll let you know next week how the Ricoeur thing goes. *Love Michael*

October 17, 1999

Dear Mom,

Sunday morning. Overcast. I think it's rather brisk outside. Well, to the point. I went to Montreal and attended the Paul Ricoeur lecture. Don't forget, this is a world-famous philosopher, and whole conferences are devoted to his work. This lecture was at the University of Montreal in a fairly large amphitheatre. It was pretty much full by the time Ricoeur started his lecture. I suspect there were about five hundred or more people. His lecture (in French) lasted about an hour. The subject was the relationship between fundamental ethics and applied ethics. The first relates to an overall desire to do good, to be sociable, to love (don't forget, he's a Christian), to do justice, to preserve dignity, to have a good will, etc. The second is the particular concrete instances such as to be found in the institutions of medicine and law. His thesis is that, in order to go from one to the other, from fundamental ethics to applied ethics, thought and deliberation have to take into consideration the various norms which already exist, codes of deontology in these institutions guiding their practises. However, the norm is not sacrosanct but sometimes must be adjusted to better accommodate particular cases. These cases, once again, being looked at from the viewpoint of love, solicitude, good will, etc.

So, that's the gist of his lecture. Then there was a question period. Three microphones were set up in the aisles. Also, there was a TV camera. Mad rush to go to the mikes. Finally, one young lady asked her question. I didn't quite understand it, but it seemed challenging. Next, a young man asked a question, rather long-winded, and Ricoeur had difficulty understanding him. (Being from France, he probably was thrown off by the Quebec accent.) Ricoeur, by the way, was sitting at a small desk on a spacious,

elevated stage. About fifteen feet away from him was the host, some university representative who stood at a microphone ready to come to the old man's aid. (Ricoeur is eighty-six.) This was in fact what happened when, upon Ricoeur's not understanding the young man's question, he had to step in and "translate." Then it was my turn. Yes, by now I was standing at one of the microphones, clipboard in hand with my notes and questions on it. However, I only asked two short questions, two questions, however, with a "devastating" effect. The first question, "Can transgression be an ethical act?", I made sure to deliver slowly and clearly. After I had asked this question and a subsidiary one, Ricoeur merely stared at me. Ten or more seconds of silence passed. Then he gestured towards the host in a rather helpless way. The host himself seemed at a loss what to do or to how to come to Ricoeur's rescue. People in the audience started tittering. Then, some close to me, started shouting: "*Donnez le papier!*" So, straightaway I went up to the elevated stage and held up my clipboard for the host to receive. He promptly took it and presented it to Ricoeur. The latter then spent another ten seconds or so studying the question. In the meantime, some man sitting next to the microphone where I was said: "*Bonne question!*" Also, I should mention that some people applauded when I took the written questions up to the stage. Finally, he gave his answer. I had difficulty following it. I found out later it was a essentially a dodge to my question: "Can transgression be an ethical act?"

After the question period, I went up to Ricoeur who was shaking hands and chatting sociably with a few university officials. He's very small, maybe five foot six and 130 pounds, but looks trim and in good shape. However, when I introduced myself, he definitely wasn't happy. I told him I was the doctoral student from the University of Ottawa who'd sent him a letter in June to which he had graciously replied. He merely smiled and nodded his head, not saying a word, and, at the same time, making sure his hands were out sight. So, you see, when I extended mine, it was an error because he clearly had no intention of acknowledging me beyond what minimal politeness demanded.

There is a lesson here, Mom. It's one thing to write books and put down noble thoughts. It's another to live them each and every day. Oh, I'm sure he's a decent person, but no better or worse than most people who fall short of the ideals they claims to be so important.

My thesis project defense is scheduled for the afternoon of November 3. About time, isn't it? Over seven months have passed since I handed in my proposal. Well, it should be interesting. I hope a lot of other students show up.

That's it for now. You'll notice I sent along a little something for the kids. *Love, Michael*

October 24, 1999

Dear Mom,

Shortly after your phone call. Now what do I write about? My leaf collection? Well, you already know about that. They stand sentinel on my wall like so many brightly coloured butterflies pinned to a board. About Paul Ricoeur? Holds up amazingly well for his eighty-six years. No cane or anything like that. Could pass for a man in his mid-seventies.

The other day I saw a rabbit near the house. Acted rather tame. Turns out he belongs to a young couple with small girl. Rabbit ran off from them three months ago. Obviously, he still lives in the area. We tried to catch him but couldn't. Too many parked cars. How does he survive? How does he avoid the occasional cat or dog that must go after him? Can a rabbit defend itself from a cat?

Little French-speaking girl in the house. Her father has a room here. Philip is his name. His wife comes over quite frequently. For some reason, they stopped living together. Recently, he nearly cut off his arm with a chain saw. Carelessness. But he's alright except for doing some damage to a main nerve.

The wind blows outside. Gusty. Cloudy sky. I'm still running in shorts. Leaves thick on the bicycle path. In the park, hardly any runners besides me. People go in more for rollerblading or cycling.

That little girl is noisy. Always chattering in the hallway. At first, she was very shy but, at the same time, curious. In the summer, I'd leave my door open. Every so often, she'd peek in, very cautiously. I'd then say, "*Bonjour, comment ça va?*" But she'd just stare at me.

Haven't seen much of Gilles lately. Don't even know whether he found a job. Told me some time ago he wants to go home (Ivory Coast) before Christmas, so he has to make some money. Strange fellow, in some ways. A lawyer with few outward signs of being one.

My solitary life! Now only once or twice to the university per week. Short visits. Don't spend much time socializing. Sometimes run into somebody and chat. The effort to socialize to any great extent seems beyond me. To say many things lightly, without real engagement or enjoyment, purely to be pleasant or polite, to feel no depth to the occasion, I've never been able to do this. As much my loss as my gain. Neither friendless nor surrounded by friends. Always trying to reach inside somewhere. Take in the world as a whole. Not divided or compartmentalized. The good and the bad. Hence my propensity to mix with all kinds of people and have all manner of experiences.

Shall go grocery shopping shortly. Big stores close at 4:00 P.M. here on Sundays. Can buy wine and beer in the grocery store, but I don't care for the latter. And my consumption of wine is limited to a glass per day. I enjoy it with a relatively plain supper.

It's not a bad life. Not terribly exciting but certainly not boring. Pretty much on an even keel. I would love to go to sea or climb a high mountain. Physically and spiritually, I could do it. I must content myself, however, with translating such experiences into my present work. To what ultimate destination? I don't know exactly. It's not something I spend a great deal of time thinking about. It's enough to have today, tomorrow, and the day after.

Growing old frightens me more than dying. The loss of power, of strength, of spirit maybe. I am all by myself in this and, though it's an ever-present preoccupation, I've no desire for solace apart from what I find inside.

Pierre Elliot Trudeau just celebrated his eightieth birthday. What kind of shape is he in? Some say his memory is going. We all rejoin the eternal cosmos from which we all sprang. Certainly nothing there to

be frightened of or resentful towards. Millions of years the world got along without us, and we or, rather, “we” got along without it.

A scrap of paper, a bit of writing, done offhand and forgotten, can outlast a life. I can honestly say I never wrote anything with the intention of trying to mislead. After a while, of course, it becomes a habit. How difficult it would be to write any kind of advertising or promotion even for myself.

I’m lucky to enjoy such good health. It means I can carry on with ardour and passion. Something might be in the offing, I don’t know. However, the ship holds its course and rides the sea. Certain lands and countries we’ve seen look promising. It does well to keep a record of such things. *Love, Michael*

October 31, 1999

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Still not quite light out. Just turned the clock back. Big day coming up. Wednesday at 2:30pm. All prepared, just a few finishing touches. My God, it’s been a long wait! Over seven months! Rather scandalous, so one professor told me. Anyway, committee work is like a mill that grinds slowly, but I’ve put the time to good use. It should be an interesting affair. I’ll hit them where they feel it.

Finished correcting some tests for two different courses. These are small classes and it wasn’t a lot of work. These student profs are touchy when you point out some of their mistakes. Maybe the students (first-year ones) are in some sense getting short-changed. It’s kind of like going to an intern for a diagnosis. Some regular part-time professors, people with experience, have lost work on account of this arrangement with third and fourth-year doctoral students teaching first-year courses in philosophy. Teaching is not something you just pick up overnight. It tends to be under-appreciated as an art, as something you can be very good or bad at. And the students are often not going to complain and let you know.

This past Friday a professor from New York came to speak to us. Has written a dozen or so books and many journal articles. Was trying to make a case against liberalism in our society as being nothing short of evil. Spoke very well and made all his points very carefully and clearly. But I thought that, on the whole, his thinking was simplistic. When people started asking him questions, he appeared to be always getting the better of them, using a seemingly logical, straightforward rebuttal. This went on for about ten or fifteen minutes. Here was this conservative (for that’s how he identified himself) lording it over the mainly liberal establishment. Were they all going to let him get away with it? I don’t feel myself to be any more liberal than conservative, but I felt something had to be done and so I went into attack mode. I sidestepped the main case he was making, i.e., that liberalism is internally inconsistent in the sense that, when dealing with the evils in society, it perpetuates them. Rather, I challenged him to put forward a better option given that inconsistencies can be found in any doctrine. I also used his own words against him. For example, he called liberalism a faith. I told him that, if this were true, then his claim that liberalism was in deep trouble could only be an exaggeration. For when did an intellectual doubt or suspicion (or, for that matter, condemnation) have much influence on faith? He couldn’t really argue that liberalism was in deep trouble on this basis.

These people write their dozen books and think they're on top of everything. But challenge them in the right place and it falls down like a house of cards.

Imagine! He sets himself up as an expert on evil and yet, without missing a beat, he's willing to claim that dropping the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities was necessary.

But, in truth, the difference between good and evil can be very problematic. It depends on where you're sitting. But this guy thinks the opposite. For him, it's all quite straightforward and able to be settled by reason – *his* reason, no doubt.

Fellow tenant carted away from here the other day. Alcoholic. Was having some kind of fit or hallucinating. I've heard that he's coming back though. Ambulance came for him. And police. One a woman cop. Looked hard as nails. No hips.

The leaves on my walls look good. They seem quite comfortable and happy. I'll have to clean my room up after the thesis seminar. It's long overdue.

Was out walking last night near Parliament Buildings. Spotted two guys in Hallowe'en outfits. They were dressed up as streetlights. They had long boxes over their heads and upper bodies with three cut-out circles in front. Then they had over the circles green, orange, and red paper or plastic. While standing in the direction of the traffic, they shined a flashlight from inside the box through the different holes, as if the lights were changing.

So, that's all for this week. Next week, I'll tell you how it goes with the thesis project defense. Wish me luck! *Love, Michael*

November 7, 1999

Dear Mom,

Well, I won't beat around the bush. I've suffered a setback. I had the thesis project defense last Wednesday and there was significant resistance to my project and how I was going about it. I won't go into the details. Basically, it's the same old story: they're looking at the formal requirements and the ideas behind it are of less concern to them. This is the nature of academia. It hasn't been called a diploma mill for nothing. So, now what's confronting me is finding a path which will suit them as much as it will me. However, I don't think I can remain with ethics, specifically, the heroic dimension, as my focus. I must shift my attention to another area. I'll likely stay with Ricoeur but, at the same time, bring in another philosopher for comparison and contrast. I haven't discussed this new direction with anybody, but I've set up an appointment with Madame Letocha for tomorrow afternoon. I certainly hope she's receptive to it. One thing I won't allow, however, is to be taken down the road of pure expediency. Madame Letocha has a tendency to encourage taking this road, so I must be vigilant. If worse comes to worst, I'll quit the program before selling out.

It's a disappointing turn of events, but I knew from the outset I was taking a risk. I couldn't really have proceeded otherwise. Narrow specialization doesn't appeal to me, so I'd no choice but to work out a

larger view. Psychologically speaking, I'm in a better position now to give way a bit, to conform to the university's standards. I feel I've already met my own. Given the right area to work in, an area of my choice, I believe I can still pull it off. But the next few days or weeks will be fateful. They will tell me whether I can proceed successfully or not.

Yesterday exterminators came to the rooming house and visited each room, applying an organic compound deadly to cockroaches. I've only seen a few of them, but there was a surprise down below in a self-contained unit (a room substantially bigger than the others here) with a young couple from Cambodia and their new-born child. When the exterminators visited them, they found cardboard boxes full of vermin. Apparently, they obtained these boxes from a grocery store and never bothered to check them out. (It's fairly well known that cockroaches can hide in them.) Of course, one can't rule out the possibility that cockroaches are more common in Cambodia.

Met a new tenant yesterday while the exterminators were busy in our rooms. His name's Bill and perhaps a few years older than me. He moved here recently after living for thirty years in Montreal. Originally, he's from upper New York State. He spent a year in Vietnam, then, when back home on leave, he decided he couldn't spend another year in that warzone. He then deserted to Canada, leaving family and friends behind.

A very friendly chap, quite lively, with a grandfatherly look. Has taken the modest road in life. Got his BA at Syracuse University and majored in philosophy. It was good to meet him after my recent experience. I live between these two worlds of academia and non-academia. If I went entirely over to the first, I'd feel I was giving up a part of myself. If I went the other way, (which still may come), that would be another failure in my life, at least from the conventional standpoint.

What matters most in all this is to maintain one's self-respect and simply fight the good fight. The consequences are less important. I will take another run at all this and orient myself closer to what they want. At the same time, I'll guard myself from having my project turn into someone else's.

The university profs have to deal with many people. It's injurious in many ways. One becomes, for the sake of one's health and emotional well-being, a cog in the works. To keep the machine running at highest efficiency, that's what ultimately counts. And perhaps even some of them consider me a mere troublemaker, somebody looking for an excuse to fail and blame it on the system. That's where I must prove them wrong by bending but not breaking or turning myself into a pretzel. It's a delicate task. We'll see what the future holds. *Love, Michael*

November 14, 1999

Dear Mom,

Well, I'm pleased to inform you I've had an eventful week in which the prospects for future work on my thesis have greatly improved. I met with three professors on three different occasions, two of which are members of my thesis committee and the third being my thesis advisor (Professor Feldspar). I proposed to them a new plan and they all came on board but not to say without some resistance, each in his or her own way. However, I overcame it and the attendant objections. Basically, they all wanted me to stay closer to the area I was already in (i.e., the study and critique of the ethical self in Paul Ricoeur) with the corollary that I make the thing more scholarly and acceptable. However, I'd already made up my mind this would cut against the grain and turn into something I'd get little enjoyment from. So, I decided it was better to shift the focus and the terrain upon which I was working, resulting in much more additional work but bringing certain advantages. One is that, in this newly chosen area, I'll be forced to adopt the prerequisite style and form that are demanded by the powers that be. Another is that my level of interest will remain high, which wouldn't be the case were I to stay with the old project while making all the necessary compromises. Finally, I believe the committee members and my advisor have a more or less personal interest now in my project. It includes them, so to speak, rather than excluding them. This is by no means pandering, for, as I already mentioned, they put up initial resistance. In short, what I'm embarking on now is every bit as ambitious and risky as the old project.

Instead of one major contemporary French philosopher to deal with, I'll be taking on two. They are as different as can be but have debated in an area I believe a suitable point of entry for me. The fact they're so different, both as philosophers and persons, is what especially appeals to me. I would like to examine this difference and perhaps see how much of it is fundamental opposition or not. Jacques Derrida, the other French philosopher, can be described as having been a scholarly rogue or black sheep over the past thirty or forty years. Notwithstanding this, he's generated a good deal of interest and attention on both sides of the Atlantic. Paul Ricoeur, on the other hand, is anything but a rogue. Ultimately, at the end of his life, he ends up preaching the ethic of the good, responsible, respectable citizen. However, both of them have a debate in a couple of their books surrounding the concept of metaphor. This is a troublesome area for philosophers. (But what area isn't?) Metaphor is usually associated with rhetoric and poetry.

So, what I have immediately before me is something like a crash course on Jacques Derrida. Up to now, I've read very little of him. I can't very well choose to read only what will end up being used in the thesis. This would be too much of a shortcut. The area I'll actually end up covering will be small, but both Derrida and Ricoeur have generated a lot of scholarly comment. The people who evaluate master's and doctoral theses go out of their way to make sure all pertinent references, sources, and authorities are cited and taken into consideration.

Well, I can only hope that by spring I'll be once again ready to submit a thesis proposal. The road is long and arduous, but at least inspiration and energy are not lacking. Of course, this time it must succeed, for I won't get a third chance. Now I've got three people on board with me, moreover, three who are

sympathetic to my approach which, in a nutshell, is valuing the means as much as the end. Now that I've got them more or less on my side, I should be able to avoid going off the rails.

I'll give you the names of the principal people involved: Professor Vance Feldspar, my thesis advisor, Very nice man but a bit too easy to please. Professor Daniele Letocha, the woman I thought was going to be my enemy or at least a stumbling block, but it has turned out quite the contrary. Finally, Professor Denis Dumas, a young man, earnest and energetic, who sports long hair but works outside my sphere of interest. Nevertheless, based on my recent talk with him, he's interested in what I'm doing and suggested I consult with him in the future.

So there it is. There's still life in it. Everybody's been treating me pretty good. What's more, they accept me on my own terms. I don't have to play games.

It snowed the other day, but now it's gone. *Love, Michael*

November 21, 1999

Dear Mom,

Early Sunday morning. Overcast outside. We're still above freezing. No snow on ground. In fact, I'm still running in shorts, though I draw some odd looks. However, when I'm running, I hardly feel the cold. There was a fellow who ran all winter last year in shorts. This was at the University of Ottawa, and he ran either on or along the Rideau Canal (for sometimes he ran on the ice). He's in the philosophy department, a graduate student like myself. Admittedly, I thought he was bizarre.

A week of reading Derrida. If you recall, in my last letter, I mentioned he was the other big-name philosopher I'm working on. I find him quite interesting and certainly a change from Ricoeur. I'm reading a book he published in 1967, the year you, Carla, and I went to Expo in Montreal. It was the beginning of his making a name for himself. A lot of terms used by him have become common in some circles such as "logocentrism," "ethnocentrism," and "eurocentrism." Derrida has had a significant impact on the teaching of literature in North America.

I went out the other day and bought a few Christmas presents to give to Patricia and John's kids. A little harmonica for Harlan (very handsome instrument from China), a storybook for six-year-olds for Siobhan (stories from different countries), and, finally, for Jackson, a world globe that inflates and rotates on a stand.

When I go running, I still encounter flocks of geese at the postage stamp beach. These geese are wild, of course, but don't show much fear and merely waddle out of the way. I also notice the black squirrels around here are still active. As soon as the snow falls, no doubt they'll disappear.

Not a great deal to report. How do you talk about a week of reading? What a way to live a life! And a lot of people do this even with stuff they're not particularly interested in. Take walks in the evening but not so much lately. Gilles has visited me once or twice. Works part-time with a moving company. Wants to try something else and doesn't seem to be in a hurry to return home. But that's the only place his law

degree is any good. Strange thing to choose to be here picking up boxes instead of having a law practise! Shows a strange philosophical bent that interests me, however. Funny how people taking philosophy at graduate level don't seem to be interested in developing their own ideas but rather in simply referring to others. Always referring to a thought with a name attached to it to give it currency and weight. Always a distance between the thought or idea and oneself. As if they were only so many dead specimens to be dissected. This same coldness, this same detachment in so many young people always strikes me as a bit of an anomaly. A sense of adventure hardly apparent. Business-like attitude preferred. Such is what the institution implicitly encourages and, admittedly, seems to run best on.

What do you think of that Egypt Air crash? A suicidal co-pilot behind it or not? Just heard on the news he repeated a prayer fourteen times while the automatic pilot was being disconnected and the plane started its precipitous plunge. Surely something suspicious here, if the report's accurate. You're not likely to repeat a prayer fourteen times if you encounter mechanical problems and need to react.

Hard to imagine somebody doing that who's worked many years in a position of trust and responsibility. Only a total "letting go" would seem to account for it, a sudden thought that nothing at all matters. Maybe he even decided at some point he was doing the passengers a favour by taking them with him. But this would have been contrary to his Muslim faith, so maybe he lost it some time prior to this flight.

But why didn't he commit suicide before the flight? Did he just follow the usual steps, zombie-like (he'd made the trip so many times before), then finally realize where he was, where he was going, and where he didn't want to go, that is, back home, back to his family, back to Egypt. What great shame had he incurred?

Remember, he said: "I've made my decision," but this only takes a few minutes. It's possible he got on the plane not even suspecting what he was going to do.

Remember John Milton's line in *Paradise Lost*: "The mind can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

So much for another week and another four sheets of foolscap. Trust you are feeling well. It won't be long before I'll be in Winnipeg. Until then, I must lay the groundwork for a new project. *Love, Michael*

December 5, 1999

Dear Mom,

Overcast. Rain predicted for today. Will go up to plus seven so still not that wintry. Ran yesterday in shorts and the day before although it was around freezing. People think it's weird, but I'm not cold once I get going. I remember when I used to run track at Glenlawn Collegiate. Going for long runs on weekends in winter. Perimeter Highway usually. Mr. Pierce, our coach, in his little Volkswagen station wagon. He'd always go up ahead of us and stop. Often, I'd run over to the car and get rid of some item of apparel: scarf, extra sweatshirt, or extra pair of gloves. By contrast, Laurie Groves would be muffled up to the eyebrows. But he was a good runner. Small and sturdy. Golden Boy (both stellar athlete and student). It would be interesting to know if he still runs.

Derrida! Damned philosopher! As difficult as cracking nuts with your teeth. All the time it cracks my brain. Makes me often ask: "What have I taken on?" No question here of it's not being a challenge.

Heard from Pablo. Very surprised and sorry to hear he broke up with Mirriam. I found her to be very sweet and thought they were made for each other. And to think they flew back and forth across the Atlantic and sent each other emails every day.

Would you believe it? I still see flocks of geese coming in and landing on the river or invading the little postage stamp of a beach. "*The marines have landed!*" They act quite at home and don't put up much of a fuss when I run by. Where do they end up? Southern United States?

Fellow by the name of Bill here. Fifty-three years old. Vietnam vet. Actually, deserter from U.S. army. Think I told you about him. Has little room, much smaller than mine. Wants to move out in the new year. Asked me if I wanted to share two-bedroom apartment with him. Nice enough guy, but I don't see any advantage. It would mean loss of privacy as well as moving further from downtown (this is what he wants to do) to a more suburban area. But this would take me further from the university and perhaps put me on buses which I hate. Sure, might end up paying less rent for a better place, but then there's the matter of furnishing it. And then there's the fact he wants to "do things together." He wants companionship. All very well except I prefer being alone most of the time.

Solitude does not mean being free of pain or anguish, but it does mean being free of feeling stifled, bored, satiated, or distracted to the point of irritation and discomfort. No doubt he wants to have a TV room and other amenities. This guy was married for twenty years. He'd lived in a Montreal suburb but suffered from depression, so he moved here and simplified his life. Now one might say he lives on the edge of poverty.

But, in Canada, living on the edge of poverty is a far cry from living in poverty in, say, Africa. People here can collect welfare. Two, in fact, do in this rooming house. Lazy parasites, one is almost tempted to say. Both able-bodied but where's the incentive to work? Pride? They managed to swallow it a long time ago or else never developed a work ethic. And no job they'd be able to get really attracts them, so they willingly accept a government handout.

Harold O'Connor hated such types, and so do a lot of others. Feel their tax dollars are going to waste supporting these good-for-nothings. And maybe these haters hate their own jobs. So the natural resentment.

All day I read in French and English difficult philosophical texts. I've almost forgotten why I'm doing this. Now practical considerations overrun or subordinate initial interest and enthusiasm. I mean to say, when you have the last two, there is no reason to ask: "Why am I doing it?" You do it simply because you want to. But when practical considerations dominate, you ask, "Are these steps the right ones? Have I chosen wisely? Should I be doing something else? Where am I headed with all this?"

And yet I've tried to peg my interest level at the highest, but this is where it also proves to be onerous and perhaps dangerous from the strictly practical point of view. Therefore "Courage!" It's still too early

to say where things will end up. It's step-by-step at this stage where perhaps I have some of the steepest, roughest steps to take. There's still a good deal of uncertainty about this new direction. What route should I take up the mountain? How many provisions should be taken along? How many camps or depots should be made along the way?

So, I will shortly go out for my run. My God, so much of life is routine! Doing the same thing and then, almost as soon as you say it, one's life takes a sharp turn, and then we become nostalgic for the way it was, that old routine we inwardly complained about.

Another couple of letters and then I should be able to see you in the flesh. *Love, Michael*

January 10, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Sunday. Overcast outside. Very peaceful in my little room. Conducive to good work. And I've been working hard this past week as well as thinking about my recent stay in Winnipeg. The wonderful treatment I received from family and friends.

I cut my hair even shorter and shaved off what was left of my beard. However, I haven't been mixing lately with any people in the Department. Only a few surprised reactions so far to my new "millennial look." However, I feel it cleaner and tidier up top. No blotchy mixtures of grey and dark. And good show of cranium. Not a bad feature!

Have some business at Department tomorrow. Straighten out matter of my tuition fees for winter term. You see, they will get deducted from my pay as teaching assistant. Had it easy last term. Still remains to be seen what I'll be doing and who I'll be doing it with.

Also, have a preliminary outline for my thesis project which I'd like to deliver into three sets of hands. Still the question of whether they will understand what I'm doing or be willing to endorse it. Next couple of weeks should tell the story.

How much milder it is here than in Winnipeg! A few days ago, it was pouring rain. And today it's supposed to be minus one. The Outaouais River is only frozen along both shores. Middle still open. I see it every day when I run along the cycling path towards Aylmer, a small town outside Hull. Right now the path is more icy than snowy. Have taken a tumble more than once.

New tenant in this place. Young fellow. Just met him briefly. Don't know what he's up to, but he might be a student. Possibly at the nearby *Université de Québec en Outaouais* (UQO). It's a small place. I run through it's parking lot every day when I'm returning from Aylmer.

Just saw Gilles briefly. Wished him a Happy New Year. Bit of an enigma, that one! His home country, Ivory Coast, is in turmoil right now. Army has seized power. Economy is in the toilet.

Haven't worn my new walking shoes since I came back on the Greyhound bus from out West. Still, I know for sure they're an absolutely perfect fit. Old guy who was helping me in shoe store (possibly owner) was adamant they were too small for me. So, here's an example of the expert being wrong.

But the reason I don't wear them now is I want to spare them from the salt on the roads. So, I wear the hiking boots I brought from Winnipeg, the ones I wore in winter when I was driving taxi.

Had some news from Pablo. He writes a very obscure letter. Only thing that came out clear was his travelling around Portugal with his family over the holidays. But he appears to be distracted. Spoke cryptically of his relationship with Mirriam, of some loss of confidence and betrayal. It was difficult to make it out. He seemed to bear a grudge against her. However, there was some hint of trying to get back together. God only knows what it's all about. I certainly wouldn't have thought her capable of anything, much more likely him.

Well, about time to get to work. Rereading key text right now. Challenging stuff. And to think that nobody in this Department really knows Derrida. There was a graduate student studying him, but he fucked up. He dragged it out far too long and didn't take the necessary steps to get everybody on board.

So, I'll say goodbye for now. Is Al keeping the TV turned down? Has he missed his head lamp? Oh, by the way, I made good use of it on the bus. And even here I use it when going into the shed to unlock my bicycle. *Love, Michael*

January 16, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Snowing outside. Bit milder than the last few days which have been quite bitter. Need to wear long underwear when I cycle to university. Tendency for my head to get cold now due to lack of hair. Have already surprised a few people in Department with my new look but, actually, haven't spent much time there of late. I met my thesis director, Professor Feldspar, last Thursday. Nice easy-going (sometimes too easy-going) man. Discussed my thesis project. He's "easy-going" about it. A few questions and points to clarify but not much more. The real test will be when I meet the two members of my thesis committee, Madame Letocha and Monsieur Dumas, to see what they think. I emailed them Friday to set up appointments. Will check tonight for responses.

Now, I see it's snowing quite heavily. Running on cycling path will be difficult. So far, much more icy than snowy. Have gone for a tumble more than once. Always curse a lot when that happens. River now almost completely frozen over. Wasn't the case when I arrived back from Winnipeg. January has so far been up-and-down. Even heavy rain at one point.

Still don't know who I'll be TA-ing for. Expect to find out this week. My earnings cover my tuition fees with a bit left over.

Pablo still having trouble in his relationship with Mirriam. But all his letters, besides being in bad English, are cryptic. Can't make out exactly what the problem is. He denies its infidelity, either his or hers. So,

maybe they just got a bit tired of each other. On the other hand, Pablo seems to be still in love with her. So, what the upshot will be is anybody's guess.

I'll make this letter short because there isn't much to report. We're in the throes of winter and now getting the worst of it. Winter is hard on my bike, but I keep it well greased. Work hard as usual on project but one always thinks one should be doing more. Hopefully, I'll be able to report positively on my meetings with the two committee members. These should take place this week or the following.

Love, Michael

January 23, 2000

Dear Mom,

Very cold outside. Winnipeg weather. Has been like this all week. Often with a brisk wind too. Really feel it when I cycle over the Alexandra Bridge. My eyes often filled with tears. But I still run every day. Actually, it's easier to bear than cycling. Will go to university this afternoon. Use computer room and possibly library. As you already know, some good news, Professor Dumas, an influential member of my thesis committee, has given my new project a solid endorsement. This will make things much easier, almost assured, one could say, because none of the other members, including my thesis advisor, has real expertise in the area. One strong voice tends to lead all the others. It's human nature. Such is my present thought on the matter, at any rate. As for Madame Letocha, another member of my committee, I saw her Friday afternoon. The meeting with her was a bit frustrating and inconclusive. She directs her concerns more to technical or practical matters rather than to ideas. My feeling is she's conditioned herself over long years to getting students to succeed at their thesis work above all else. So, perhaps not in principle but in practise, she doesn't want to see ambitious philosophical undertakings at this juncture. Her idea is to reduce risks to guarantee success. She thinks one should defer important work to the post-doctoral stage.

Her approach is scatter gun and she talks in French very fast. But she has a good heart and goes out of her way to help. She touched upon a number of issues before she was forced to break off to attend to something else. Later, I decided to make a list of her objections and respond to them. I've isolated six and I've already written a response to the first one. I will continue this exercise for the next month or so. I write in French (I don't have to, but I do) and it takes a lot of time. Parcelling out the answers makes the task easier.

These professors are so busy with other students they can only read quickly, not study what you write. Sometimes you get the impression they don't read it at all. I'm sure they do in general, but the thought that goes into their reading is another matter. They're only human beings, of course, and can only do so much. But, being professionals, they can't be thoroughly candid about this.

Went to the dentist last week for cleaning and checking. Need couple of fillings replaced. Dentist's office is just around the corner. Latest equipment. Haven't seen anything like it. Can see your teeth blown up on a TV screen. And in colour. Perfect picture. About a thousand times enlarged. Dentist shows you where the old filling is separating from the tooth. And I have plenty of old fillings in my mouth. Some

probably thirty or more years old. Very nice dental hygienist tells me I should floss to avoid gum disease. Said there were signs of it. That scared me, so now I've begun to floss just before bed. Make it one more of my habits. Take our habits away and there'd hardly be anything left of us.

Spent more time in the philosophy department this week. Attended a talk as well as a defense of a doctoral thesis. Fellow who hales from New Jersey. His family came up to attend it. He succeeded, and they were very happy and excited. His little entourage! Remarks like "So now we can call you doctor." How many times has this been said before? Well, it's all very nice to have a title, but I'd rather do an impressive work, despite Madame Letocha's warnings.

I will call my thesis advisor, Professor Feldspar, tonight and inform him of my meetings with Dumas and Letocha. He doesn't say a whole lot, but he's always pleasant and willing to help. I take a very strong lead and so myself am not easy to lead. But how can it be otherwise if one truly wants to break new ground?

So, there's another weekly report. I hope your pneumonia has cleared up or will shortly. *Love, Michael*

January 30, 2000

Dear Mom,

Just filled out my driver's license form and will send it off when I mail this letter. Still early, not yet eight o'clock. Has turned milder. Went to computer room at university yesterday. I'm busy answering some objections by one of the members of my committee, Madame Letocha. She wants the thing to follow the normal, beaten, well-trodden path. Of course, I'm resisting, and so we have this exchange going on by writing. I systematically respond to her comments and questions. It takes a lot of time because I write in French. Not that I have to, it just seems more fitting. She always addresses me in French at the university. Good woman but thoroughly institutionalized. Knows nothing but the "scholarly way." As if anything new and venturesome was to be found there. One is always supposed to be borrowing one's light from someone else. Or, at least, that's what they expect as your apprenticeship. Only trouble is, for the vast majority, it becomes the rule of life. They learn no other way.

Guess what? I'm going to be a tutor starting Monday, tomorrow evening for a middle-aged woman called Catherine who's finishing off her Bachelor of Theology degree at St. Paul's University. This institution used to be part of the University of Ottawa and has a beautiful library, mostly religious stuff. People come from all over the world to use it. Can't take books out, generally speaking. They have a good selection on Paul Ricoeur. (Lots of theologians like him.) Anyway, getting back to Catherine, it's rather a fluke this happened, although an email about the job went out to all graduate students in philosophy at the U. of O. Despite this, I got the message from a professor at St. Paul's (more about him later) who introduced himself and said he was calling me on behalf of this student (Catherine) in his first-year ethics class. Apparently, she needed some help because of a learning disability. It turns out I'd received a recommendation from a fellow graduate student who's a friend of this professor and someone, strangely enough, I don't know very well. A bit of a mystery to me. So, I phoned my Chinese friend, Puqun Li, because he knows this graduate student called Patrick better than I do. It turns out that

Puqun Li had received a call from this same professor but wasn't able to take on the job. The professor had my name already given to him by Patrick but still didn't have my phone number and Puqun Li supplied it. The only thing I can think of is that Patrick recommended me to Professor Hare because of something Puqun Li said about me. Anyway, I thought about it a bit and decided to give it a shot. So, I phoned this professor and he told me he'd put my name on a list of people who'd already applied for the job. This list was given to Catherine but with me given a recommendation. Well, lo and behold, I got a message from her before the day was out. Next day, I phoned her and it turned out she'd been in a car accident some years ago. Reading some texts gives her problems. Needs to have ideas verbalized out loud, rearticulated, and so on. I'll see what the problem is Monday.

Now, get this! Do you remember the article you cut out of the newspaper and sent me about a doctoral graduate at the University of Ottawa who opened up a service counselling people by using philosophy? Well, that's Professor Hare. Actually, all he's doing is teaching the one ethics course at St. Paul's. Contract work. He works fulltime for the federal government. I suspect the counselling service didn't work out. Maybe I'll get to meet him at some time in the future.

Also met the student professor at the University of Ottawa I'm assisting this term. Her name is Heather McQuarrie. She's a part-time doctoral student who works for the government full-time in the Department of Defense. Their building is a stone's throw from the campus. I sat in on her class of over a hundred first-year students. She's good, I like her style, but she doesn't know her way around the Department very well, being a part-time student in her second year. In my opinion, she shouldn't be teaching this course because, in addition to working full time for the federal government, she's taking a philosophy course herself. The fact is that teaching takes up a lot of time. There's a lot of preparation to do. And then there's marking. That's where I come in, for the most part. She's actually enlisting my aid to get certain matters straightened out because of lack of time and because of not knowing who to go see about such-and-such. Will attend to this tomorrow.

So, you see, my life's a tad more entwined with teaching matters than before Christmas. Heather even asked me if I wanted to take over a class at some point.

Ethics, what a messy business it is! Everybody's got their own point of view. And there are religious people in these classes who protest the way it's taught. I can't say I blame them. *Love, Michael*

February 6, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early in the morning as usual. Winter's grip on us still very much in place. Snowed yesterday. Will encounter that extra snow on the cycling path when I go running this morning. Have been invited over to Puqun Li's for supper. Plan to freak out his four-year-old son, Star, with my "new look." By the way, still have people in philosophy department who, having not seen me since December, have difficulty recognizing me. Some say it makes me look younger. No doubt that's attributable to the removal of grey hair. But I must say, for my part, I've grown accustomed to it. Indeed, hardly ever conscious of it now. Just have to be sure to cover my head in winter.

Last Monday tutored at St. Paul's University for the first time. You recall? A middle-aged woman called Catherine. But this Monday, tomorrow evening, that is, I'll be tutoring three women. All friends of hers, all students in the same ethics course. Catherine asked me if I'd tutor her friends along with her for an hourly rate not yet agreed upon. Last Monday, I discussed philosophical points and issues with Catherine for two and a half hours. Received \$35 for it (\$15 per hour). These women are all middle-aged or elderly church-going types. They're very interested, but their background in philosophy – at least, formal philosophy or philosophy as history – is virtually nil. Should be interesting to see how it goes tomorrow. At least, this time I'll be better prepared. That is to say, I've now had a chance to read some of the texts they're studying. Otherwise, it's sometimes difficult to answer their questions.

Had a minor skirmish with Heather McQuarrie, the student professor I'm TA-ing for. It happened last Friday after her class. Had trouble all week trying to get hold of her. She never seemed to be in. Then, Friday, she started telling me what my duties were as if it were my first go as a teaching assistant or as if I were a private in the army and she was the sergeant. As I mentioned, she works full-time with the Department of National Defense. She is only a part-time doctoral student. Anyway, it cleared over quickly enough. However, she does remind me of a potential burn-out case. She keeps accusing the philosophy department of not having their act together. It's as if she thinks information should be given to her the way it's done in the army, that is, with perpetual briefings. By contrast, in the university, you have to go look for it. But she's never around the Department or university except when she teaches or attends the one course she's taking. Her manner might be described as mannish or military. She teaches her ethics course largely by drawing on army issues. No question of her intelligence, just that I don't think that, with all she's doing at present, she should be teaching this course. Well, we'll see how it goes. I'll help her out as much as I can, but she'd better drop that "officer" attitude towards me.

Still working on my second thesis committee member, Madame Letocha, to get her to "see things my way." She wants my project to be less bold and ambitious, less risky. But taking risks as an ethical matter or issue is precisely what I want to do or deal with (performatively speaking) as part of what it is to do philosophy. God, what have I to do with being a safe and secure scholar! I leave that to others. Anyway, I answered some of her objections on paper once again, very carefully, nicely, politely, maybe even charmingly, but also firmly. Even boldly with a certain amount of audacity which, of course, can also charm. Anyway, she hasn't given me a response as yet, if she ever does. But I dropped by her office Friday afternoon and she was very pleasant, indeed, amused. So, nothing I wrote could've shocked or upset her too much, even though she's a representative of the system I'm criticizing and one, moreover, who is often a staunch defender of it.

Well, it would be nice to have her as well as Monsieur Dumas in my corner. There is only Professor Geraets to worry about. He is my third committee member and a semi-retired professor. Now, you must understand not only am I trying to depart from the norm in the writing of my thesis, but I'm also including within it a philosopher who is notorious and not well appreciated by many or even most academic philosophers. I'm speaking of Jacques Derrida who, by the way, also happens to be very difficult. Some respectable people even think he writes nonsense.

The time is moving around to eight o'clock. The day promises to be sunny. There is pleasant classical music playing on my little radio. Oh, I got an email recently from Pablo, but he's still not saying much. He prefers to make jokes and insult me in bad English. However, he does keep inviting me to come over to Spain. Too bad I wasn't free to do that.

Now, I shall go and do some work. More of the same. And yet it's never quite the same. The fact that I've loaded more on my back than others is compensated by being more highly motivated. At least, such is the case with writing this doctoral thesis. *Love, Michael*

February 13, 2000

Dear Mom,

Starting off grey and overcast. Was up at 6am. Have already done a bit of work. A test is scheduled for the class in which I'm a teaching assistant. So, last Friday, Heather McQuarrie, the student professor, gave me a copy of the test she'd drawn up the night before. I'll probably be marking some eighty tests. A lot of work! Take me about a week because I usually make a lot of comments. Many don't do this, limiting themselves to assigning a grade. But I find this impoverishing. Better to give the little extra and get some satisfaction in a job well done (however detestable it may be).

Looks like I'm going to be a popular TA for this class. I caught the last half of it on Friday and, after it was over, three or four young women approached me. They wanted to know my office hours (Tuesday between 3:00 and 4:30pm) and when I'd be available to meet them. It's the test coming up that's got them nervous. Most of them have virtually no grounding in philosophy. Another problem is the text they're supposed to be using and studying isn't available. Frankly speaking, teaching with student profs leaves something to be desired. Of a class that numbers one hundred and sixteen, only about fifty were there Friday. Not a good showing.

Tomorrow evening, I will go tutoring again at St. Paul's University. Now I have four students. Catherine, the woman I started with, gave my name to some official for further reference. Amazing how fast it has gone, considering it all came to me. I certainly didn't look for this work, but now it agrees with me and we'll see how it goes.

Thesis work progressing as usual. I'm trying to read a few texts spread out over a certain area to be comfortably prepared when I put them all aside. And that's got to happen next month. Otherwise, I tend to drag things out. But I like to know what I'm talking about. Otherwise, you get into that feigning mode, and there's enough of it already.

One thing I can say: I'm lucky with my present accommodation. Never have any problems with noise or disturbances. And that's good considering the cheap rent. Fellow called Joslyn comes here three times a week to clean the bathroom and vacuum the hallway. Very nice and agreeable. About fifty-three. His son is currently training to be a provincial police officer.

I've a big pile of snow outside my window. A virtual Everest. You see, I'm right next door to a parking lot owned by Albert Legras, my landlord. (He's originally from France.) It'll take a while before it disappears in the spring.

Went bowling Friday evening. First time in years. Five pin. That's what I'm used to. There were only five of us from the philosophy department. We expected there to be more. I didn't bowl too badly, better than most. After three games, my companions went off to the bar, but, instead, I got on my bike and went home. Putting down money for something I can do without, well, I leave that to the younger ones.

Should be turning the corner on the coldest weather soon. I look forward to it like so many others. And I'm sure you're looking forward to it too. I like the seasons of transition: spring and fall. The mood of looking back, each time a certain delicacy of feeling, a certain poignancy, caught up in the strange mixture of the singularity of our experiences and their universal aspect.

Now, I shall return to McQuarrie's test and see what answers I myself can give it. Test won't be given until the next class on Friday. I'll help out by receiving my share of the test papers to correct afterwards. About two-thirds of the total.

So, once again I bid you adieu. Got to go to the dentist's for new fillings on the 18th. Dentist also wants to put a bridge in my mouth, but it no doubt costs a bundle. Would be a replacement of what's already there from Dr. Lachance's work in Winnipeg. Something I had done before I went to Europe. Also flossing regularly at night. Dental hygienist told me I had some gum disease. Actually, it feels good to get between the teeth with the floss. A mixture of pain and pleasure, like scratching an itch. *Love, Michael*

February 19, 2000

Dear Mom,

This is a change. Writing you Saturday evening. But I'll have a busy day tomorrow, starting early. I've about seventy-five tests to mark and it isn't going to be fun. Some of the students have pretty fuzzy notions about what's going on. For example, one young lady phoned me a couple of days ago for help. I explained things to her for an hour. It's doubly hard because I'm not teaching the course. She's not interested in thinking but rather wants to memorize everything. Reminded me of a slow-learning high school student. Doubt she'll pass. Probably the last philosophy course she takes.

That McQuarrie woman's a pain! The problem now is over the division of labour, who should be correcting how many tests and so on. Rather than negotiating with me, she acts like we're in the military and I'm her subordinate. All of a sudden, she becomes greatly concerned about me working all of the 120 hours I'm supposed to. It's the second time she's brought it up and it really pisses me off. It's as if I'm a potential shirker and she's got to make sure I don't cheat the university. It's all bullshit because, being only a part-time, second-year student in the doctoral program, she doesn't know her ass from a hole in the ground. She's like the officer out in the field who has to rely on the sergeant major for advice. Well, I'm the sergeant major here but it's all rot. I'm drawing up a record of my hours and I'll be as scrupulous about keeping track of my time as she seems to think is necessary. And you know what? No doubt I'll be working over my required number of hours.

Then she phones me today and wants to talk like we're old friends. Had trouble getting off the phone. Even started to feel sorry for her. Doesn't like her job in the military or at least some aspects of it. Always complaining about not being appreciated. Lives way out of the city. Has to spend an hour and a half on the bus every day. No family in the city, mother dead, single, probably no boyfriend, given her abrasive manner. And, on top of this, I suspect she's a drinker. Always talking about getting a bottle of wine. And, sometimes over the phone, I hear what sounds like ice rattling in a glass. Get the feeling she's half-cut. Perhaps a closet alcoholic.

Received your little epistle. It was easy for me to imagine the scene just as you described it. "Come on, Jackson! Smarten up!" "Harlan, will you get over here!" "Now, Siobhan, take it easy! You're going to spill it!" And on and on.

But you're right, John has a good heart. And if we were all taken to task for our bad habits, we could, like Hamlet, ask, "*Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?*"

The Everest of a snow pile outside my window is even higher. But soon, any day now, it'll start to melt and go down.

Went and saw a movie last night called "Topsy-Turvy." About Gilbert and Sullivan, the time they're having a falling out before putting on their best piece "The Mikado." Extremely well acted. Very much behind-the-scenes stuff but also onstage too. I'm sure you would love it. Great costumes, sets, music, acting, and so on.

We've had some snowfall in the last week or two. Sometimes I'm running knee-deep through it on the bicycle path. Skidoo tracks help. I turn back at the Champlain Bridge and go from the path to an open road. Always a relief to leave the snow behind. Run by a school with kids out at recess. Sometimes a ball goes over the fence. They call: "*Monsieur, monsieur! La balle, la balle!*" They want it thrown back into the yard. Then, shortly after that, there's the small campus of the *Université du Québec en Outaouais*. I run through the parking lot and onto the main road leading towards downtown Hull. Buildings there are lovely inside. New classrooms with huge windows overlooking river. Sunlight galore! Makes the ones at the University of Ottawa look drab.

Well, I'll have my evening cup of cocoa, but first I'll do my one hundred leg raises. I do them in the morning also. Makes my stomach hard as rock. Oh, I went to dentist for a filling. Very fast service. First dentist other than Dr. Lachance in over thirty years. Having a few problems with student dental plan. Seems like they're trying to pull a fast one. They claim scaling is not part of basic cleaning. In other words, instead of one hundred percent coverage, they give only ten per cent. Well, we'll see. *Love,*
Michael

February 26, 2000

Dear Mom,

Day of my birthday. Spent it correcting and marking tests. Have been at it all week and I'm thoroughly sick of it. Seventy-five of the suckers to do and all by less-than-inspired first-year students with a less than brilliant professor in class. So I end up with a lot of mediocre, often poorly hand-written tests to look at, evaluate, and comment on. Trying at the same time not to come into conflict with the professor's way of teaching the material. That's not always easy.

So that's my week. Not much to report there. It's melting and the snow is receding. Big pile outside my window has noticeably gone down. And the bicycle path on which I run is, of course, slushy and slippery. And of course all the dirt's coming out. Cloudy the last few days. Maybe the whole week. Suits the way I feel, strapped as I am to this task of correcting and marking. Hope to see the end of it by Monday. I've dragged it out too long. The students have my red ink all over the place. Just hope they can read my comments.

Then Tuesday afternoon, I have to monitor three students who missed the test day due to sickness. (I hate this!)

I'll keep this letter short, if you don't mind. I simply don't have much to say. Oh, I called Patricia last night. She'd just got home. Told me she'd sent me a card with something the kids had written, but I haven't received it yet. Nor have I received your card.

Life is generally a messy business. Getting born is and so is dying. And we make a mess every day. And I see it in these young students' writing. The messy thinking and mine too. Maybe just a little better in this area. Struggling to keep on top of it, contain it, like you in the kitchen or in the house generally. But it also comes in more "spiritual" forms. Order is fought for, particularly in institutions with some success, but never without a price. Like a certain standardization that leads back to a certain kind of messiness. Messiness in the sense that philosophy isn't supposed to be rote learning. All these kids' answers seem so much the same as if they were so many heads growing out of one body. *Love, Michael*

March 5, 2000

Dear Mom,

Another grey morning. About freezing. Just heard on the radio you'll get plus nine today. (That's balmy.) Finished all my marking of tests earlier in the week. What a relief! How much red ink! These students undoubtedly have poorer writing than social skills. Anyhow, it's over and I was able to get back to what interests me. So, that's what I've been doing most of the week. Busy with reading, studying, and taking notes. Hard to talk about this sort of thing. Lucky with the room. Quiet. No problems with noisy neighbours. Speaking of noise, I notice all the water birds have returned to their nesting places on the little islets of the Outaouais River. They make a raucous noise, a real community of them – seagulls mostly. It just seems like a little while ago I saw the last geese heading south. Now hardly any snow on cycling path. Makes running a lot easier. Running through snow is what I do in winter and, as it seems,

no on else. Others either walk or use snowshoes. And then there are snowmobilers who help to flatten the snow and make running easier. At spots, however, it was almost knee-deep. But I'd already done this sort of thing before on Churchill Drive in Fort Rouge along a stretch of the Assiniboine River. Morning training runs as a teenager with Harvey Pearce, our paraplegic, bald-headed, gruff-sounding coach, and the small group of dedicated runners: Laurie Groves (a golden boy who later became a doctor), Ken Allen (a reliable, honest teenager who had an alcoholic mother), Gordon Cardinal (a gifted athlete who was later severely injured in a tragic car accident), and Linda James (an exceptional student and athlete who became my unrequited love). I was all of fifteen. I'm fortunate I'm still able to do the same thing. Must have good genes.

Gilles came to my room the other day. You know, the guy from the Ivory Coast who claims to be a lawyer. Hard to figure out what's going on. By all appearances, intelligent, knowledgeable, and well educated. Shows interest in many areas. Good conversationalist. We talked pleasantly for an hour. Then he tells me a strange thing. He says he's being hassled by the phone company over \$1200 they claim he owes on his Bell Canada Card. You know, the card you can use to make long-distance calls at pay phones. Well now, he tells me he's only used the card to make one local call. So what's going on? He says he's tried to get information on these calls but so far without success. They just hassle him over the phone and demand money from him. (It sounds very fishy.) They told him he must've given his card and pin number to somebody else, but he denies this. According to him, somebody must've managed to get access to his service. Very strange! Also strange is his telling me about this as he's leaving my room and as if it were a mere after-thought. Hell, if that happened to me, I'd be hitting the roof. So, this is what makes me suspicious: his off-hand way of treating the matter along with the unlikelihood of the phone company browbeating him if a hacker was behind it all. One thing I do believe though is they've cut off his service. Well, let me tell you, I'm not handling any more of his calls. Enough is enough!

Finally got the very nice birthday card from Patricia and family. She put down all the kids' remarks. Notice the difference between Jackson and Siobhan's comments. His short "I love you, Uncle Mike," versus her more energetic "Make sure to come back next Christmas, Uncle Mike, so we can play Turtle and Horse again." He needs to be helped to find his special area of development or else he's going to stay in the shadow of his younger siblings and suffer by it.

I can hardly imagine how I would've felt if Carla, Sharon, or Ryle had been besting me while growing up. I'm sure I would've carried it around like a shameful thing. Nobody can be more sensitive to criticism than a kid growing up. Why do you think you hear of these incidents where guys (they're always guys but that's another issue) go into schools and blow others away? To my mind, he should be put on a diet and into some helpful program rather than be obliged to endure his father's constant harangues. But this is an old story: how parents can cripple their children without knowing it. Thank God, I'd a mother who helped to make me strong and independent.

So, there it is for another ordinary week. I trust you're getting some sleep at nights. Once again, thanks for the money you sent as a birthday present. I can tell you I didn't go out and blow it. (I used it for groceries.) As always, I've got to make the best use of the time and money I have. *Love, Michael*

March 12, 2000

Dear Mom,

Guess what? Winter outside. A thick layer of snow deposited overnight. And it's still snowing. Fairly gusty as well. My mountain bike broke down a few days ago. Pedal fell off. Threads stripped in the hole where the pedal screws into the pedal arm. Had to go out and buy a new pedal arm (\$30) as well as new pedals (\$11). Now just have to fit them onto my bike but, of course, need reasonably warm weather. I took the opportunity a couple of days ago to clean the bike. Boy, was it filthy! The accumulation of dirt and grease from all winter. You see, I grease it regularly through the winter, not simply oil. Only way to protect it. So, I needed to use lots of rags soaked in gasoline to clean it up. Stripped it right down to the bearings. I have to reassemble it now, but of course not today.

Heather and I worked out the affair with the low marks in her class. (As I told you over the phone, all the students complained about my marking.) Everyone gets three additional points. On Friday, Heather showed a movie about the war between Serbia and Bosnia in 1995. Various women's groups working inside the country to help people get along under difficult conditions and, in some way, resist the war and its extreme nationalism. Three young ladies came to see me about the test. Seems like there is a definite gender split in these classes. Guys are much less likely to put themselves in the role of suppliant. It's something I only did once – at Concordia or, rather, it was while taking a course at McGill as a visiting student. Was given a B but, at my request, professor allowed me to rewrite essay. Then I received an A minus. I figured my grades had already suffered enough due to the trouble I'd got into with three professors. At the graduate level, people will kill to have a B plus turned into an A minus. After all, it can make the difference between getting a lucrative scholarship or getting into a certain university or not. Hence the danger that's built into the system of turning students into sycophants. The whole business of chasing after money by advertising and selling yourself. It's definitely not to my taste. But most will swallow their pride, especially if they have a chance at getting their hands on ten or fifteen thousand dollars. It's really quite competitive. You have to be a hard worker and excellent scholar, no question. At the same time, however, the system can undermine one's character. You learn to recognize what works and what to conform to. The practical side is all that counts and whatever ideal or ideals were initially there get shunted aside. One no longer reaches for the impossible dream; one goes for the brass ring instead.

Still snowing. This might keep up all day. My room definitely needs a spring cleaning. *C'est une porcherie*. Oh, here's some news! Gilles, the guy from Ivory Coast, left for home last night. He said money was sent to him from his family. Why he couldn't save the necessary amount while working here is beyond me. Furthermore, Bell Canada is still after him for \$1200. They sent him a list of calls from his phone, some of which were made to Barbados. Again, he claims to know nothing about it. He seems to have a highly developed knack for mixing truth with falsehood. The most likely scenario is he loaned his phone card to some guy in a bar. I remember him telling me he'd lent fifty dollars to a guy he'd just met and who claimed he needed it to get to Toronto. When I asked him why he lent money to a stranger, he

appeared to think nothing was out of the ordinary about this. For him, it was simply a matter of finding the person trustworthy. He didn't go into specifics, and it's precisely this "parsimony" that make me suspect he's a practised liar. So practised he no longer makes a distinction between telling the truth and lying. Or perhaps he lies simply to keep at the top of his game.

Strange fellow! I guess I'll never know what he was all about. Is he a lawyer? Read a story about a guy in Switzerland who passed himself off for twenty years as an eminent doctor. Turned out to be bogus, but he fooled everyone. Then tragic ending: he killed his wife, parents, and children.

Enough for now. Hopefully, when I write again, it will be more like spring. Now time to begin another day of study. I'm a studying machine! *Once more into the breach, dear friends! Love, Michael*

March 18, 2000

Dear Mom,

Cold weather persisting but nice and sunny this morning. Maybe it'll warm up. Have started preparations for my proposal. Should keep me busy for the next couple of weeks. This would mean submitting it by end of March or early April. Close to one year from the day I submitted my first proposal. So you get an idea of how much additional work comes from this second time around. Also, I'm trying to do something different and it remains to be seen whether it will be accepted. So, in this sense, nothing has changed.

Guess what? I lost my pupil, the woman I was tutoring at St. Paul's University. Had a feeling it would come to this. She'd cancelled the last couple of sessions, claiming to be too busy. But I suspect she didn't think she was making enough progress while counting every penny. These church people! They strike me as being unbelievably tight. All she wanted was an hour a week. This from somebody who can barely read a sentence without problems. And, to complicate matters, she and her friends, as she me told me herself, are primarily concerned with getting A's. (Talk about superficiality!) Furthermore, it was only after I called her to find out how things stood after two cancellations that she informed me of her decision. Really, for an hour a week, it's hardly worth it.

Everything settled down now with the mid-term tests and the reaction of the students to the low marks I gave them. Heather played Santa Claus and doled out five additional marks. No doubt she'll be asking me to go easier on them when it's time to write the final exam.

Waiting for over a week now for a nice warm day so I can repair my mountain bike. As I told you, pedal fell off. Needed to buy new parts (\$41), but the bike's worth it. Riding in winter is awfully hard on it. They use so much salt on the roads and sidewalks.

As I told you, Gilles is gone, leaving his unpaid bill of \$1200. I'd like to know what really happened there. I suspect he lent his phone card to somebody. One thing about that guy: he was poor as a church mouse but didn't stop himself from buying expensive clothes. Who knows what kind of people he was hanging out with?

Well, I continue to live my hermit-like existence. I'm by no means in love with it. It's just that I'm not in love with anything else and certainly averse to much that comes with too many people around. Oh, I can get along well enough with everybody, I suppose, and I go to occasional social events. But it's certainly not something I couldn't do without. It never touches me deeply nor I it. It's a two-way street: you get what you put in.

I wish I could say that for my writing attempts. How much I put in and seem to get nothing. And here I'm still at it, only in a different way. Amazing my spirit hasn't been broken (so I flatter myself). A certain resistance – hereditary, no doubt. Able to live with minimal props in greatest country in world. People all over are dying to get here so, if you're poor here, it's nothing.

Just the other day, terrible road accident in some rural area. Daycare centre. Woman driving station wagon or van. Kids all loaded up in it but no special seats for them. Hadn't gone a kilometer when she lost control, went into oncoming traffic. Car then smacked into her on the side, sending all the little ones out into the snow (sprawling lifeless). They were on their way to a maple syrup festival. Kids all excited, then tragedy. Brutal end.

But how else does life have value except through death? Somebody else's death and that includes even children. I speak at the wider level of understanding and, of course, not in the narrowly circumscribed one of grieving parents and other members of the family. But we all read the newspapers and it's surely not to experience their pain. Or, if we do, it's pain at a distance. It may also be something that dares not speak its name. *"Dans l'adversité de nos meilleurs amis, nous trouvons toujours quelque chose qui nous ne déplaît pas."* (Larochevoucault)

So much of custom and convention are like the clothes we wear to cover up the baser parts. Only a few can strike a magnificent pose in the nude and, even then, for how long? We are not statues like Michelangelo's David. So, some of us dress simply and others badly and others poorly and others flashily and others tastefully and others richly, and then, after all this, there are not only costumes but a play.

Well, enough scribbling for this week. I trust you're getting a reasonable amount of sleep. "Sleep, that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care." Crows outside my window making an awful racket. Celebrating spring, let's hope. *Love, Michael*

March 26, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Classical music on radio. Sunny out. Should be reasonably mild today. Already running in shorts. Yesterday, familiar signs of spring. V-shaped flocks of geese overhead. They consume tremendous amounts of energy while flying. They rotate their positions, all ending up at the front at some point. A similar rotating is the practise with teams in competitive cycling. Did it once while in Montreal. Thought that I, a forty-four-year old in excellent condition, could stay up with the best girl cyclists. Found it to be not so. (No doubt they train like the devil for competition.) However, heavier then by possibly fifteen or twenty pounds. Makes a big difference when cycling over a distance or uphill.

Still haven't repaired my mountain bike. Bad weather the biggest reason. Also, very busy with final preparations for thesis proposal. Didn't want to leave anything to chance as far as its form and presentation. Must be scholarly but also something original and independent. So, it's all rather painstaking. Every day I work at it and I'm definitely getting closer. I'll be happy to see the end of this. At the same time, I enjoy it because it's exploring new territory. I bet few in the Department experience this as acutely as I do. For the most part, it's systematically discouraged. Scholarly maxim: Strive to be the reflected light of some sun and not a sun oneself.

I'll have to give this room a spring cleaning. Hopefully, the proposal work won't drag out more than two or three weeks. Have neglected it for at least a couple of months. Not that it's all that bad, though certainly it's not up to your high standards. Better than the guy across the hall, Paul, who's part of the night cleaning staff at the University of Ottawa. You wouldn't even want to look into his room. He's a bit odd, locking his door even when going to the john. As if somebody were anxious to get into his rat's nest. You'd think he had thousands of dollars stashed away! The guy's been acting lately as if he were pissed off at me. I more or less ignore his bad moods, his paranoia, or whatever it is. At least he's quiet.

Gilles moved out and very soon another black dude moved in. Just spoke with him briefly the other day. Hales from Burundi in Central Africa, dirt-poor country, worse than Ivory Coast. But he spent eight years in Cuba before coming here. Received his training there as engineer. Now he needs to upgrade to meet our standards. Seems we always assume in the West we have the highest. He's still busy getting to know the surrounding area. He tells me Cuba has an excellent reputation in Africa. It sends its doctors and nurses there to train people. Also, people go to Cuba for training in various professions. It's free too. Only a country of eleven million people and cut off entirely from U.S. market. By the way, they're still holding onto that six-year-old Cuban boy in Florida. Dirty business, making him a political football. I hope he's reunited soon with his father.

Still talking about that bad accident in newspaper. One in which eight pre-school children were killed. The driver was the mother of one of the children. She was just recently released from hospital. Inquest going on. Still don't know how it was that she lost control of the minivan. It veered into the incoming traffic, then got smacked full square on the side. Was carrying ten children of whom only two survived. Imagine her situation! Not only grief for her child but feeling responsible for other deaths. A veritable massacre of wee kids. Bad luck or a moment's carelessness?

I'm glad nothing like that ever happened to me as a taxi driver. While driving with passengers, I always drove carefully. When alone, another matter. Chasing for fares, gotta hustle! Bust your ass to make some money! Actually, it's rather game-like beating other cabbies to the punch. With experience, you get pretty good. But you end up hating red lights, especially long ones. Good thing it wasn't like here in Quebec. Still can't turn right on red. Terrible for taxi driving but great for cyclists and pedestrians. In Ottawa it's like Manitoba, so it depends what side of the river you're on.

Ice still in the river. Big chunks I noticed held up by Alexandra Bridge. Oh, read in the newspaper an iceberg spotted south of New Zealand bigger than Jamaica. Imagine! You could practically establish a country on it. How long will it take to melt?

Reading Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Very slow but full of rich detail. Set in France, late nineteenth century. Hero is frail romantic boy who aspires to be great writer but doubts himself and procrastinates. As adult, glories on reflecting on all the details of his past life and transforming it into art.

Well, that's it for the week. Back to work now. It's coming together slowly but surely. I think I can swing it, and I think the game will be worth the candle. *Love, Michael*

April 2, 2000

Dear Mom,

Well, I forgot to make the call to Patricia and John last night. Reason: I was having a problem with my new neighbour, black guy who has occupied a small room adjacent to mine and has a very loud voice. As bad luck would have it, he moved in about the same time the other guy did, the one from Burundi who studied in Cuba. He's right across from him, so they keep their doors open and talk across the hallway past 11pm. Furthermore, this second guy had obviously been drinking. He wasn't too respectful when I asked him to keep it down. It wasn't the first time. (I suspect he takes me to be a killjoy.) Anyway, it did get appreciably quieter, but I'll likely be encountering this problem in the future. At least, as long as he's here. So, atmosphere in rooming house is definitely taking a turn for the worse. (The same thing happened on Wright Street. A drunken oaf took exception to my sharing the kitchen with him and then picked up a knife and pointed it at me.) Well, I'll monitor the situation and, if I have to, I'll complain to the owner. (He'll see that I have teeth.)

Yesterday I finished an important stage of my work: a detailed outline of what I'm doing. Soon I'll fill out the official form with it along with a rough table of contents and bibliography. But the major part of the work has already been done. I'd like to get it out of the way before I have to correct final exams.

Oh, I visited The Nox, the university pub, this week for the first time. One student I was with had just received his degree. Took him six years but he spent most of them in The Nox. Even worked and studied there. I couldn't do it whereas he, on the contrary, couldn't work in the library. Too quiet for him. Said he'd either get sleepy or horny. Big American guy who played football in college. This get-together in the pub, it just occurred after another fellow called Dean (who's also American) had defended his thesis proposal and had a rough time of it. In fact, committee didn't present him with a decision. Postponed till following week. One member had to leave prematurely. They'll pass the thing but ask for substantial changes. Dean will of course go along with this.

It's quiet right now. Suppose I made a lot of noise to disturb the repose of my black friend? Would he appreciate it? But this guy is no doubt a loser in life and so one has to be tolerant (ha-ha!) I have ear plugs and a fan to drown out background noise. Only once did he play his music loud, and it happened to be the type with a steady backbeat. (Grrr!)

Getting back a small refund from the dentist. Forty-seven dollars for the cleaning of my teeth which was the issue the insurance company gave me a hard time over. They'd put the scraping into another category with only ten percent coverage. Anyway, secretary told me, on account of my complaining, five other students on the same plan were getting refunds. I was the catalyst for this windfall.

It's cloudy out and I don't think it's going to warm up much. Still have to fix my mountain bike that's disassembled in shed out in back. Bad smell there from gasoline, so I shouldn't leave it too long. Some spare furniture there: old mattresses, chairs, tables, desks, etc.

The big hill of snow out back has almost disappeared. Now mostly a pile of left-over gravel. This year landlord will pave the parking lot and put in drainage – city demands it.

I think that's about it. Scratching my head, trying to come up with more news but not much forthcoming. Should give Aunt Olive and Aunt Jane a call. Haven't spoken to them since Christmas.

I'll phone Patricia tonight and wish her happy birthday. Oh, thanks for sending me the Christmas snaps. Yes, I really do believe it's better for me to shave completely. This was Carla's suggestion and she has an eye for such things.

So, until next Sunday, I bid you adieu. Did you find Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*? It's a slow read but not as much as James Joyce's *Ulysses*. There you have to be practically conversant in five languages. Hardly anyone can read it. Imagine spending ten years writing such a novel! And then he outdid himself with another one called *Finnegan's Wake* that took seventeen years and is totally incomprehensible. Love, Michael

April 9, 2000

Dear Mom,

Winter outside. Yes, we received some heavy snowfall. Thick carpet of white. Was blowing quite strongly yesterday. Didn't even bother going out to run. Today it's still wintry looking. I read in the newspaper the whole St. Lawrence-Great Lakes System is very low. It's even affecting shipping and pleasure-boating. So, perhaps this extra precipitation will improve the situation.

Went to see a movie last night (rare event!) called "American Beauty." Super script, casting, and acting. About a guy in his forties who wants to get out of the rut he's in. All sorts of freaky characters. The dialogue is like you hear with the Shibou kids every day. Teenagers are an important part of the film. Beautiful girl in there that reminded me of Meka. The main character is obsessed with not being ordinary. Film probes everyone's vulnerabilities. No one is spared, but it's all done in good sport. You should you go see it.

Have finished writing a part of my proposal. Will drop it off to my thesis director who I go for months without seeing. The rest of it will have to wait for a while. Reason: will be correcting final exams shortly. Have copy of the exam now and, going beyond the call of duty, I'm doing it myself. It should be easier correcting this time. Heather changed the format to make it clear and straightforward. It's not a task I relish, but the money I get for it certainly helps.

Problem persists with my neighbour, so I complained to the landlord. He woke me up at 4am Saturday with his loud music. So drunk he couldn't put together a coherent sentence. (No, neither in French nor English and he has the effrontery to tell me he's bilingual.) Well, at least, it's quiet this morning. Oh, and

this guy is supposed to be a student at the U. of O. in the doctoral program of the Department of Criminology. Imagine! The guy's not a kid either, he looks to be in his forties. He's also out of shape, ugly, and, when drunk, talks like an absolute ass. So, I don't think his prospects even with a degree are particularly good.

Back to the film. It's strange how you feel after coming out. It's as if everything has taken on a new lustre, a new significance, a greater intensity and deeper interest. This seems to come from the opposite, that is, feeling you're in a rut, doing more or less the same thing every day. It definitely has a dulling effect, no matter what it is. With me, it's not intellectual but rather social. There are few people who I take a strong interest in, and most of these, I'd have to say, are in fiction or history. So, I always feel there's something missing. And don't think for a minute I consider it to be other people's fault. No, rather, I have this congenital incapacity to put more into this part of my life. To recreate the situations that nourish it. Remember Milton's great line: "The mind can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven." So, one can do much simply by having the right attitude. But all this requires energy that has to be taken from somewhere else. In my case, it must from the social to the intellectual and philosophical realm. Easy enough for some to go lukewarm here. In fiction or on stage, people drop their masks or have them torn off. This is what distinguishes it most from the day to day.

Mid-morning is afoot, I must return to my work. Exam preparation. What went on between you and Carla, I think, is of no great moment. You didn't say anything that wasn't already a reflection, a doubt, a shadowy concern. Not all bases were covered. Isn't that what it amounts to? Maybe she didn't perform well in all ways, but who does?

Their children are primarily an outgrowth of their general concern for material well-being, for a life charged with activities, enjoyment, diversions, etc. It certainly wasn't a life of duty, discipline, devotion, and so on.

We can read it better now that certain chapters have been written. The direction of things and where and how they get their start. The things that are all condensed in a ninety-minute film, for example.

Love, Michael

April 16, 2000

Dear Mom,

Today starting off overcast whereas yesterday was sunny, warm, and beautiful. After I spoke with you and Siobhan, I went running. So warm I took off my shirt. And later I worked the afternoon on my bike, cleaning and doing a repair job. Also with shirt off. Best time to get tan, avoid burn, sun's rays still too weak.

A pile of exams to correct. Almost ninety. Hideous sight! Keep me busy for at least a week. I put down a lot of comments although they're not returned. Only those who make a request ever get to see them. Repetitious, boring work. Be glad when it's over. Then I can get back to my proposal.

Let me tell you about incident last Wednesday. Supposed to help out Heather with exam. It was scheduled for 7pm, so I go the university. Come 6:30 or so, I look for Heather. Can't find her. Exam is taking place in big lecture hall, the kind designed like theatre and stage. Before exam starts, hall is full of students patiently waiting or doing some last-minute studying. But no Heather! Go to building where philosophy department is. She's not there either. Wait a bit, then go back to hall. Now 7pm. Finally she rolls in at last minute. Tells me breathlessly she's just had a horrible experience. But first must distribute exams and accompanying booklets. So, here's the situation: there's this girl called Robin who's been pestering Heather for extra help right from the first class. Always holding her up for a half-hour to hour. Even calls her regularly at work. This runty-faced kid, around twenty, has a learning disability. She gets to spend four hours writing her exam, an hour more than others, and in special building on campus. Well, here's what happened: Heather was with Robin when she started the exam. Then she spent forty-five-minutes on the bus to get home. (Why a person with no car and who doesn't drive would live so far out is beyond me.) Shortly after, she got a call saying that Robin had her hands on a version of the exam with all the answers. In fact, it was the same version Heather had supplied me with. For some reason, the assistant let Robin begin the exam with the answer sheet right in front of her. But finally this person got hold of Heather on the phone, told her what was going on, and so Heather's first reaction was to invalidate the exam. At the same time, she wanted to talk to Robin about it and then guess what. The girl ended up throwing a fit, insisting she wouldn't rewrite the exam and deserved nothing less than an A+. On and on it went, Heather not knowing what to do. The girl was absolutely impossible to deal with. (You can bet that Heather now has a different view of her.) In any event, she finally called a cab and rushed back to the Special Aids Centre. There she basically gave in, allowing Robin to do the final long-answer question. This question was apparently the only one she still hadn't done when Heather arrived. Answering this question would now constitute her whole exam. Presumably then she would get her A+. Heather of course feels victimized, but it's pretty much her own fault. Did the girl's over-dependence on her satisfy some deep-seated need? How else to explain her putting up with this over an extended period of time?

Now I have to start in on these exams. A herculean task like cleaning the Augean stables or combatting the dreaded Hydra. No sooner chop off one head than another pops up.

It's a slow spring. Where are the leaves? But chirping birds there are aplenty. My neighbour very quiet the past week. It's as if somebody put the fear of God into him. Hope it stays that way.

Oh, almost forgot! Went to the Ottawa Art Gallery for the first time even though it's only across Alexandra Bridge. Beautiful building. Only some ten years old. You'd love it. Biggest and best in Canada. Lots of Canadian art. Alex Colville exhibition coming in June. Will go see it. If you'd come to Ottawa last summer, I'm sure we'd have gone there. Talked to security guard from Somalia. Lonely job. Most people only converse with paintings. *Love, Michael*

April 22, 2000

Dear Mom,

Still hard at work correcting exams. Although today I finished early and went to computer room to work on my proposal. At least another three days with exams. Ninety is a lot. It's the most tedious work! I'll be so glad when it's over.

Weather here has been absolutely the shits. Can't remember a cooler, greyer spring. Day after day same thing. Depressing! Right now I hear the cars swishing by on Rue Montcalm and I hear Philip with his four-year-old daughter in bathroom. She's getting her nightly bath. She's generally here on weekends. Mother comes occasionally too. Don't think they ever got married. Just lived common law for a number of years. Philip's about thirty and very strongly built. Works construction all year round. Think he was into drugs at one time. Maybe even drug-dealing. Now he's a Jehovah's Witness. But he doesn't advertise it. They have one of their impressive Kingdom Halls in Aylmer, a sector outside Hull. Saturdays the huge parking lot is full of cars. They've even visited me on a few occasions. Every city I've ever been in, it's like that. They're nice but, of course, they always trot out the same old arguments. Want simple answers to difficult questions.

Funeral home very close by. Nearby waste container is full of their stuff minus bodies (ha-ha!). Paul, the packrat next door, started pulling odd pieces of furniture out. Got something like an antique wooden lectern in pretty good shape. Then Philip was there pulling out stuff. Finally me. Got a wooden clothes tree missing a couple of hooks. Don't see these things anymore. Find it useful with my running clothes needing to be dried. Also found battered old black suitcase. Haven't figured out how to use it.

Had some bad luck. Got my Miele bicycle stolen. Have had it over fifteen years. Happened right on university campus. Broad afternoon. Partly my fault. Relied on cable lock rather than U-shaped kryptonite one. Brazen bicycle thieves! Security have cameras covering the area but, with so much traffic, who's watching? Who's going to watch like a hawk all day?. No doubt the thief had the cable cut in seconds. How they do it without attracting attention I don't know. But, anyway, it's not likely I'll ever see it again. Oh, and another thing is they don't change the video tape in the cameras on a regular basis, so getting clear images is impossible. Police officer told me this and, when I phoned the security company, they more or less confirmed it.

Well, I still have my mountain bike. Just finished the repair job on it. I wasn't using the road bike much anyway. Last summer I didn't use it once. For going to and from university, mountain bike is good enough. And also for getting around city. Not like Montreal where I was cycling around the whole island as well as South Shore. Bicycle paths all over. It's really become a part of the culture there. Mount Royal in the centre of all if you want to do a bit of hill climbing. Took me all day to go around the island. River practically always in view. Cycling in summer was magnificent. Also included Lachine Canal and the Old Port – all parts of cycling route. What a diversity in such a small area! Often going underneath exit ramps of ubiquitous autoroute. Their giant square pillars supporting overhead ramps. And the bicycle path often running underneath them at various points. Then there are the smaller islands which are also

hooked up. Amazing to go over Jacques Cartier Bridge and see the old Expo site below with Laronde, the amusement park still in operation. Heard recently it has to be upgraded and modernized.

Shall presently have my nightly cup of cocoa while relaxing peacefully with my pipe. Everything going well, even if correcting exams isn't fun and losing an old bike a pain in the butt. Excited about what I'm doing philosophically. Will put together the best proposal I can. It'll be difficult but I'll still try to make it as accessible as possible. There are ways and means of doing so without having to limit oneself to being simply formal and argumentative.

The biggest challenge of my life so I'm putting everything into it. Having already gone through the process definitely helps. I pretty much know what to expect.

There it is for this week. When I next write to you, I'll be back working full time on my proposal. Then it won't take too long to finish. *Love, Michael*

P.S. Noisy neighbour still acting up on occasion but better than it was.

April 30, 2000

Dear Mom,

Bright and early this morning. Blue sky. Fresh day. Will warm up to 15 degrees or so. It's about time!

Had a dreadful April. Cool and cloudy. Yesterday afternoon, very pleasant. Golden sunshine. Philip's little four-year-old playing out front with half-grown kitten. All signs of rejuvenation and growth. The grass finally starting to look like grass. Buds on the bushes in the yard. Slowly but surely.

Well, I did it! I worked my way through that mountain of exams. Finished Wednesday, then returned straightaway to my thesis proposal. Now coming along nicely. Working on bibliography. It's an annotated one so that means you have to give a short rundown on each article or book you're referring to or using in some way. It's not a small job. I already have some of it done in handwriting. Now I have to type it up on the computer. It's not really hard going, just making daily trips to the computer room at university. It will take a few more days to complete. Then I still have to do the table of contents. This will take a bit of time. I want this thing to be as perfect as can be. Then they'll concentrate on my ideas (hopefully).

Has been quiet lately. No trouble with neighbour. Glad of that. In fact, hardly see him.

Have made up a little ditty for Siobhan. Will send it along for her birthday.

You remember Gilles? The guy from Ivory Coast? Six foot three and thin as a rail? A presentable young man (but black as coal) who was or, rather, passed himself off as a lawyer? Well, don't tell anyone but now that he's gone back to Africa, I took the liberty of opening up his mail. And guess what? Collection agencies! Yeah, it looks like he pulled out owing money in all directions. I consider myself lucky now to have got back the hundred I'd loaned him last summer to go tree-planting in Whiteriver. Believe me, to this day, I don't know what that guy was all about. If he told me a lot of lies, he was damned good at it.

My thesis director, Professor Feldspar, is a veritable pussycat of a man. I suspect he might not be so highly respected by his colleagues. A certain laxity, lack of rigour, and probably lack of publications. Has been around for light years. Has only one speed – slow. Gentle as a lamb. I don't think he particularly wants to be intellectually taxed or challenged at this stage of his career. Such is the impression he gives. Just stay in the same area he's familiar with and damn the rest. The first time I mentioned him to Madame Letocha, she rolled her eyes, so my reading of the situation is she's not crazy about him. And he really has nothing to say about my work.

But, at the same time, I don't pressure him to say anything. What advantage? There's nobody in the Department who's really in my camp. How could they be when I come across as being, at least in some sense or other, anti-academic (or even anti-philosophical)? It's the difference between an ethic of protecting the status quo and one of risking it.

This is why I must take pains not to get tripped up on mere formalities. All their first critical instincts are here. Here they can say, "This doesn't pass. This isn't a scholarly work." And before they even get to your ideas or anything else.

Exciting times are coming. I'll keep you posted. Saw two thesis defenses this past week. Both went very well. Interesting work yet certainly more conservative than mine.

Talk to you next week, Mom. No one will be able to say I didn't give it my best shot. *Love, Michael*

May 7, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early morning as usual. Promises to be a hot one today. I heard 30 degrees on the radio. Nothing like it so far this year. Yesterday was nice but still on the cool side. Trees now all decked out with their young green leaves. Girls all going about showing their legs. Every year the same.

Had a talk with my thesis director, Professor Feldspar. The guy doesn't really know what I'm up to, and he has neither the energy nor inclination to find out. I'm trying my best to make it easier for him. Left a couple of letters at his office. Don't let it ever be said that your son isn't up to a challenge. Whole issue still remains in doubt. Am now in a position to put some pressure on him to think about what I'm doing. This means making him think differently and others too. How successful will I be? Only time will tell.

My proposal is now very close to being assembled. Writing the bibliography. Took up a lot of my time this past week. It is very long and detailed. A lot of work for what people only end up glancing at. All the university people learn how to read quickly or not at all. It depends on how much time they have and whether it accords with their interests.

Today is Siobhan's birthday. I sent her a funny birthday card in French and that little ditty called "There was a wee miss named Siobhan." I hope she's received it. I sent it off last Monday. Anyway, I'm sure she'll have a splendid day. And you, no doubt, will be there with her.

Downtown Ottawa. The Bytown Market area. Cafes and bars bursting now with people. I cycle through this section to and from university. It's like Corydon Street in Winnipeg only bigger and more diverse. Double-decker buses take the sightseers around. I was on one with Pablo shortly after I came here. We went to Pink Lake in Gatineau Park. We walked around the lake. We hit it off so well right from the start. Our sense of humour and interests were well-matched. I haven't heard from him lately, but then I haven't contacted him either. Was thinking to do so once I know something one way or the other about the thesis proposal.

Ran into a young doctor called James the other day. He had a room in the Louis Pasteur Residence two years ago. So did Pablo and I. Really nice fellow, good looking, but, believe me, this guy could talk the hind leg off a mule. He's studying pathology but wanted to do family medicine. God, I can't see how he'd ever be done with a patient! Talk about going into details! It's like Norm Scrimgeour on steroids and at a more technical level. Can bore the hell out of you.

There is a young guy from India here as a philosophy student. Thirty years old. He seems to be partial to my company. I wish I had this effect on thirty-year-old women. Every time he sees me in computer room, he comes over and wants to chat. He just finished his first year in the program. Now looking for summer work. In truth, it's against the law for visiting students to work anywhere but on campus. But, of course, there are no jobs on campus.

Room badly in need of a spring cleaning. Also, I've still got to file my income tax return. Have delayed on it while working on my thesis proposal.

Slowly making my way through *Proust's Remembrance of Things Past*. Young hero just broke up with his first love, Gilberte. Boy, what attention to every little mood and thought! The detail is far more than most writers will go into. It's much more concerned with the internal life of the character than the external press of events. With how understanding unfolds over time, about what the past was, its significance, and how so much remains undisclosed.

Fellow student has given me his thesis proposal to look at. We have some common interests. I'll look it over now. Offer him some feedback. It's something we all need and like to have, even if it's not entirely favourable.

Well, best get cracking with the rest of the day, our first real summer day as it's starting to shape up. Tomorrow I'll go to the university library and do some last touches on the bibliography. Then submit it to Feldspar and try to light a fire under his ass.

Lots of construction on campus near where I was in high-rise residence. Two more buildings of the same going up. Big tall cranes there now. Foundations in place. No walls yet. Heard there was a problem with noise over winter. Students complaining. Then deal struck. They'll get a month's rent back.

Library closed today. It's like that for the summer. Closed on Sundays. Otherwise, I'd probably go there. I'm so itching to get through this stage.

Well, bye for now. Of course, I'll keep you posted on important developments. Whether I go on or end up back with the taxi, that's literally what's at stake. *Love, Michael*

May 14, 2020

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Cool in my room. Got up a bit later than usual. It's 8am. Alarm not set properly. Hard week. Thesis director Feldspar doesn't really know what I'm doing. Spells trouble. I'm trying to rectify the situation as best I can, but if I gave in to some of his suggestions, I wouldn't recognize my own project. It's a question of finding a way to bring him around. Another concern of mine is that some committee members don't even bother to read the proposals, just more or less skim them. Actually, it's the thesis director who's supposed to decide if the thing is ready. And my director, frankly speaking, isn't capable of judging my work. All the stress is on scholarly form, scholarly procedure, scholarly precision which often isn't precision at all. So what I'm doing, I suspect, is subversive and people naturally resist this. One has to come up with an overpowering approach and position.

Sent off my tax form finally. A couple of weeks late. Will get over a thousand-dollar refund. At the same time, I'll have to get a new loan for the coming year. God, I'm going into debt! No wonder people cave in and go along with the system. It's costly to go against it and you can easily come up empty-handed.

But I don't get discouraged easily. One must have faith in one's self to the point that, if one gave up prematurely, one couldn't live with it. Only one life and, even if I fail, at least it won't be a mediocre effort. But, all is up in the air and the game continues.

Tulip festival is going on at other end of Alexandra Bridge. Area sectioned off. Pay to get in. Live entertainment. None of it for me though except to glance at while going by (as with so many other things). Throngs of people in restaurants and streets: drinking, eating, conversing, gawking, loitering, shopping, sightseeing. Watched some teenagers the other evening before going to movie. Had some time to kill. Busy area right downtown. Very crowded. I was happy to do some people-watching for twenty minutes. And there was this group of kids, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old, and guys and girls, obviously friends, kibitzing around, acting cool, natural, with quick reflexes and quicker remarks. Jibes. Jokes. It could have been fifty years ago because it was a timeless affair. So what if a couple of them had roller blades instead of roller skates? Everything else was the human species, as one finds it, at that age, full of the present moment. Childhood now behind and young adulthood beckoning with golden promises. The cynicism of later years may look upon them as one of life's little jokes.

Still, it was very pleasant to watch these kids, to sit there more or less unobserved even if without a past not so similar to their own. I was a loner even as a teenager and didn't hang around in groups. Hard to have one's own thoughts in a group. Marking all the exams, for instance. How much they all seemed the same to me! Answers all so similar. Something almost machine-like about it. But, of course, this is just their selves in the philosophy course. Their real selves are where they are the rest of the time.

You know, sometimes when it comes time to write a letter, I resent it as an obtrusion, an interruption, a taking me away from other tasks. But then, once I begin, this attitude changes and I know I'm doing

something important. For what I do here is a boon to me as much as, I hope, it gives pleasure to you. It's a time to retreat from the rush and press of life and remember a life already past. And to be reminded that all will be this way, even the "oh-so-important" now. We end up only leaving behind a story.

Now, it is time to return to my work. I hope Siobhan had a good birthday and received my card. It was a funny one and I'm sure you'll tell me about her reaction.

I'll go out running in an hour and post this letter near the Portuguese church that's especially active on weekends. It's by a funeral home not so active (ha-ha!). Both are very close to my place. *Love, Michael*

May 21, 2000

Dear Mom,

Sunday morning as usual. Weak sunlight outside. Bit hazy. Radio on. Classical music. Always pleasant. Soothing. From a little, two-bit radio I bought in Montreal. Thing I paid fourteen dollars for. Sound amazingly good. If they had sound like this in the 30's or 40's, listeners would've thought they were in heaven.

Good week. Lots of work done. Professor Feldspar finally approves of what I'm doing. Indeed, he called my bibliography excellent. And I've been busy rewriting much of what I did before, taking into consideration my readers while still challenging them.

Will go to computer room after I finish this letter. It's coming together. Shouldn't be too long now. Maybe a week. Then get the thing submitted. For this, I need Feldspar's signature.

In my eyes, it's the Cadillac of thesis proposals, and I'm not just talking about quantity. If they try to monkey with it, it'll be on their consciences.

Took my little mountain bike into the repair shop the other day. Wasn't running smoothly. Now much better. New chain. Back sprocket. Could've changed them myself but didn't wake up to the fact until too late. Chain stretched, you see. New chain needs new sprocket because they wear away together. Very nice owner. Real gentleman. Father owned it before him. Just died. In his eighties. Worked in the shop to the very last. Now son has it.

Beautiful bikes there, my God! Some going for \$1400 to \$1500. They have a lot of parts to them now including shock absorbers. So elegant looking. Would almost hate to get them dirty. Boy, if somebody in the late nineteenth century had seen one of these bikes, they would've thought they'd come from another planet.

I didn't get any report about Siobhan's birthday. Did she get my funny card and poem?

Finally, I got my income tax out of the way. Had to go to one of those absolutely huge government buildings to get the Manitoba form. I'm lucky they could scrounge one up. Thousands of government employees work in Hull then clear out in late afternoon. Homes in suburbs. Evening it's dead. Have to go to Ottawa for some life. Wasn't always like that. Hull once had a renowned night life. Rather shady

though. Government officials and elected representatives used to get into trouble. Bars stayed open late, longer than in Ottawa. All changed now. Lots of property owners happy because not so many problems.

Looks better now outside. Blue sky. Clear. Just in the stretch of twenty minutes or so, tons of red-winged blackbirds flew in. You see them along cycling path. Also saw mother duck with six or seven wee ducklings yesterday. In ditch, of all places. Not a smart mother. How would she keep her ducklings away from some dog or cat?

Hardly any insects yet. Tulips are out. Almost through, in fact. Tulip festival already finished for this year. City is famous for it. They even have what's called a Tulip Trail. Haven't been down it so can't tell you much. It even goes through Hull. I guess for sightseeing at time of tulip festival. Scattered floral displays along the way.

Also lilacs of course. In fact, nature has decked herself out in all her colours and greenery. Is there another planet somewhere inclined to being so ostentatious? No doubt more than we'll ever know. More than the imagination can grasp. What an immense uncharted ocean there! Who could ever plumb its depths? Philosophers sometimes think they can. Oh, quite valiant attempts of reason, no doubt, reason which is held to be the light of lights. A universal light. Certainly that was the case in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Age of reason. Age of scientism. Before terrible world wars. Rampant optimism about technology. Man himself would bring heaven to earth by dint of his own inventiveness and technical know-how. Twentieth century, things changed, though not because technology slowed. Far from it. But the unbridled optimism of the nineteenth century is no longer with us. The machine, however wonderful, is still machine and no more. It's only a temporary wonder and fascination. I imagine the ancient Greeks were equally thrilled about the wheel or lever and what it could do.

And so I've filled up my four pages. Very functional. We are, after all, quasi-machines. The French philosopher, Rene Descartes, thought that animals were machines. Their suffering wasn't real, something we read into them. Now, of course, nobody agrees with him. *Love, Michael*

May 28, 2000

Dear Mom,

Hope you received my last letter. Overcast this morning. Still relatively cool here. Last year, I remember feeling the really hot stuff even at the beginning of May. Not so this year. Now it's almost the beginning of June. Philip, the young man who lives downstairs, tells me a hot summer is predicted.

Just heard on the radio this morning Maurice Richard died. I'm glad of this, given his various medical problems. He would've been a zombie, half-dead, his memory and powers of recognition gone. Homages from all quarters. No doubt one of Quebec's greatest athletes and heroes. Admired as a human being and not just as a great hockey player.

I remember when I used to go to the barber shop in Chambly. A large framed photo on the wall featuring the Rocket fighting for the puck with no less than Bobby Hull (the Golden Jet). Hull the much younger man, of course, who had just broken into the NHL and Richard on his way out. Maybe even his last year (1960). So, I must've been about nine or ten. By the time I really got interested in hockey (including hockey cards), Richard was retired, and Jean Beliveau was the captain. (He was a great one too.) Now, Beliveau has been diagnosed with cancer.

I'm afraid I have to pass on some unpleasant news. My second bicycle got stolen at the University of Ottawa. Again, I was using the computer room. Again, I went to the security and reported it. Again, I was careless in locking it. I absent-mindedly used my second lock, the weakest one, and forgot to put the strong one on. I suspect there are professional bicycle thieves operating on campus and the security people aren't forthcoming about it because, first, they can't do much about it (they have cameras but they watch neither the busiest nor most secluded areas all the time), second, they don't want to lose face, and, third, stolen bicycles aren't a priority.

I kick myself now not only for my carelessness but also for having recently put \$100 into the bicycle for repairs. Of course, I'll have to replace it, but right now I'm hoofing it. Yesterday, for example, I went to Loblaws in the afternoon with that green duffel bag you gave me. The store is about a mile and a half away. Usually I go by bicycle with a pack sack and do a bit of shopping. This time I bought \$114 worth of groceries, put them in the bag, and then walked home. (Too cheap to pay five dollars for a taxi.) And, God, it weighed a ton! All on one shoulder. About seventy pounds. Had to stop several times. Even ended up going further than I had to because of wrong turn in industrial area. Asked directions from two boys on bicycles. Reminded me of my youth in Chambly exploring world around me and living at a time when being an adult was only a dream. By the way, I should mention, before this incident, I'd gone nearly forty-four years without losing a bicycle. Think from now on I'll lock it up right where the security services are. (But, on second thought, it probably wouldn't help.)

Very close to finishing my proposal. Just a table of contents to type up. Nothing after that but proof-reading, minor correcting, and assembling it with title page and table of contents. The whole thing will run over sixty pages. A giant-sized proposal. Very excited! Have worked hard and believe I've accomplished something.

Got a short note from Pablo. Didn't say much. Just kibitzed around in his bad English. Boy, it would be great to see him again, but who knows if it'll ever happen?

Philip has a little four-year-old daughter who comes here on weekends. Yesterday, I looked after her while Philip was out cashing his paycheck. She was in my room drawing on paper and chattering away. One funny thing was her mistaking the dried-up maple leaves on my walls for butterflies.

Will go to computer room later and continue with last bit of work. What a haul it's been assembling this proposal! It's safe to say I've got everything riding on it.

Just heard on radio something about controversy in England involving Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Extreme favouritism. Students who go through the private school system chosen over some top-notch candidates from public schools. *Love, Michael*

June 4, 2000

Dear Mom,

Sunday morning and a bright one. Promise of a beautiful day. Well, I finally did it! My thesis proposal is completed! Feldspar now has a bound copy. It looks like a mini thesis.

Whatever is left should be relatively minor. Just a few typographical errors. But, of course, I've got to wait to see what Feldspar has to say, but it looks promising. He likes the reorganizing of it to make it more accessible.

So, I expect it should be handed in some time this week, and then each of the three committee members will get a copy. I plan to have all these copies bound. What's a few dollars when your future's at stake?

So, it's quite likely the defense will take place sometime this summer. No long delay like last time. Some shit hit the fan about this and so there's been a call to speed up the process. And, unlike last year at this time, my committee is assembled and ready to go.

In the meantime, I will continue to do research, reading, note taking, and so on. I see no reason why I shouldn't be writing the thesis by fall. Given the amount of preparation I've done, it shouldn't take too long.

Well, the great Maurice Richard passed away and, for a solid week, the Montreal newspaper, *Lapresse*, has made his life, death, funeral, and various honours front-page news. Doesn't that say something about the modern-day hunger for heroes? Something like heroes of old, mythical in stature with numerous exploits to their credit. Ancient Greece, for example. The twelve labours of Hercules. Representative of a people. A hero whose faults pale in comparison to what is admired. This was Maurice Richard who managed to steer clear of scandal. Was always straightforward, hardly ever spoke. And never betrayed a tawdry side to his character.

A feat virtually impossible for a leader of a modern-day democracy, although Pierre Trudeau and Rene Levesque came close. Funny that they're all French Canadians! I don't see any English Canadian politicians of note. They can say what they want about Fidel Castro, but when he finally kicks the bucket, I bet there'll be a monstrous funeral procession on an island with only eleven million.

June, the month of weddings, church bells. Maybe they'll be sounding at the Portuguese church nearby. I remember a record from Chambly we used to play: "*June is busting out all over / Ding dong the bells are going to chime.*" I remember listening to this song while rocking on the living room sofa (all of us kids did this) and looking out the front window at a blue sky and a fair day. Feeling happy too because the song is a happy one. And outside the front window the majestic weeping willow in Daudelin's front

yard. (I'm not sure if the spelling of their name is right.) Of course, it was close to summer vacation for us kids. Out of school finally. Another reason to be happy. How we looked forward to those summer holidays! And in Chambly it was quite good. Good for kids, one large playground if you think of Fort Chambly, the old fort, the canal, the rapids, Chambly Basin, Mount St. Hilaire, and Mount Bruno in the distance. The open field in the back of the house. The housing development going on in Chambly West. The corner store so frequently visited for candy and soft drinks (seven cents a bottle). And much else.

I'm still attached to this childhood place (and space). I'm glad I had the chance to visit it again four or five years ago and to re-experience it. Some major changes but also things that stayed the same after thirty years.

One thing though. It's too bad the French and English school systems kept the division going. To think that I had no French-speaking friends while growing up! Amazing when you think about it. There you are, where the majority of people speak French and you don't. I guess in some sense I've tried to make up for this.

Do you remember the boy next door who died of cancer at sixteen? Jacques was his name. I don't think I ever knew him. Had a younger brother called Tony. I used to envy him because he'd always greet the chip wagon every day with his fifteen cents. Greasy but good-tasting chips. The little kid, I remember, was afraid of thunderstorms. He'd cry and run home every time one started. I couldn't understand this. Maybe I was even by then scientifically oriented. After all, didn't I have *How and Why Wonder Books* on dinosaurs, rocks and minerals, weather, and whatever else? Yes, certainly I was intellectually engaged even then.

How luckier than Sharon was !! For her, it was brutally disrupted. For me, at age thirteen, it was merely a turning of the corner. *Love, Michael*

June 11, 2000

Dear Mom,

Bad weather. Cool all week. Hardly seems like summer. And today it looks like it's going to be more of the same. Hope you're doing better. Just slipped a note under my neighbour's door. His music kept me awake till two in the morning. Damned idiot! Hammered on the wall but all he did was turn it down a bit. Still could hear the deep base which for me is like Chinese water torture. It just so happens that, right across from him, is a fellow countryman. They both moved in here about the same time. Both from the same dinky, piss-poor country in the heart of Africa (Burundi). Just coincidence they should end up across the hall from each other. Anyway, it's great for them but not for me. You see, they keep their doors open and talk in loud voices across the hallway. (Fortunately, it's around the corner from me.) And they talk incessantly. As if they were reciting all the oral traditions of their country. I have to turn my fan on to drown out their voices. And they more or less keep to themselves like me, but their presence is obtrusive and bothersome by way of their being compatriots.

I think this neighbour has a few drinks on those evenings he plays his music too loud. Supposedly a student in criminology at the University of Ottawa. Ordinarily, you'd think we'd have something to say

to each other, but only once did he come to my door and that was just to borrow something. He struck me as being taciturn and unfriendly. Obviously, he gets along better with people from his own country.

The note was framed courteously. We'll see if it has any effect. Otherwise, I'll go to the landlord.

Well, finally handed in my proposal Friday. What a haul! I never expected it to take so long. But that's usually the way. I always underestimate these things. Come Monday or Tuesday, I'll receive a call from the secretary. She's having three copies made for the committee members. I told her I wanted to put them in binders. Costs only nine dollars. Anything to make these committee members read the proposal and not just flip through it.

In the meantime, more reading and research. Should take up most of the summer. I'd like to be starting the actual writing come fall. It will likely be long (perhaps five hundred pages), but the writing is much less work with thorough preparation. And this is what I must busy myself with over the next couple of months.

Have been running back and forth to the university across Alexandra Bridge. Cut through a park not far from the Parliament Buildings, then through the market area usually crowded with people. Fresh produce galore. Then onto the university campus but a mile or so away. I run with a little lightweight packsack. Feel a bit odd, middle-aged man running around like youth but, fact is, run quite well and can cover ground quickly. Walking, on the other hand, takes forever. I even run to this little Jewish bakery somewhere past the university. Pumpernickel bread and bagels! Just noticed young girl who's started there. They seem to change staff frequently. Mostly students working part-time. Anyway, this girl looks to be about nineteen or twenty. Extremely fair-skinned and delicately boned. Sports a crucifix in a bakery that's otherwise ostentatiously Jewish.

Heard a bit about the Tom Sophonow-Barbara Stoppel affair. He got cleared by DNA analysis. Guess it's even more of a story in Winnipeg. I remember reading the first newspaper accounts painting him as guilty of the murder. Even his physical appearance and behaviour were pointed to as suspect. He should at least get a book out of this and make some money (apart from whatever he gets from a lawsuit).

Now time to get back to it, Derrida, that is, and reading him in French. A hard guy to read. He makes you work. That's because his thought itself is always working. And yet, perhaps not so surprisingly, he's accused of being a charlatan by mediocre scholars.

Thanks again for your generous help, Mom. I'm still looking for a used bike, but there doesn't seem to be much. I'm still waiting to get my income tax refund deposited in my account. Oh, I've got to get clear of this business and make some money eventually! God, to be doing at age fifty what others do at thirty! And yet it's not incapacity that scares me but merely the social stigma. After all, most my age have already established themselves. *Love, Michael*

June 18, 2000

Dear Mom,

Sunday morning as usual. Overcast but might get hot. Has been so last few days although still cool at night. Visited my Chinese friend yesterday, Puqun Li. Supper. Home-cooked Chinese meal. Discussed many things. Went out to nearby park in evening. Runs by Dowd's Lake (part of the Rideau Canal system). Lots of ducks in water. People feed them. Tons of Chinese people in the area. All more or less living in the same huge apartment block. A community within a community. Puqun Li's five-year-old son, Star, was doing some fishing. Little sunfish to catch, nothing more. They're no good to eat, but the ducks were tempting until, according to Puqun Li, people realized they're not meant for the dinner table.

Puqun Li has been notified of a substantial rental increase come September (from \$500 to \$630). All for a not-so-great one-bedroom apartment with little balcony. He can't afford it as student. This is Ontario, don't forget, and the Harris government has done away with rent controls. So, maybe Puqun Li will end up moving his family to Hull. Rents are cheaper there, but he'd probably have to send Star to a French school. Other possibility is moving closer to the university campus. He has two months to decide.

Guess what? Went to a yearly bicycle auction yesterday in Ottawa held by police department. Tons of stolen bicycles, but I didn't find mine among them. (I had two stolen over the past year.) Nevertheless, I ended up bidding on a bicycle practically new. Paid \$140. It's a mountain bike and certainly not top of the line, but I'd probably have to pay more at Canadian Tire or Walmart. So, your money has been put to good use.

Let me talk a bit about Star, Puqun Li's son, who'll be five next month. I notice his English has improved considerably since the last time I saw him. He's a very friendly, animated boy with sparkling eyes, short, close-cropped hair, and a "China-doll" face. We played various games, did card tricks, and stuff like that. All to his great amusement. After his fishing, he brought home a little sunfish in a plastic bag full of water. Then his mother filled up a pot and put the fish in. Eventually Star went to bed and periodically the fish would flip out of the water and end up on the floor. I don't think he'll survive very long.

I'm slowly making my way through Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Read a few pages before I go to sleep. Steeped in aesthetic as well as psychological observations. Pretty soon, I'll have finished the second volume. The hero is still a sexually charged teenager at a summer resort in France. Obsessed with a band of girls he sees periodically on the strand. Like proud alien beings from another planet! Visitors here, not really partakers of this world! Holding some mystery among themselves! Oblivious to the oldsters! Impertinent! Impatient! Scornful! Wicked! These girls have known one another since childhood. Form their own little intimate world.

Well, it's almost 9:30 and I should get some work done before I go running. Oh, where, where, where will this all lead? And have I time? Will there be time? And so on and so on.

I think the bathroom is free. I heard someone in there. Probably one of the noisy neighbours, although can't say they've been bad this past week. They tend to chatter away like chipmunks. Must repeat a lot of their stories or how do they carry on so long?

But, on the other hand, it can't be easy for them. Cut off from their culture by ours. Substantial difference despite the European influence in Africa. And yet I don't find them to be particularly sociable. At least, one of them isn't or maybe it's me but I'm not aware of it. Though I don't like to admit it, I too have my blind spots.

And so, there it is for another week. Oops, somebody slipped into the bathroom again and sounds like they're taking a shower. Will have to wait though I've got to go badly. Well, didn't have a whole lot to say this week. I'll have to dredge up more from the past. Like the time – oh, but that'll have to wait until next week. Until then, I wish you good luck in your tomato growing and the best for the summer. Love,
Michael

June 25, 2000

Dear Mom,

Raining cats and dogs this morning. In fact, a lot of heavy rain recently. Really, enough for a while! Went over to a friend's place last night. Small gathering. Mostly students. Young people. One aspiring writer. Started off outside on patio but then had to go inside. Very nice people all articulate and interested in art, literature, and philosophy. Had some good discussions. One fellow reading *Remembrance of Things Past*. In fact, knows this work better than me. Drank the bottle of wine I'd brought for the evening. Enough to get a bit heady. Then home alone as my wont and custom.

Still haven't received your letter. Maybe get it tomorrow. Feel a certain loss of lustre. This city doesn't charm me like Montreal. Feel like I've already become acquainted with too much. Sight of Parliament Buildings while crossing Alexandra Bridge no longer stirs me. Hull is fine but few tranquil areas and lots of traffic. And my neighbour last night with some friends over. Even very young children. Time for his beat-beat-beat-thud-thud-thud music. No matter how soft he plays it, it disrupts my thoughts. Mild form of torture. Thank God it's not every night!

Rain still coming down in buckets. Maybe won't be taking my run this morning. Got up somewhat late as a result of party last night. (Didn't roll in till 3am.)

I should be happy, I suppose, to be accepted by people twenty years my junior. My problem is not so much age as a certain withdrawal, a certain closing in on myself, a certain desire both for and against human contact. Torn in both directions, never any resolution, happiest with myself but not happiest in view of some perfect situation or arrangement. Only I realize that what I desire and imagine for myself no more exists than I do as ideal person or being for someone else. So, there's this gap over which my inner and outer life ranges but never fills.

I'm very conscious of being my closest companion, that there is this communion between the various parts of myself constituting the one. For are we not, in some sense, multiple beings, living as we do over various periods, phases, experiences, temperaments, moods, anticipations, and so on? And to let all these various selves cohabit, have their say, without suppressing them even if they are in opposition? What is there to all this? Yes, it's an experience of a kind, perhaps the deepest and most comprehensive

possible. Never entirely settled, never entirely happy but perhaps a few exalted moments. Maybe I live for these moments whereas others, for various reasons, have sluffed them off.

Perhaps I had these moments most in my life during my European trip. Moments when both my life and the countryside lay before me equally enthralling. But, alas, we go on and the day completes itself.

They're playing some of *Carmen* on the radio. I like this music. Over ten years ago, if you remember, I was an extra in a production at Winnipeg Centennial Hall. I had to dress up in a toreador's outfit and march in a procession across the stage. I remember the first time I attended a rehearsal at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. (It was in a spanking new building.) It was the beginning scene of the fourth act, a village scene with children, hustle and bustle, vendors hawking their wares. It was so lively and gay! When they did the rehearsal, it was like a magical transformation! It was like a new, entirely different world descending upon, taking over, and investing itself in the everyday. I enjoyed this rehearsal more than the later performance. The director, a young woman, stopped it at various points to make adjustments or corrections. The common everyday world would then reassert itself but only for a moment, only until the music and lively scene began again.

Church bells now tolling and the rain still falling. I was supposed to go to Puqun Li's this afternoon and fix his bicycle. Unusual amount of rain, well above normal for this time of year. Well, now it's time to sign off from these ramblings. Have got to start preparing for my oral presentation and defense. It may be just around the corner. *Love, Michael*

July 2, 2000

Dear Mom,

Overcast this morning but perhaps it will clear. Last night heavy rain then rather cool. Fireworks went off around 11pm in downtown Ottawa. Visible from my place out back. Just a few of us watching. All tenants including the two guys from Burundi. One of them really drunk. He tried to talk to me in French and English, but it didn't make any difference. I didn't understand a word he was saying. And this guy's in a PhD program! Unbelievable! He strikes me as being a complete jerk. I've never had a conversation with him when he was sober. And conversing with him when he's drunk is impossible. Even had flecks of vomit on his shirt. Boy, he should check himself into the nearest rehab centre. Otherwise, he's going nowhere.

Philip's a muscle-bound guy who lives downstairs. His four-year-old daughter comes over on the weekends. Her name's Melanie. She only speaks French. She's a bit chubby and subject to moods, but Philip dotes on her. And now she's got a little friend, five-year-old from a place nearby on our little dead-end street that runs into busy Rue Montcalm. Heavy traffic is visible and audible from my window. Philip's put together a crude, open-air, weight-training space in the backyard. Weights somebody sold him for seventy-five dollars. Chin-up bar he himself fastened to the wooden fire escape. And a couple of other contraptions being used as weight-training equipment. He's a former competitive bodybuilder but also a former drug dealer. Started in high school. His older brothers were doing it before him. And right now his sister's in Regina training to be an RCMP constable.

He grew up in a nearby suburb called Buckingham. Hardly your impoverished inner city. He himself never got busted, but his brothers did and went to jail. The Hell's Angels then moved in and took control.

Worked away most of Canada Day. Took my run and talked to Philip a bit, as well as getting your phone call. I must say, you always sound very up. Your voice is as strong as I always remember it. And I'm sure the gardening gives you a great deal of pleasure. Nice to be able to get out of the apartment and in the greenhouse where, with the tomatoes, you're away from pavement, pedestrians, and traffic.

Morning is best for me. Quiet. Later there is always some outside noise or distraction. Particularly in summer and particularly on holidays. And now with Philip and his weight training just outside my window (he likes to play pop music), it's not ideal.

Was bothered by a pain which I took to be a toothache. Finally dropped in on nearby dentist to make appointment. As luck would have it, dentist happened to be there even though officially on holidays. He was kind enough to check me out. Usually you have to wait weeks. Anyway, it turns out to be nothing more than gum sensitivity. The dentine is exposed and that's what causes the sharp pain when eating or drinking. But talk about simple solutions! A toothpaste called Sensodyne. Now the problem should disappear in two weeks. And to think that, if I hadn't dropped in then, I might've gone weeks without doing anything.

It's moving on towards 8am. Classical music on my radio. Little fruity-coloured fan blowing as usual. Only paid fourteen dollars for it. Made in China like the desk lamp I bought at Canadian Tire. A hell of a lot of Chinese products on the market nowadays! Practically all the kids' toys. Was over at Puqun Li's a few days ago and fixed the flat tire on his bicycle. He buys all his bicycles at garage sales for ten or twenty dollars. When they stop working, he simply abandons them. Now his bicycle works after my fixing the flat, but it still has no brakes. Nevertheless, he rides it five miles to the university. I told him that wasn't a good idea, but he's got so much on his mind he's willing to risk it.

He's going to China in August to be an interpreter for a visiting professor who's an expert on water pollution. Of course, he'll spend some time with his family. Expects to be away twenty days, then going to a conference in New Hampshire. Wants to fill out his CV like everyone else (except, perhaps, me). Of course, this is how you get a job, isn't it?

I've got pretty good with chop sticks. Now, I use them every time I have supper at his place. It's just the trick of manipulating them like pincers.

Well, so much for now. I've filled up my four-page quota. Back to my own stuff. Perhaps not the same dull round that William Blake speaks of but still a routine with its minor concerns and obligations.

Happy gardening! *Love, Michael*

July 9, 2000

Dear Mom,

Overcast this morning. Yesterday was pleasant. However, overall, it has been abnormally cool and wet. Good, I suppose, for those who don't like the intense heat. Personally, I wouldn't mind some hot weather. Right now, it's cool and quiet. Hardly any traffic on Rue Montcalm which is normally busy. Yesterday Philip, the young muscle-bound guy living downstairs, got himself a very fancy mountain bike for only eighty dollars. Only trouble is, it's stolen. Made of aircraft aluminum. Twenty-four speeds. Almost new but I wouldn't buy it.

Tuned up my bicycle a bit. Wheels needed aligning. Adjusted brakes and gearing. Now it rides very well. But I don't think I made such a saving on it as I originally thought. Canadian Tire sells bicycles amazingly cheap.

It's possible another professor may join my thesis committee. Not confirmed yet. Fellow from English department. Somebody who's supposedly familiar with Derrida's work. This would balance things out because, as I explained earlier, there's a prejudice against it. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that, taken seriously, it threatens the whole philosophical tradition.

Canada Day passed here uneventfully. Watched the fireworks from the landing on the fire escape out back as I did last year. Simon, my black neighbour, was drunk as usual and, for some reason, focused his attention on me. Could hardly make out a word. (He sure struggles a lot to say nothing.) And, then, when he's sober, he doesn't speak to me. He satisfies himself with a curt nod.

The anniversary of Sharon's death has passed once again. I suppose you went to the gravesite. Nothing could be more common than dying, and yet nothing strikes us as being so abnormal. Eleven years already! Her children no longer small but young adults, thinking ahead about their own lives. Repetition with a difference – one of Derrida's themes.

Stockwell Day just got in. Heard it on the radio this morning. Same age as me. Members attracted to his youthful appearance and dynamism. Manning ended up plotting his own political demise. Lacks charisma. So does Joe Clarke. Chretien, the old man, will still beat them. He has a kind of reverse charisma. Kind of like Ed Sullivan. You get affectionate for him almost on account of his deficiencies. Perhaps Manning should've stayed like that instead of trying to have a more youthful look. By ultimately valuing it, he invites others to do the same. Then the question becomes: why not go for the real thing when it comes along?

Stockwell Day may become prime minister, but it won't be the next election. And I hardly think he'll attract votes from Quebec. Here the Liberals are second to the Bloc Quebecois.

Might take a short trip to Waterloo, Ontario this summer. Friend has invited me. Somebody who I met when I stayed at one of the student residences two summers ago. A doctoral student in waste and water management. Has had some problems recently. First, his girlfriend walked out on him. Second, his thesis proposal was refused. So, he must try again as I'm doing. I've never been to Waterloo. I applied to their

university but was rejected. I think it's a nicer one than University of Ottawa. Would get to see it, at any rate. Should I cycle the two hundred and fifty miles? Now I've no road bike, just the much slower mountain bike. Would take at least three days. Bus wouldn't cost too much. With student discount, about fifty dollars for round trip.

Ideally, I'd go after defending my thesis proposal. God, the glacial pace of this thing! Already a month has gone by since I submitted it!

Well, time to get back to doing some work. Thought I might go today to a nearby beach with Philip and Melanie (his little girl). But I just heard showers being forecast. There certainly isn't the mosquito problem here that's in Winnipeg. Hardly any flies or bugs at all.

Ran one time along bicycle path in late evening. Fireflies all along the way.

Will keep you informed of upcoming developments. So far, it's quiet, just plodding away like I'll do for the rest of the morning. *Love, Michael*

July 16, 2000

Dear Mom,

Morning after your last phone call. Wet outside. Problem with fellow tenant last night after I came back from movie. His stereo still going and, with it, the heavy bass beat that became even louder. Of course, he was drunk again and impossible to communicate with. Just sits in his room listening to his music in a stupor with glazed expression, smoking one cigarette after another. This fellow who claims to be a doctoral candidate with a teaching post waiting for him at the University of Brandon. I would dearly love to hear a word from him when he's sober to verify this. Is he a pretender like Gilles? Enregistered in a program but nothing more? Maybe even wasting time in it? I've no idea but, to judge from his drunken behaviour and other personal habits, he's as far from a professional career as I am from the prime minister's office. Will have to go talk to owner again. Other tenants are also complaining. Even the tenant across from him who's from the same country. (I guess the honeymoon is over.) I just spoke to him this morning. He was hammering on his door and making himself a general nuisance. Will have to get rid of him.

Movie last night with Sean Penn called *Up at the Villa*. British period piece based on novel by Somerset Maugham. Set on the outskirts of Florence prior to outbreak of Second World War. Love story with beautiful woman getting ready to marry wealthy older man who has top diplomatic position. She wants security because poor and also went through bad marriage. But things take a different turn when she meets the Sean Penn character at dinner party. All well-to-do foreigners living in Italy. She complicates her life tragically when she has a brief affair with an Austrian refugee working as a waiter. Takes pity on him and wants to give him some happiness. He was a student in Austria opposed to Nazism and had to flee his country when the Germans under Hitler annexed Austria. Later, he commits suicide in her bedroom because he had fallen hopelessly in love with her. He then becomes a body that has to be removed.

Happy ending though. She decides not to marry the nice but stuffy diplomat and goes off with the gay blade who proves to be not so bad because he's the one who gets rid of the body. (I know it sounds comical, but the acting makes it serious.)

I expect to have more news to report next letter concerning the defense of my thesis proposal. Caroline, the Department's student advisor, is trying to light a fire under the asses of the committee members. Sent them all emails last week saying "Come on, you guys, shake a leg! You made this student wait seven months last time. So, let's get with it!" Oh, I'm sure my thesis proposal has given them a few troublesome moments. The whole business of writing in scholarly journals somewhat losing its lustre for me.

It will be a personal victory if it passes without any serious objections. In fact, that's the only way I'll allow it to pass. I'm not going to tolerate any major changes. I've already spent too much time with it.

You mentioned a telephone conversation with Ryle in which he implied you didn't support Dad as much as you could have or would've helped him over the hump. Well, I witnessed enough in Kingston to know the hump was on his back. Something that was there before you married him and stayed with him after the marriage. How many nights did I see him drink himself into a stupor! Drinking pitcher after pitcher of beer in the Lasalle Hotel. Usually sitting alone, smoking incessantly. Occasionally playing bumper pool on a small table. Drunken conversations, maudlin sentiments, lubricated friendships and sociability. Not that I wasn't part of it for a while. But what has all this to do with family values? With being a father and raising a family? Which is what he took on and, after some years, could no longer carry out. How so? How did he let it all go? How let your children go?

Is it because we always want to expand or enlarge our lives and that some, when they cannot do so, immediately contract? Is it that something missing was governing his moods even in the midst of relative richness, the relative bounty of Canadian middle-class life? What more did he want and could not have? Why did he talk about the importance of character and not show it? Is it simply that he wanted to go high and, after failing to do so, could find no alternative? What was missing in him that may be in me, and what is missing in me that may have been in him?

Sharon said life's unfair. I prefer to think it's both: fair and unfair. Fair in probably getting more than deserved in some areas and unfair in getting less than deserved in others.

Time to move on. Questions always outweigh answers, but I do believe in *Carpe Diem* (Seize the day)! I believe you do too. *Love, Michael*

July 23, 2000

Dear Mom,

Morning. Bright one. Unseasonably cool weather has prevailed all this past week. Read in *La Presse* that people are flocking to warmer spots such as Florida and southern Europe. Hard to book a seat on a plane now. Apparently, different weather patterns all this summer across North America. A prevailing

northwest-southeast wind instead of a southwest-northeast one. But I read last week we're supposed to get some hot stuff shortly. Heat wave in the States mounting north. We'll see.

Noisy black neighbour gone! Got the heave-ho! I didn't complain about him, somebody else did. Landlord didn't waste any time. Cleared out his room and put all his stuff in shed. Room filthy. Rotten food, encrusted hot plate, dirty fridge and floor. Had to throw out his mattress. Hadn't cleaned anything the whole time he was there. And he hasn't come back yet to collect his stuff. Pretty soon, it'll be a week it's been sitting in the shed. His stereo is being held at the office and his TV in a small storage compartment in the rooming house. Very strange! He left a note for Albert, the landlord, complaining that he hadn't been given forty-five days' notice. I think he owes Albert for the last month's rent. Legally, I don't know how Albert stands. I'm sure he couldn't have ejected him without notice in winter.

Talked to the philosophy department secretary Friday. Only one committee member has sent back a report. Still two to go. Now it's from week to week. One of them is away at a conference. I just hope none of them pull out at the last minute. That's been known to happen. Then Caroline, the student advisor, has to go look for a replacement. The usual bureaucracy here as everywhere else. Keep my fingers crossed on this one. I've definitely been waiting long enough, especially if you take into consideration my first attempt.

Continue to work every day. More and more stuff read and studied. Hope by end of summer to be close to being in a position to start the actual writing.

I've more than two thousand pages of notes. Most of this is various citations from the pertinent texts. I've also put together a sort of defensive *dispositif* for the upcoming session. That is to say, I anticipate questions and objections the committee might raise. I no doubt will have to counter certain academic and scholarly prejudices.

I compare my task to the ever-so-long climb up a steep mountain where there is always the danger of slipping off. I cannot make the kind of compromises others make.

Which strangely makes me younger than them. For they grow old in spirit quickly, succumbing to what the institution orders up. The institution which itself is always a little old in spirit.

Sometimes my mind flits back to the past and can hardly believe that so much time has passed. For example, my two uncles rise up before me, your two older brothers as I got to know them after we first came to Winnipeg. And I associate them, of course, mostly with the horses, the racetrack, the farms. How busy and active they were! How much alive then! How engrossed in their affairs! How could one think then of all coming abruptly to an end? So concrete and physical were they! Like the horses themselves!

Went and saw a movie the other night. Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour Lost*. Very skilful cutting of the play with song-and-dance, Broadway type additions, Gershwin, Gilbert and Sullivan, etc. And yet retaining the matchless poetry of the Bard. The theme of young love. Of four young men swearing off women to seclude themselves all the better for study. And, of course, all this being confounded very

quickly by the arrival of certain lovelies (four of them, of course). And set around World War Two with old time newsreels to help explain and speed up the action. This play, by the way, is not one of Shakespeare's more popular comedies.

Again, time presses upon me to get some work done. More of Jacques Derrida, one of the few philosophers who talks about philosophy in the university.

Otherwise, everything going swimmingly. Just a long wait. Maybe next week I'll have something to report. Until then, I'll sign off wishing you more pleasant summer days and good growing in your garden.
Love, Michael

July 30, 2000

Dear Mom,

Amazing! I received your letter on the 28th and it's dated the 26th. How's that for speedy service by Canada Post?

Once again, thanks for the check and sending me my student loan. As always, I'll put both to good use. This morning overcast but already warm and humid. The past week has been more like regular summer weather with hot evenings. But now, the month of August ahead of us and normally it cools off. Yes, the weather has been rather strange.

To judge by your letter, you are indeed keeping active. You've always liked the social end of things whereas I'm more solitary. Last night I went to another movie called *Joe Gould's Secret*. It was at the Bytown Theatre and cost five dollars. About a middle-aged guy in down-and-out New York who claims to be working on the world's longest novel entitled *The Oral History of the World* and is befriended by a writer from the *New Yorker*. It's set in the 1950's and based on a true story. The down-and-out writer proves to a real character in more ways than one. He has convinced everyone he's been writing this book for many years while living from hand-to-mouth. He's very articulate and sociable. The guy who writes for the *New Yorker* is very nice and has a beautiful wife and a two-year-old daughter. He ends up writing an article on Joe Gould which gives the down-and-outer a moment of glory and makes him a local celebrity. People even send him money through the mail. Of course, they're convinced he's been writing this huge novel which allegedly focuses on all sorts of ordinary people and what they have to say in their day-to-day lives. This is how Joe Gould himself describes it. Well, of course, you soon find out it's all one big con game. There's no such oral history. All that he's actually written amounts to a few snippets: abortive attempts, rewrites, repetitions of the same autobiographical anecdotes. All rather self-indulgent and narcissistic. Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention that Joe Gould actually did go to Harvard and graduate Summa Cum Laude. And he did have the project in mind from the beginning, but his interest was never as much with other people as himself.

Actually, he put me in mind of Dad (maybe myself too). At least, as I remember him in Kingston and in Ireland. Joe Gould couldn't seem to resist a bar when he had some money in his pocket. And his intellect and way of speaking did make him stand out in a crowd and from his shabby, uncouth surroundings.

Also, he was marked by a great self-centredness and high opinion of himself. Despite this, many people were kind and generous to him and even put up with his fits of ill humour.

The sun is peering out now. Probably get hot and humid. I tried to reach the secretary of the Department last Thursday and Friday but didn't succeed. Call again this week. See if there's any movement. She tells me she sends them emails to remind them. In the meantime, I go on working and preparing.

Oh, about that article you sent me. Thanks very much! Of course, what you have here is a way of popularizing certain aspects of the history of philosophy, but it's also rather misleading. Philosophy is probably more about finding problems than solving them. And maybe all sorts of global solutions are offered which, of course, never stand up. The problems also tend to become increasingly complex. Now, it's virtually a cacophony of conversations, but popular philosophy cuts through all this. It's more like light entertainment. Maybe even somewhat anti-philosophical in the mode of Michel de Montaigne (whom the author cites) railing against Aristotle and other systematic philosophers. The idea being that they're deluded from the get-go by thinking they've figured it all out. Sceptics they're called and they go back to ancient Greece, but they've always been a marginal affair. You can't build and maintain a tradition on doubt.

Some speak of the death of philosophy. Marx did, for example. He believed that philosophy should actively change the world, but once this was done (end of class struggle, rule of the proletariat, etc.), what need of it?

Unquestionably, popularizing has its place too, and it's not so far removed from pedagogy. All teaching is simplifying and therefore a kind of distortion. This is the reason so many different interpretations can arise and fight over the same thing. One party emphasizes one aspect, another party a different one. In this respect, philosophy mirrors life with its ongoing, complex, and multiple shifts. It searches for settled meaning and yet, if it were to find it, it would truly be its death.

But most people find their philosophy as a personal thing and stay with it as others do with religion. There isn't really that much difference.

Well, enough for now. Still no exciting news to report. Let's hope next week. *Love, Michael*

August 6, 2000

Dear Mom,

Very early Sunday morning. Sun still not up. Woke up for some reason at 4am. Just had breakfast. Very good summer weather past week. Working hard, as usual. Still preparing for defense of my thesis proposal. Found out that one thesis member hasn't sent in his report. A certain Professor Van Den Mengel who belongs to the philosophy department of St. Paul's University. Maybe he left the country. Caroline, the student advisor, has sent him three unanswered emails. Is he doing a Rip Van Winkel? Gone to sleep for twenty years? Maybe this coming week we'll hear.

How do I prepare? By coming up with questions I think they could ask. As part of this exercise, I try to anticipate a worst-case scenario. It's brings into play whatever playwrighting skills I have. Not a scholarly way to go about things, but if I did do so in any strict or conventional sense, you'd probably not recognize me.

So, I must persist in my own way come hell or high water. Work hard and simply try to do my best and not be too surprised or disappointed if I don't score a resounding success. These people are neither my allies nor my adversaries but somewhere in between. Then again, I don't know about this Professor Van Den Mengel. Maybe he's already looked over my proposal and is disconcerted by it. Disconcerting scholars is what Derrida has done for many years, only with great success. Not that he didn't suffer, particularly in his early student years. Problems with being Jewish in Algeria. War years. Also suffered from depression. But proved himself to be brilliant early in life, and he was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time (i.e., Paris in the 1950's and 1960's).

I received your second letter with student loan which is now deposited. My Chinese friend, Puqun Li (pronounced "Putch-in Lee"), is going to China shortly as a translator for a visiting specialist from University of Ottawa. The guy has written on waste management. Puqun Li will also take the opportunity to spend a couple of weeks with his family. Father alive but mother died when he was still a child. But, of course, there's the extended family. Big thing still in China. Oh, and he just told me his wife's expecting their second child, so now he really feels under pressure. He's already writing his thesis, so he's well ahead of me. And this despite being a family man. But he's been luckier than me in other ways. He's in constant contact with his thesis director, Professor Lugg, who even corrects his English for him. Also, he's simplified things for himself whereas I've gone the other way. In short, he has a very practical approach to fulfilling the requirements of the program.

And, no doubt, I'm the only one doing it the other way but let that pass. You've heard enough about it. Now it's growing light. Sky overcast but may change. Summer slipping by so fast. Chained to my kitchen table that serves as my desk hours on end. More than I want, but have to make the best of it.

Just before or slightly after waking up, I had Gerd Lohre in mind. His jovial, clown-like face and corpulent form. Saw him as I knew him at work from day to day and over many years. I remember the first time I started working for Lohre Foundation and Underpinning in the basement of Harrow United Church in Winnipeg. He pretended he was an employee like the rest of us. He asked me and some others in his funny German accent, "How much you getting paid?" And we replied, "Four dollars an hour." And then he bellowed, "What the fuck! I'm only getting three!"

He did so much for his son, Peter, and also helped out his brother, Horst. There was a time they tried to go back to live in Germany, the three brothers, Horst, Gerd, and Roman. But it didn't work out for them and so they returned to Winnipeg. Roman's two sons, Ralf and Frank, didn't like the German school system. And some business venture, a garage station, I believe, didn't work out. So, they ended up coming back to Canada and back to construction and, specifically, the piling and foundation business. And, then, eventually starting their own small company which I practically saw from beginning and

certainly saw to the end. Their first big job was the Ramada Inn on Pembina Highway where you worked at one time.

So, now it's time to go. Still no real news to give you. A kind of doldrum period. Others go off to conferences, give addresses, specialize. But will any of it be remembered as significant?

I trust you're continuing in your inimitable fashion and making the best of life. Love, Michael

August 13, 2000

Dear Mom,

Fine morning. Weather good this past week. Best of summer has been in August. I don't have a great deal to report. Professor Hunter (yes, there is one here!) told me last week my thesis project defense should be happening shortly. He's the chair of the thesis committee and presides over the proceedings but doesn't participate. Very nice friendly man. Specializes in Modern Philosophy with seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers like Rene Descartes. ("I think, therefore, I am.") Anyway, this means the third committee member from nearby St. Paul's University is ready to hand in his report. But now, guess what, I've decided not to do my project defense in August. Reason? Perhaps hardly anyone will show up for it besides me. So, I'm going to make sure it takes place in September. I'll simply be unavailable for late August.

In the meantime, I prepare like the devil. After all, this is where they could stop me cold. I don't want to see them asking for any major changes, so I must be prepared, I must be master of the situation. Which is why I've tried to anticipate some of their questions. Except for the third committee member, I know them well and so more or less know what to expect. There could be some dumb questions and, with this in mind, I'm making every effort to avoid inappropriate responses. I'm exploring a new area and must conduct myself as the expert in it and not like some rank amateur, some hesitant schoolboy.

The key is setting the tone early. A way of being firm and articulate without being overly confrontational or overly defensive (as was the case last time). And always polite in the manner of cheerful persistence. The philosophical area I'm exploring is very tricky and controversial. Derrida has his enemies. To be unorthodox, no matter how good you are, is to have enemies. So, my handling of myself, the subject matter, the questions, the possible objections is all very important. It's necessary at this point to drive the nail deep into the wood.

I sent off a letter to the *Collège International de la Philosophie* in France. Derrida was instrumental in setting it up. A kind of counterinstitution. The way philosophy is taught is an issue among others. I asked for general information and how to subscribe to their journal *Revue Rue Descartes*.

Making my way slowly through the huge second volume of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. What an observer of people and manners! What penetrating insight and observations! Everyone is opened up with a scalpel. The decline of French aristocracy and titled people including the pretenders. The rising bourgeoisie with aristocratic tastes and pretensions. Sexual love, homosexuality, lesbianism, political

and social scandals. But none of this done blatantly or crudely. People who recur in the hero's life, how they change, how *he* changes. All this done quite masterfully.

I only read a few pages each night before dropping off. A long way off from how much literature I used to read. Still, I keep it alive. The rest of the time I'm reading philosophy.

But Proust's great work is what you could call a philosophical novel. Only it does what it does by going beyond systems to the always-something-larger-or-left-out. Unpredictable, unexplainable, mysterious, what is neither good nor bad but perhaps both at the same time.

Well, I see I've managed to fill up my four pages. Sometimes it's a struggle to find things to talk about.
Love, Michael

August 20, 2000

Dear Mom,

Bright morning. Brisk outside. Yesterday quite cool. Went to the university in evening. Used computer room. Crowds of people downtown as usual. Market area. Various good smells assail you. So many restaurants, stands, bars. (You'd like it.) I generally just pass through on my bicycle. Also quite a large Chinatown here in Ottawa. Must have all happened in the last twenty-five or thirty years. Their numerous stores spill out their goods onto the sidewalk. Big on vegetables. I don't think Chinese people care too much for Loblaw's. They can't get what they want there. Their cuisine has a long history and is very integrated into their way of life. A hamburger or hotdog, even a cold sandwich, simply doesn't cut it.

My Chinese friend, Puqun Li, is in China right now acting as a translator for visiting professor. Then visiting his family. First time back in three years. He's a very polite, thoughtful, amiable fellow. His young wife still doesn't speak English very well. She works part-time in a (guess what?) Chinese restaurant. With so many Chinese people to talk to at work and at leisure, etc., it's hard to become fluent in English.

Signs of the coming change of seasons. Flights of grackles (something like blackbirds) pecking about on the lawns in the morning. Also those wasps that like to buzz around you but are really harmless. And soon new sets of faces showing up on campus. A lot of fresh faces taking up residence there as I did three years ago (but without a fresh face, of course). For a lot of them, it'll be the first time living away from home for an extended period. But in a couple of weeks, with new friends and everything, they feel right at home. Such is the eternal flexibility and adaptability of youth.

A person who is inclined to the contemplative life cannot take too much sociability. The latter tends to get between him and himself. What is a pleasurable distraction for others is irksome and a hindrance to him. He does not want to lose himself in the crowd. He already feels there's a crowd within himself. Tighter and more compact, to be sure, but nonetheless a myriad of individual items. And he would like to have time to inspect them one and all.

For we, as individual human beings, are constituted from the ground up by other people and other things. We are born into a certain world which takes us over and starts to shape us before we know it. This is how we set out on our particular paths, and I'm not just talking about a professional career. I'm talking more in the realm of the spirit: how we end up unfolding ourselves and who knows the wealth of subtle, even invisible factors that come into play here. What seemingly insignificant events in earliest childhood make the difference between choosing one destiny and another. Which amounts to our choice of ideals, what we like to imagine best for ourselves or others.

People who stand out only by standing with the crowd prosper best in this world. But people who stand out from the crowd by standing away from it prosper best beyond their earthly lives.

There is really no reason to envy one fate or the other. They all bear their own sun as well as cast their own shadow.

Life chooses us less than we choose our life, but we like to think differently.

Shakespeare lived, Shakespeare died. Some one hundred and fifty years ago, long after his death, he came into his own as a world-famous figure. And, today, he is considered, according to the latest consensus, the greatest Englishman who ever lived.

We are relayed to the present from a past we have forgotten and relayed to a future – through our children, grandchildren, books, writings, creations, myriad anonymous contributions – we know little or nothing of.

Perhaps we were never quite real to begin with or at least never so different from stage characters and characters in novels as we like to think.

Of course, all this is contrary to the Christian notion of an eternal soul, an eternal identity before God.

Nil desperandum! Any answer would be the end of all answers. All questions, for that matter. Each of our lives is a river that stretches out to reach the sea. And how much beauty and mystery there is in this!

Well, you can see I didn't have a lot of hard news to report, so this letter has been devoted to a bit of aphoristic thinking. I trust it will interest you but, then again, it's so easy to interest a mother. *Love,*
Michael

August 27, 2000

Dear Mom,

Enclosed are two items I wrote which I thought might interest you. They give a good summing up of how I view my situation for the upcoming thesis project defense. One of them, entitled "Committee Member No. 3 Goes for the Kill," gives you an idea of what I'm expecting and how I prepare for it.

I received acknowledgement for having taken the guest room at Lion's Place for the days after Christmas. Thanks once again.

Very nice summer weather the past week. The best at the tail end. Some leaves, I notice, already starting to turn colour. Fern leaves first along cycling path. Few and far between as yet. Red is the dominant colour of changing leaves here, not yellow as in Winnipeg. Some few flights of migratory birds. The university will be heating up very soon. Perhaps even tomorrow I'll notice the difference. Will go in to register for the 2000-2001 university year. My fourth, can you believe it? And all the work I've done, and I still don't know where I'm entirely at.

Still slowly making my way through Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. You literally spend hours reading about one high-society soiree. (The detail is incredible!) The Duchesse of Guermantes is a star figure, young, beautiful, and witty. Brilliant conversationalist. A kind of modern-day Cleopatra with encyclopedic knowledge. Gracious to all (except those she doesn't mix with and enjoys disparaging), including the very young middle-class first-person narrator. At the same time, we can see her wit and social graces take precedence over depth and magnanimity. Amidst the luxury and the high-precision manners is the same sort of loose thinking, maliciousness, and small-mindedness that could be found anywhere.

Went to see the old movie *Spartacus* the other night at the Bytown Theatre. Made in 1960 with Kirk Douglas in the lead. He was also the executive producer and director. First saw this movie when I was seventeen and working up north in Gillam, Manitoba. It strongly affected me then, but now the script seems mediocre. However, there are a couple of lines, a couple of scenes that resemble things in *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V*. Laurence Olivier plays the Roman general, Crassus, who ultimately defeats Spartacus's slave army. And then there's Peter Ustinov, Charles Laughton, and Tony Curtis. The acting is of the highest calibre and the battle scene at the end very impressive.

For some reason, my mind is drawn back to the time of the racehorses. To Uncle Harold's farm and to Assiniboia Downs. Do you remember that horse owner I worked for after I broke up with Uncle Harold? The old guy (I forget his name) who had a crush on you? He had convinced himself the feeling was mutual. He knew horses but not the human heart (or much else). His sexual comments used to surprise me given his sixty years. At seventeen, I was still naïve and virginal. Now I remember: Lon Marsh was his name and he had a nephew, another horse owner, called Gordie Marsh. A guy with thick glasses but dressed up like a cowboy. One time he told me Uncle Carl must've have been some man in his day. I suspect he was thinking of his size and strength and not his character. This over two-hundred pound man who strutted around the shed row in his cowboy boots and hat. Who talked to everyone in sight and at great length in his gravelly voice. Who, on race night, always had *The Horseman's Digest* under one arm. Who avoided doing a lick of work at the racetrack and even on his own farm. "All the world's a stage, and we are but players on it."

The horses, pampered, but living out their lives in wooden cubicles. No open skies for them from morn to dusk. And some pushed down the track when their legs were already suffering and almost shot. Shooting them up with painkillers as well as vitamin supplements to make them run better, to get a few more races out of them. Uncle Harold was no innocent here. Why did he buy so many broken-down horses? God only knows! Was it simply because he got them cheap? And what was he then expecting? A miracle?

The little tack room I stayed in one summer at age fourteen while working on his eighty-foot-long ranch house. Painting, insulating, and helping the German carpenter, Matt, by nailing plywood sheets on the living room floor. Also painting Bill Wysocki's fence, a neighbour who was Uncle Harold's business partner (but I'm not sure if they were friends). And feeding the one or two horses that were there while the rest were at the track where I'd be working the following summer. And feeling very lonely out there, asking myself why I didn't have any friends. Obviously, even then, I was afflicted by the loner bent that's dominated my life but, at that age, caused me a good deal of anguish, a good deal of perplexity. But, of course, this is not to say I would've been happier in a group. It's just that, at such a young age, I imagined some perfect companionship and then couldn't understand why it wasn't there for me.

So, there it is for another week. Will see Caroline, the student advisor, tomorrow. Get on her case about this third committee member who's holding up the show. He still doesn't seem to be quite on board. He ought to be shot! *Love, Michael*

September 3, 2000

Dear Mom,

Still no definite date for my thesis proposal defense. Will contact Department tomorrow to see what's happening. These things do seem to have a tortoise-like pace. In the meantime, I fully arm for combat. I have some forty pages of prepared questions and answers. God grant that it hold me in good stead!

Philosophy, like life, is a veritable ocean. While traversing it, the thought of drowning is never entirely absent. How easy then to understand the lure of religion. An end to agonizing over difficult questions. To playing a seemingly futile game. One simply has one's faith, one's answer to deepest questions and, then, presumably, one simply gets on with the rest.

All the great philosophers certainly thought they had the answer. All that one can say is, if they did, it generated further questions and answers. For each answer, perhaps ten questions. The wheel turns and no one knows when or where it will stop.

Friday was very hot, but Saturday was cloudy and cool. This morning the sky overcast. Already I've heard geese honking in the vicinity of the river. Early arrivals! This week the university will definitely become very active. Classes will commence and, in that ocean of youth, I'll move my middle-aged face and body. Others my age already have twenty years of scholarly work and teaching behind them. Some look it too and so, from this point of view, it's not so attractive. Walking books! Ordered verbosity! Talking heads! Wise and not wise. Good and bad. Interesting and not interesting.

Is it for this one fights tooth and nail while pretending no fight, no rough passage, no trouble worth mention? The calm orderly surface of institutional life is undoubtedly indispensable. Departures from it of any kind would break necessary links and stop the wheels from turning.

And so, to insert myself in it as even a minor irritant is a delicate operation. In however humble a way or however ineffectually, I impress my will on my surroundings. From my own little corner, in my own little

way, by example, by infiltration, by being accepted even while being resisted and resisting. By establishing something singular. Perhaps a model if not now, then later.

And how to explain it to anyone? This wish not to be turned into what already is? To change subtly what is around me into something else?

I too operate with an ideal, a way of being, a way of educating myself. I haven't diverted from it in thirty years. However, it's not necessarily an ideal life but more like a sustaining or identifying force. I simply want some room for it and, insofar as others can recognize themselves in me, perhaps I contribute something.

These letters to you, I've come to realize, are very helpful to me. They allow me to spell out certain states of mind and reasons for doing what I'm doing. In effect, a bit of analysis of my eccentric approach to philosophy and professionalism. God only knows how much genuine contact with it there will be in the future! All this coming from, lest it be forgotten, a former taxi driver, truck driver, construction worker, pipe layer, miner, cook, parking attendant, salesman, etc.

I hope you enjoyed those little supplements to my letter of last week. Did you find them reasonable enough?

I think I told you I wrote to this institution in Paris called the *Collège International de Philosophie*. They sent me a few items but not much. They ask for sixty francs to cover expenses for sending out information on the upcoming program. That's twelve dollars Canadian, so I sent off a money order. This institution makes a practise of deeply questioning itself and examining how philosophy is taught in the university.

So, enough for this week. Still reading Proust slowly. The hero is telling us a lot about the secret life of homosexuals or, as he refers to them, inverts. Among them the cream of French society. Some deathly afraid of scandal and even going so far as to cast suspicion on others to deflect it from themselves. Womanish spirits bound in men's bodies (and vice-versa). Part of the exotica and erotica in the garden of humanity.

Until next week. Trust you have a nice crisp enjoyable fall in Winnipeg. Love, Michael

September 11, 2000

Dear Mom,

Beautiful weather all this past week and today promises to be more of the same. I was out yesterday evening on a road bike similar to the one I had, the grey Miele, which was stolen in the spring. I was instantly transported back to my cycling trip in Europe and felt a deep longing for such an experience again. I can still move quickly on a road bike which, of course, is faster than a mountain bike and gives you a real sense of covering distance. This road bike belongs to Philip who lives downstairs (my muscle-bound friend). Somebody had abandoned it at a corner store (*dépanneur*) perhaps because it's stolen. (There's a lot of that going around here.) Anyway, I just went out on a little jaunt before sunset through

Chinatown and then back across the river over the Champlain Bridge. (First time I crossed it.) Rather longish and under construction. Had to keep up with the traffic but it wasn't a problem. Then back home on the Quebec side following bicycle path near the river. (This is where I regularly run.) Agreeable feeling to be able to cover the ground so quickly and under my own power!

Still haven't got a date yet for my thesis project defense. Rather annoying. Some committee member out of town and not back till September 26. Caroline in the office will try to set it up for the last week in September. I'll check with her on it tomorrow.

University campus overflowing with students now. So crowded compared to what it's like in summer. A lot of them are there for the first time and have to learn how to use things: computer room, library, book store, etc. I even ended up helping a few myself. Other than this, it's mostly a week of socializing for them. Some, of course, will have to find a place to stay. Somebody told me Ottawa only has a one per cent vacancy rate, so this can be difficult.

My Chinese friend, Puqun Li, back from China. Was a translator for a visiting professor from University of Ottawa. They spent a few days visiting a couple of sites for water treatment in Southwestern China. It took them three hours to reach it by plane from Beijing. Shows you how big the country is. He told me the work was easy because most of the time he was translating for the professor and his wife while they were sightseeing, shopping, and going to restaurants. Puqun Li said he himself was impressed by the local and regional cuisine. Nothing like it here, he claims, even in Chinatown.

His wife's expecting a second child in spring. He feels real pressure now to get his doctoral degree out of the way. He's already written a good part of his thesis and, as I said before, is much ahead of me. But I don't really believe you can compare our two projects. He has a very tight, narrow focus that, quite frankly, would bore me. As somebody once said: specialization is saying more and more about less and less.

September 15, 1975. That day will always stay in my mind. Almost exactly twenty-five years ago, I left you and Sharon on the back doorstep at 99 Glenlawn Crescent in Winnipeg on a crisp beautiful day to strike out east on the Trans-Canada Highway. Why was I doing this at this age while others were already embarking on their professional careers? What was I trying to mould or fashion for myself? Surely, I thought more would be in place for me by now. Surely, I thought I would've secured my niche long before I'd see myself pass into my fifties.

How far can we peer? How far can we determine? So much is closed off to us. My spirit is intact and hasn't shriveled. My yearning is still there. My means not entirely meagre. And I still march towards a challenge and the completion of my life's work or whatever it might be.

Dad's little room at 25 Cadogan Road, Fairview, Dublin, Ireland. In the suburbs and looking relatively respectable. Perhaps a fashionable neighbourhood at one time. Little bit of lawn in front of the row houses with low wrought-iron fences. Inside, however, an entirely different story. His little garret upstairs was the smallest of rooms with sloped ceiling and a small window from which one could see over the rooftops of neighbouring houses visited often by big seabirds. And his room contaminated with

psoriatic scales that were literally everywhere as had been the case in his Kingston apartment. Oh, how far from that neat little bungalow in Chambly! From the family life that went on it over seven years!

As if he'd never had a family, as if it were merely a transitory affair, a passage, something shaken off to carry on elsewhere. Not intrinsic to what he was, never really a part of him, never felt deep down. How else to explain it? An episode, a register of life, ultimately not entirely agreeing or not giving due satisfaction. A downslide, a letting go, a falling off. The voluptuousness of the fall, of letting oneself go and landing where one will, no longer caring.

So much for this week's musings. Variations on an old theme. Myself, my father, an alternative approach. I'm sterile in love and marriage but perhaps fruitful somewhere else. *Love, Michael*

September 17, 2000

Dear Mom,

Cool weather has finally visited us. This morning overcast. Cleaned up my room the other day. Was badly in need of it. Still waiting for a definite date. Caroline tells me there's one committee member who still hasn't announced his availability for the end of the month or beginning of October. It's the guy from St. Paul's University, Professor Van Den Mengel. He's on sabbatical and, apparently, this gives him an excuse to take his sweet time. Don't think I'll have many smiles for him on the day of reckoning. That a student should blow all these fellows out of their socks. Now, that would be a difference! Instead of the usual sycophantic way of doing things A fifty-year-old rebel. Wouldn't Dad be proud of me? A chip off the old block!

Things seem to move so slowly. Life in general. So much of a routine. So much solitude. So much study. Digging ever deeper into something when I'm not sure how it will carry. Fear of growing old and grey. Life too. Am auditing one course in French. Instructor is Madame Collobert, a slim attractive woman who's probably about ten or fifteen years older than she looks. Good person but rather distant with a distracted air. She seldom smiles but very quickly when she does. She's a visiting professor from France and hardly speaks English, although she's trying hard to learn it now.

I'm taking the course to improve my French but the subject matter is definitely of interest to me. It's about ancient Greece and, specifically, Homeric heroes as role models compared to Socrates. I'm quite familiar with the material due to undergraduate courses I took at the University of Winnipeg.

Wrote a short letter the other evening to Pablo after long hiatus. Seems to be going great guns with his university research as Director of International Relations. Doesn't supply me with many details about it, but did say he's got a new girlfriend. He's a good-looking charmer but, as I saw every day on the fourteenth floor of Stanton Residence and later, during the summer, in Leblanc Residence, ambitious and hard-working. As fond as I was of him then, I never considered him to be an intellectual. What he did at university seemed to be merely a means to an end. Perhaps this helps to explain the emptiness of his letters. What he's doing now might be more modest than he likes to admit. On the other hand, somebody like me, who lives in unabashedly humble circumstances, secretly thinks of greatness. This is

the belief or illusion as I go on with my day-to-day struggle. The power of thought, so often delayed, immensely delayed, and yet so often far-reaching, very far-reaching!

Twenty-five years ago I set out for Europe. I took a journal with me. I only kept it for a while because I found writing in it tedious. Then, in York, England, during the winter months, while staying at a bed-and-breakfast, I tried to record my adventures. I never finished the project, never caught up to the point of arriving in York. I had already visited southern England, Wales, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland (just a bit), and the Lake District. (I think I'd got up to the Lake District in these writings.) People and places, places and people, the open road, the changing countryside, the inner contact with myself. Mixture of egotism and romanticism. The great experience, the great life, the great happiness always beckoning and promising to be around the corner. Others bite the bullet, do what they don't like to get ahead, to make money, to advance themselves. The dreamer persists in his dreaming. He follows his passion, his genius, his illusions.

So, here I am, still positioned between my usual self-confidence and lack of it. As stubborn to make it or break it in my own way as others are in theirs.

You see how I must fill up the pages of these letters. So uneventful is my life, but something is always due to arrive. We can count on that. *Love, Michael*

September 24, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Nippy out. Partly overcast. Received your letter. Thank you very much. Also that newspaper clipping. Please, please, whatever you do, don't associate me with that sort of book! It's gossip-mongering of the worst sort! Nothing could be more despicable than to discredit somebody's life's work by lifting certain incidents out of their lives and either giving a distorted account of them or fabricating them outright. Such a book is meant to appeal to certain people's anti-intellectual prejudices by attacking the philosopher's character. Everything is thrown into the same pot and called by the same name. (Or, at least, that's the impression given by the book review.) One is not expected to think and put different things on the scales and weigh them. One is expected only to react by exclaiming: "See! All the great people throughout history were worse than me!" How does such a book differ from those about celebrities revealing what terrible lives they live? Here one is simply at a more informed and articulate level of gossip. But it's still gossip which means it's ultimately more concerned about scandal and sensationalism than truth. For what you really have here is the art of the half-truth and the quarter-truth. How much is omitted in such books that, in the name of truth, should be included, and how much is included that, being dubious or slanted, should be omitted?

Are intellectuals supposed to be a homogeneous group with specific identifiable traits as once thought (and still is in some quarters) about Jews, blacks, and homosexuals?

Enough of this! A few days ago, I made a rather interesting discovery. I was on my daily run when, lo and behold, I came upon this very big turtle. He was about fifty feet from the river. It was a snapping turtle and they can be dangerous. His shell was a foot in diameter. I found a box, put the turtle in it, and took it

home with me. (Not the normal thing, is it?) It was a difficult operation because I didn't have a top for the box. People all curious and concerned. Wanted me to return it to the river. (Of course, I eventually did what these environmentally conscious people wanted.) I had him here in the room for a while. Got more or less used to me. Very intriguing to look at. As old as the dinosaurs. This one with sharp claws, a spikey tail, long stretchy neck, and bird-like mouth. Took some photos of him with a friend's camera. Can keep them as pets but need a large aquarium. Also, they're fussy about their food and you've got to feed them in water.

Reminded me of when I found that much smaller mud turtle in the field behind our house in Chambly. Do you remember? I probably was about ten or eleven years old. I remember how that turtle held on for dear life to the grass. I put him in a box and left him outside overnight. But he managed to get out and that was the last I saw of him.

By the way, I called the Museum of Natural History in Ottawa. They said the biggest turtle ever taken out of the Ottawa River had a shell of eighteen inches. Age difficult to determine because they grow according to the availability of food.

Was at one of my rare student parties the other night. Drank a bottle of wine and ate some barbeque stuff. Engaged in some philosophical and not-so philosophical conversation. Spoke a while with a young French woman by the name of Syliane. She, along with her husband, will graduate this year. Both excellent students. Win scholarships, attend conferences, publish articles, etc. You could say they have success written all over them. But, philosophically speaking, we've little in common. They accept the system as it is and, what's more, play it for all it's worth.

Met the professor I'll be working with as a teacher's assistant. God, I'm feeling my age! The guy is probably fifteen years younger than me. "Call me Martin," he says. Should be all right with him. Seems to know what he's about. There are two other TA's besides me for a first-year class of two hundred students. Critical reasoning, logic, argument. Boring stuff for a lot of students, but they've no choice but to take it.

Professor Van Den Mengel, the long-absent member of my thesis committee, is supposed to get back from Timbuctoo September 26, so this week something should happen. (I'm just joking about the "Timbuctoo.")

Enough for this letter. Will call Carla later, of course. Happy birthday, old lady! Olympics going on. I particularly remember being at almost the tail-end of my European trip when the Olympics in Montreal was being held. The year that fourteen-year-old Romanian girl, Nadia Comaneci, was a gymnastic sensation. Twenty-four years ago!. A whole new generation! Haven't got a TV so I don't watch the games. Just read stuff in *La Presse*. Love, Michael

October 8, 2000

Dear Mom,

Very much into cool crisp fall weather. Sunny this morning. About 7:30. Classical music playing on my little radio. How well it has held up! I bought it in Montreal for fourteen dollars and the sound is astonishingly good. Big dirigible flying overhead all day yesterday. This is a common sight along with beautiful hot-air balloons in the evening. I think you can take a ride in them for about a hundred dollars. I wouldn't mind. Give me a parachute and I'd even jump out.

I've just finished writing the rough draft of a letter in French to one of the greatest living philosophers, Jacques Derrida. Will send it to the *Collège international de Philosophie* in Paris. He has longstanding connections with this institution. I just want to give him an idea of what I'm doing and, if possible, get a response. I say in the letter that, given the conservatism of the Department, I'm pretty much on my own.

In the meantime, I've been catching up on my work as a TA (teacher's assistant). I haven't done much yet to properly prepare for it. Yesterday, however, I took time to look over a course text. It was a kind of refresher course for me. I don't want to feel like a dummy or an imposter when some student comes to me for help.

This Thursday, the professor, young fellow called Martin Montmigny ("call me Martin") is having a class test. Two hundred students in a first-year course with one prof and three teaching assistants. Most of the students no doubt would rather be somewhere else. Compulsory course for them. I have to hand out test and watch for cheaters. Bullshit job but I better show up and be there because I missed the first one.

Lots of geese on the little beach I run across every morning. They only move enough to clear out of the way. It's like the parting of the Red Sea. They're wild and migrating, but they hardly show any fear. (With dogs around, it's another matter.) They land at the same place every spring and fall because people feed them despite the signs not to.

Would like to finish my reading and research by Christmas. Then I should be able to move along rather quickly. Wouldn't have to pay registration fees for September-December session if I submitted it before September 2001. But you have to wait at least four months after submitting before defending.

Albert, my landlord, has moved his used furniture business into another building only a stone's throw from his old one. The new one's on Rue Eddy, the main drag of Hull. He converted an old Canadian Legion into a giant two-level showroom. He tells me it's probably the biggest of its kind in the Gatineau-Ottawa area. Albert came from France thirty years ago and, even though a highly successful businessman, he can't speak English.

Oh, I almost forgot! Last Sunday I went to Parliament Hill to see the crowd of people paying homage to the deceased Pierre Elliot Trudeau. Two immense lineups forming two big L's in front of the main building where the casket was. They stretched right out to and along Wellington Street. Waiting in line

took three to four hours. It was a beautiful afternoon. I cycled there with my fellow resident in the rooming house, Philip. Beautiful view of Hull from the rear of the Parliament Buildings. Panoramic view over the Ottawa River. Museum of Civilization directly on other side (Hull side). Throngs of people about. Indian Summer. All flags in surrounding area flying at half-mast. Felt a certain poignancy and fragility in the air, in the surroundings, in the event.

Remembered being with Dad in Dublin when, on one occasion, we went to the Canadian Embassy. It was November 1975. A big photograph of Pierre Trudeau upon entering. We both looked at it with pride. By then, he'd already been seven years in power and his children had been born. Margaret was ready to leave him or had already done so.

But in Quebec there was more fuss over Rocket Richard's death than Trudeau's. The latter is more controversial in this province because of his longstanding opposition to Quebec nationalism.

So, now I shall turn my attention to some text or other. So far, I've managed to hold my course despite various pressures, sometimes quite subtle but no less insidious. In this respect, you could say Trudeau is a model for me. Who would've thought that, before he arrived on the scene, a prime minister would be able to combine colourful behaviour with intellectual depth and honesty?

So far, Stockwell Day (he may be colourful but nothing else) hasn't done much for the Alliance Party. I think they made a mistake dumping Preston Manning. The whole image shit is what's behind it. Yet, Manning was at least experienced and had a more human face than this joker. A plastic politician, that's what he is! *Love, Michael*

October 14, 2000

Dear Mom,

Bright beautiful day ahead! Indian summer! Glorious colours of fall in Eastern Canada and a special day for me in that, along with this letter, I'll send one, written in immaculate French, to one of the world's most celebrated living philosophers. I wrote the letter about a week ago. Then, at the university, in the philosophy department, I consulted a few francophones, of which there are many, to correct the grammar, style, etc. Along with the one-page letter to him, I'm including a summary of my plan for the thesis project. I left this in English because he's proficient in it, having been a visiting professor at Yale for many years.

How exciting it will be if I get a response! Since he's probably inundated by requests of all kinds, I made every effort to be as short and to the point as possible. So, keep your fingers crossed. Rarely does a student get an opportunity to correspond with a major philosopher. Most of the other students work on philosophers long dead, but mine is very much alive. Moreover, he continues to write, publish, teach, and give lectures. One of his talks is forthcoming at the *Collège International de philosophie* in Paris which Derrida helped to set up. My letter is addressed to the college with the expectation that he will get it. I tried to make everything look as handsome and elegant as possible.

Not only a few students and one professor helped me with correcting the French, but also one member of the office staff. I didn't want to show it to faculty members because I'd made some critical comments about the Department.

I went to a meeting earlier in the week held by the graduate student association for the election of offices. It's called a general assembly but it's a bit of a joke. Of seventy graduate students, only seven turned up. I took on one little chore but refused to become further involved. It seems it's real purpose is for those who want to stuff one more credit into their CV. (They can say they held the position of president, secretary, treasurer, etc.) Otherwise, nobody gives a hot damn! What I've taken on is to arrange a couple of informal sessions over the course of the year for whoever wants to read something from their work. I've already done this myself in the past.

So, everything is cool. The outgoing president of the committee is a young woman who, as well as being an exceptional student, is full of grace and elegance. Her name is Syliane Charles, and she'll be defending her thesis this year. A very nice person although one of those "Christian" philosophers that seem to be well represented in the Department. For me, of course, this means being conservative and traditional rather than adventurous and exploratory.

She's from France and, with her husband, Sebastien, who's also an exceptional student, lives in very comfortable surroundings in Aylmer just outside of Hull. I've not visited them myself, but someone who looked after their place when they were on vacation told me about it. Between the two of them, they've won all the big prizes and can live like royalty. They own a car and take vacations to places like Greece in summer and probably without going too much, if at all, into debt.

But I like her apart from all other considerations because she has this modest way of blushing – how can I say it? – and a certain uneasiness mixed with friendliness. It seems as if she treats me both as a threat and an attraction. At least, this is how my imagination plays it.

Almost finished another volume of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Young hero has just come to the point of suspecting that his fiancée has engaged in affairs with other young women. And yet, he was on the verge of splitting up with her. But now his possessiveness, vanity, and jealousy take hold of him. He wants her now even though he'd thought otherwise before. Strange relationship. And a lot of lying back and forth or, at least, suspected lying. It's hard to tell the difference. At the same time, he's still hobnobbing with the cream of French society, squandering his creative abilities and never getting around to doing what he thinks he should be.

Now, I shall post this letter along with the large white envelope addressed to Jacques Derrida. Wish me luck! Love, Michael

October 22, 2000

Dear Mom,

Very early morning. Sun still not up. Been bothered lately by some sharp pains in my left shoulder and upper arm though it doesn't stop me from doing things. In fact, I even have some weights now in my

room (Philip's) that I make use of at odd moments. However, the aching is strong enough to interfere with my sleep. I tried a hot-water bottle in bed, but it's rather awkward and doesn't seem to help much. I'll wait to see if it subsides before doing anything. The only time I've been to a doctor since I came to Ottawa was for a medical exam to renew my driver's license.

Otherwise, everything's fine. We've had some really nice weather of late (Indian summer). Friday it went up to sixteen degrees. Cycled to the university wearing shorts. Probably will be last time this year. Also, put a fender on the rear wheel of my bicycle. Tired of getting my ass wet on rainy days. Am going to see my friend Puqun Li this afternoon. He wants me to look over a paper he's written and correct the grammar, so I'll end up having a good Chinese meal at his place. And I eat it with chop sticks without too much trouble. It seems to be the right thing. As I told you, his wife is pregnant with second child. Big thing for people from the Republic of China. Of course, there you're allowed only one child. If you have second, you might be ostracized and suffer other inconveniences. India's population is supposed to surpass China's soon.

Had office hours this week 9-11 am on Thursday. Elderly woman, student, came to me after my hours were officially over. I helped her nonetheless for about an hour and a half. She was having real difficulties. Martin ("call me Martin") Montmigny, the professor, tells me some people break down and cry. They think they're stupid because they see others mastering the material with little or no difficulty.

Still fighting over a logical problem with the professor only he doesn't think there is one. Spent all yesterday wrestling with it. Others think I'm obsessed, and yet it's a philosophical problem so why should it be ignored? Simply because the professor's authority rules it out? But, if philosophy has to do with this and nothing else, then I want no part of it.

Others would rather choose a problem that hardly anyone cares about. What's the point beyond perpetuating a scholarly exercise and tradition? Here it's rather easy to go to sleep as original thinker while being most wakeful and vigilant as professional one. (But, then again, perhaps that's what I'm doing in this instance.)

Now, it's later in the morning. Caught some shuteye. Bright and sunny outside but minus three. Having difficulty finding something else to report on. Haven't got those photos yet of the turtle. There still on the camera of a fellow student called Jason who lives with another student called Mark in an old apartment building not far from the university. They are both thirty years old and both come from New Brunswick. I've already been to three parties at their place.

I think it'll be nice to clear out of this place for a while come Christmas. Feel like I'm going a bit stir-crazy. I get away from this room regularly, but I still spend too much time in it. It's my office, headquarters, kitchen, bedchamber, and recreation room. In short, I'm due for a break. I'm tired of working, reading, thinking, and writing with only an occasional movie, walk, or chat with a neighbour. For example, like the one last night with a forty-four-year-old man called Ben. He's a bit of a sad sack. Always sounds like he's down in the dumps. Doesn't like his situation in life. The fact that he's middle-aged and only a dishwasher. Took training to be a cook but it didn't work out. Complains about his lot in life all the time without taking any action. Nice enough fellow but homosexual in a creepy way. Likes young boys. But he

wants to cure his sexual urges. Now, he doesn't bring up the subject. Always seems alone, walking about aimlessly, hands stuck in his pockets, head down, looking gloomy as if saying "Life's not all it's cracked up to be!"

But I encourage him, get angry with him, scold him. He seems to like that.

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

Love, Michael

October 31, 2000

Dear Mom,

As you can see, a little late getting out this letter. Finished marking those two hundred mid-term tests late Sunday. Monday afternoon, met with Professor Montmigny (Martin) at Chapters, the big bookstore in downtown Ottawa. Has his "second office" in quiet upstairs area where you can connect your private portable computer. He did this to record the marks. Class average: 75%. He appeared satisfied. Now back to my own thing for a while. Went running later. Regular route. Cool but still wore shorts. First time in a few days. Felt all right. Nothing wrong with my stamina or strength. Took some Tylenol before going to sleep. First time in my life. It killed the sharp incessant pain coursing through my arm right down to the back of my hand. Very weird! Woke up a few times. I couldn't get back to sleep. Had to get up and eat something and do some work. Then felt tired again and eventually fell asleep.

Don't know if I told you in last letter, but I got a reassessment from Revenue Canada. Had to give them back over a thousand dollars. Appears that I'm not entitled to Cost of Living Credit since I wasn't paying rent in Manitoba. They checked back to 1998 and made me pay back what I'd claimed that year as well as charging me seventy dollars interest. But I'm lucky they didn't check back further because I've been doing the same thing since Montreal (from 1994 to 1997). Throughout all those years, at least part of the rent I paid was out-of-province. But I'm sure I received misleading advice from the Manitoba office. I never hid the fact the rent was being paid out-of-province, so I naturally figured everything was all right. Year after year, it got processed without a problem.

Forgot to mention something I saw over a week ago. Was cycling back from Ottawa to Hull on a route with large open fields. Saw two big air balloons just off road and a small crowd of people. Big beautiful attractively coloured spherical monsters with little gondolas. One was just lifting off when I arrived. Quite a sight! So elegant as they lift off and gain altitude while moving laterally at same time. Then second one was about to go up, but first it had to be filled with air. Two huge fans to force air into sea of nylon lying limply on ground but eventually filling up and becoming like a multi-coloured, translucent cavern. The gondola is on its side with eight people uncomfortably packed inside like sardines waiting for balloon to lift off to set them aright. Gondola fitted with hot-air gun. Once the balloon is almost full of air from the big fans, then this torch gun comes into play with short bursts of fire of about five or six

feet. However, the wind had picked up and it was getting close to dark. The guy in charge decided to abort the liftoff for safety reasons. Paying customers had to clamber back out with the gondola still on its side. Guy in charge apologized. He said it was better to be on the ground wishing you were up in the air than to be in the air wishing you were on the ground.

Still making my way slowly through Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Young hero now living in Paris with his beloved Albertine. Funny setup! He's half-in, half-out of love with her but torn by jealousy and suspicion. Thinks she's a lesbian and yet has no clear evidence. All the while, he's leading the life of a complete loafer. Money from parents, although it's not made clear. Capitalizing on his ill health and weak constitution since childhood. Wants to create and write but never gets down to it. A kind of daydreaming and reminiscing existence. Staying in bed until late. Albertine like a kept woman. Lavishes trinkets and fashionable clothes on her. She comes from poor background. Goes her own way a part of the day. Still a mystery as to what she's up to.

Hallowe'en tonight makes me think of Hallowe'ens in Chambly as child. Going around then and coming home with bagful of sweets. One's treasure! Part of living entirely in the now! I'm put in mind of Dylan Thomas's poem, "Fern Hill." It begins:

*Now I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green . . .*

And it ends:

*Oh, as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*

About childhood, the recollection of its seeming permanence but bitter-sweet passage. *Love, Michael*

November 5, 2000

Dear Mom,

Sunday. About 10:30am. Woke up about 1:30am. Then worked for a couple of hours before going back to bed. Got up late. Still being bothered by ache extending from shoulder down to back of arm. However, get quick relief from both hot shower and cold compress. A strange phenomenon! I'm not sure what to make of it. I don't think the anti-inflammation drug affected me one way or the other. Waste of money. Have made an appointment for November 14 with doctor who gave me exam about three years ago when I had to renew my driver's licence.

Saw two films at Imax Theatre last night. Some breath-taking photography. One was about the Amazon River and the other about migrating animals such as monarch butterflies, red crabs, zebras, and whales. Cost me \$10.50 with student discount. A visual feast that makes one more conscious of the glory and blessedness of having sight. It's funny how the all-too familiar, the day-to-day routine dulls appreciation

of such gifts. Mind you, the photography gives you one superlative scene after another, all without blemish. Try to find that in any city!

Quite a sight! All the monarch butterflies of North America converge on one forest in central Mexico. They cover the trees and bushes by the millions. Stay dormant during winter then revive in spring. Mexican school children go see them on outings. Walking through magical forest! Surrealism! If you so much as breathe on them, they revive and fly off by the hundreds. So many cling to the branches that they sometimes break. The Mexicans have a religious ceremony to mark their arrival.

Feel now I'll have to read much more for thesis project than originally planned. Was lucky enough to get one book through the inter-library loans service that comes all the way from Florida. There aren't many copies of this book in university libraries. (It's a recent publication.) It's a doctoral thesis converted into a book and, to be honest, it looks like it. Although fresh and audacious, it tries to cover too much.

Had office hours last Thursday from 9am to 11am. It was after I'd corrected those two hundred plus mid-term tests. Was expecting at least a few people to show up but none did. Does this mean I made no mistakes in correcting and adding up their final grades? I'd be surprised if this were the case, but, mind you, Martin told me beforehand how he wanted the tests marked. He's quite thorough and conscientious yet with a certain stiffness of manner despite his youthfulness.

I'm finding it difficult to drudge up things to tell you. Oh, I called Aunt Jane and Aunt Olive the other night and told them I'd be in for Christmas. Of course, I repeated to them what I'd told you over the phone, namely, that I'd successfully defended my thesis project. They were very pleased and happy to hear this. Told me a lot of kids visited them on Hallowe'en and they even ran out of candy.

Here in Hull, the main drag, Rue Eddy, becomes full of goblins and ghosts around supper time. They even have to get some young people to direct traffic. But no one came to visit me, not that I was expecting it. House here isolated from others and without Hallowe'en decorations. (On the other hand, it rather fits in: gloomy, isolated, and forbidding.)

Well, I'm anxious to get out and taste the day. Go on my run and then come back and have lunch. My toasted bagel with cheese, lettuce, onions, and tomatoes. Then coffee and slice of pumpernickel bread with honey. Buy newspaper *Lapresse* at local corner store (*dépanneur*).

What do you think of this Stockwell Day? What a name! Almost as pretentious as Preston Manning! And I hear he's more Christian than Jean Chretien. Young fellow in shoe store where I bought an expensive pair of running shoes, student from Saskatchewan working part-time, told me he and his brother were at Stockwell Day's convention in Hull recently. Told me his brother is a volunteer in his campaign. Imagine if he and George Bush were both in control. Probably end up with riots in the streets.

Alright, enough babble for now. I'm getting out of here for a bit and I'll post this letter very shortly in that little red mailbox in front of the Portuguese church. Busy little place. Heart of their community.

Love, Michael

November 12, 2000

Dear Mom,

Mid-morning now. Got up early again. Around 3am. Still problem with persistent ache in neck, shoulder, and arm. Have appointment with my doctor on Tuesday. Otherwise, doing everything as normal, including running every day. Blue sky outside. Looks good for a run today. Still reasonably good weather. I see by the newspaper that, along with getting snow, it's gone cold on you. That's Winnipeg for you! All that Arctic air coming down the middle of the continent.

Quite a thing going on in the States right now, isn't it? Who will it be, Bush or Gore? Or, as Ralf Nader would say, Tweedledum or Tweedledee? Sure looks like they're going to have to revamp the electoral system. As it stands, this stalemate could drag out for weeks and even end up in the courts. Imagine! Clinton would have to stay in office longer than usual. As it stands, it's anybody's guess how this will get settled. It really depends on how stubborn these two contenders are. Suppose Gore wins Florida by a few hundred votes. Will the Bush camp accept this?

Closer to home, I listened to the French and English debates between the party leaders on the radio. All of them dumping on Chretien and the latter appearing stubborn or rather ineffectual at times. Full of exaggeration and ad hominem arguments. It reminded me of pro wrestling. For two hours they hurl insults at one another and then, at the end, smile, shake hands, and congratulate each other.

It's comical but it's also what's expected. No matter how much people complain about it, it's eaten up like violence and sex on TV. A real debate focused on facts would drive most people away.

Joe Clarke was probably the best of all. If it was just a matter of voting a leader and not a party, I'd vote for him. Stockwell Day doesn't impress me as he seems to impress a lot of people. I sense too much of the actor/showman in him. Alexa Macdonough comes across as well-meaning but with no profound grasp of issues and short on ways and means of putting into effect her policies. She was just like all the others, spending too much time trying to demonize the Chretien government. It's the lack of imagination, the unwillingness to try new approaches that's disappointing. After all, what does Macdonough have to lose by breaking stride with the other comedians?

The next day Chretien was in Hamilton speaking about the debate as if it were a football game. ("There were a lot of flags on the field, but guess what? We still have the ball!") And he's no doubt right there. His truths may be rough and ill-expressed, but at least they still resemble truths. On the other hand, Chretien should definitely make this his last go. He's great as a strategist, but I don't think he's overflowing with wisdom and competence.

Every day I feel I'm drawing closer to the end of my research. I'm reading a very good book now that's a commentary on Derrida. Perhaps I shall try and get in touch with the author. Book published in Belgium in 1994 so it's not too old. He hits on a lot of the same points I do and, really, I'm badly in need of somebody in the academic world who'd show me some interest. So, it might be worth a shot. Of course, I'd have to write another letter in French.

Puqun Li told me the other day some job is up in the philosophy department at the University of Winnipeg. I'll look further into it. Too bad I wasn't closer to finishing my thesis. Then I'd be in a much better position to apply for it.

The University of Winnipeg would actually be a good place for me. Being undergraduate only, it means you don't have to sit on a ton of committees and read a lot of theses, all of which would surely drive me to distraction. I'd prefer the emphasis to be on teaching.

Well, I suppose I'm not too badly off. Not living in Palestine, for example, as a Palestinian. Life of disruptions and turmoil but also the feeling of living on the edge. Hardly a comedy show there!

That's it for now. You can see I was short of things to talk about. This is what comes from not living a particularly eventful life. *Love, Michael*

November 19, 2000

Dear Mom,

Has gone cold here. It's close to freezing. No more wearing shorts when I go running. Still no snow. Went to a third doctor about my problem in upper back. Muscle contraction. Gave me prescription for massage. Only found out later I'd have to pay for it because I'm not on a company plan. But things seem to be improving simply by daily use of cold compress and taking hot showers. At least, now I sleep better. So, you see, a recourse to drugs is not always necessary despite the willingness of doctors to prescribe them. Just patience and a bit of imagination are sometimes all that's necessary.

About to send off a long letter to Brian Keenan, the chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Winnipeg. Know him quite well. He taught a course which I thoroughly enjoyed. (I was in a double Honours Program at the time and majoring in both English and philosophy.) I'd been planning to write this letter for quite a while, but I postponed it after I ran into trouble with my first thesis project. Now, guess what? There's a job opening in the philosophy department there. It's just too bad I wasn't further along in my thesis. Anyway, I mention this job opening in my letter and I ask Keenan how I stand as a potential candidate. I should get an answer from him of one kind or another.

Since I don't have a lot to say at present, I'll send you a copy of my letter to Professor Keenan to look over. It gives a quick outline of my academic life at the University of Ottawa. I'll put it in smaller print to reduce the number of pages.

For the rest, things move along at their normal pace. Heard on the news this morning that Bush is now ahead in Florida by nine hundred votes. However, they're still counting in some counties that favour the Democrats. Patience is wearing thin in some quarters. They better settle it soon.

Well, I'll sign off here and let you read the other letter where I have to peddle my wares. And Chretien is a criminal, according to Stockwell Day. What a joke! As if he would be so different in office. Probably a lot worse. *Love, Michael*

November 26, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early Sunday morning. Day after you phoned. Drizzling outside. Still half dark. Now, what to talk about? Life goes on. Nothing special has happened beyond my finally getting rid of that damned nagging pain in my upper back. Funny thing about pain. Had a lot of trouble even locating it properly. First thought it was mostly originating in the shoulder. Then in the neck. But, actually, it was a muscle contraction in the back and, for a while, it was like a monkey on my back. Definitely makes you think about being stuck with chronic pain all your life. I was trying to imagine this for myself. Would take a lot of readjustments and take away a lot of your relish for life, your zest for living. Think of Ryle's back troubles or Sharon's psychiatric problems. Psychical pain is still pain, something always on the horizon of one's consciousness, impeding one's movements, one's activities, demanding the incessant attention one does not want to give it. Life itself becomes one's harasser, aggressor, or stalker. Sharon's "LIFE IS UNFAIR" statement in an unsent letter to Dad. Why be punished like this when others are not? And so the questioning goes without response or relief. But then perhaps resignation sets in. It's one's lot. Accept it! The world is diversity and chance. It falls out this way, then another way. All are mortal. No one escapes the final accounting.

Saw a movie about drug-taking called "Requiem for a Dream." Very searing film about a mother, son, friend, and girlfriend all addicts in one way or another. Mother to TV game shows and diet pills (amphetamines). The rest to heroin. All unhappy endings. Young man ends up getting his arm amputated when gangrene set in. Girlfriend prostitutes herself. All living fast and furious and then, young as they are, all entrapped. Mother goes off the deep end. Loses her marbles. Very sad case. All she's got is her son who hardly visits her. Well, he's got his problems too. Obviously caught up in some shady undertakings but came from respectable Jewish family by the name of Goldfarb. Father was businessman but now dead. Elderly mother who must have had her son late in life. He's in his twenties. Beautiful, sexy girlfriend who also comes from rich, well-off family but estranged from her parents. Just get sketchy background information about this.

Why do we go see such things? These sudden and dramatic changes of fortune? Look how happy and free they once were! Look how they've fallen! And now who envies them? Who would not rather be anybody but them? Youth and good looks, the good times, all coming to this sorry end. And so now I, the non-addict, the movie-goer can go back to my normal humdrum life feeling better. Feeling maybe superior. Almost vindicated. Thinking: "There but for the grace of God, go !!"

Movies do this sort of thing. They seem to make our own lives more interesting or, at least, potentially so. We've just become too familiar with ourselves, and yet, in many ways, this is but an illusion. The strange is as much at the heart of us as at the furthest stretches of the universe. In our singularity and proximity, we are linked to vast distances and an unimaginable multiplicity. Everyone dies and takes a secret with them. We often ask ourselves: "We knew them most intimately, but did we *really* know them?" Something seems to have been left out. Something overlooked. Now their silence seems to speak of this, to focus attention on it. Is this an after-affect of the departed one?

Think of all the previous generations of which we have virtually no knowledge including our own ancestors. For example, your mother's father and mother and their fathers and mothers and back and back. What kind of people were they? Like all the rest we might well imagine. In other words, all kinds. No doubt good representatives of the human race in general.

Well, I should get started with some work. It's after 8am. Yesterday I slept in a bit. Didn't feel motivated as I usually do. Rather lie in bed in a kind of dream state, thoughts fluttering back and forth, mind like an active sea with the wind blowing over it. And there are depths too with dark movements below. Things happening before we know it that lead to things we become aware of. All these little beforehand invisible movements, agitations of the soul, barely perceptible feelings altering this or that state, this or that direction, making all sorts of adjustments, invisible calculations. All this which is of us and not of us making up an "I" that knows itself, recognizes itself, and so on which is the surface part belonging to something deeper, animal, instinctive, apart from the familiar.

Soon the Liberals will be re-elected. Not voting myself. Hull will easily go Liberal. Canada, you don't know how lucky you are! I don't either, not really. Haven't been around enough even in imagination. Always thinking about what's already good for me or could be better. *Love, Michael*

December 3, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Radio on. Cold outside. Geese still around. Saw some yesterday while running. The last of them heading south. And black squirrels still bustling around in the dead leaves. Tragic accident in the river not far from here. Woman scuba diver working for Hydro-Quebec who was taking pictures underneath the bridge. Got sucked into some hole. Other divers couldn't extricate her in time. A corpse brought up to the surface. Twenty-seven years old. Must have been a tremendous force involved. Suction caused by flowing water. Weren't many details in newspaper.

Went out to vote on voting day. Last-minute decision. Voted Liberal. I didn't even know where the voting was being held. Just took a guess. Nearby arena. Proved to be the right place. Had to show ID. Soon after, polling stations were closed, and I was hearing first results on radio. Eastern Canada, even Quebec, gave the reigns of government to the Liberals. In the West, a totally different picture. Regionalism is alive and well in Canada.

Got an email from Pablo. Happy with his new girlfriend called Leocadia. Still making jokes all the time in his atrocious English. Seems to be doing pretty well for himself, better than me. Has post at his university. Mentioned working on his thesis. Presumably, it's his doctoral thesis. He's very short on details. Says he's the Director of International Relations and I've no idea what this means. Sounds impressive, at any rate, but life as a diplomat no longer seems to be on the horizon.

Last night, scouting around on some university websites to see how they present themselves. A real job of professional packaging! You'd think everywhere but where you are is an academic paradise. Full of brilliant people who publish all the time and know everything about everything. Image! Image! Image! A good marketing job! All in lockstep in promoting themselves to the max. University of Toronto, one of

the best universities in the world, has a huge philosophy department with many staff members. I've a print-out list of them and am checking it over. Is there anyone interested in what I'm interested in? It's now or never for me, it's really a question where I'm going to end up. Maybe I'll have to go look for something overseas. I want to maintain a critical distance. I don't want to be sucked in and, then again, who would want me? There are so many younger, more flexible, more conformist types on the market. And ones who also publish more. It's something I must always keep in mind.

Received an answer to my letter from Brian Keenan, the chair of the philosophy department at the University of Winnipeg. I was disappointed by his lack of candour (his answer was rather formal), but that's what it is to be a functionary. You do what you must and go no further. Everything is controlled and efficient while a certain human element is sacrificed. One doesn't want unnecessary entanglements, complications, misunderstandings, obligations, expectations, etc.

Like always, I must ply my own tortuous path even if it proves to be a dead end. My life is the furthest thing from being programmed even at this late stage. I still have a good deal of vital force and energy, maybe more than most. I must always try to put it to some use. If I could do it creatively and on my own terms, I definitely would.

Well, pretty soon I'll be coming to visit you, but, right now, I'll be busy for a couple of days marking final exams. Exam day is December 7 for the class in which I'm working as a teacher's assistant (TA). It hasn't been too bad, and, in fact, I hardly feel I've earned my salary this year. The work's been minimal compared to what I did last year.

Well, that's about it for now. One more letter and then I'll be there in the flesh. Will have to take the bus again, of course. Long ride! It'll be the fourth time from Ottawa to Winnipeg. At least, the pain in my back and neck is gone. Imagine going with that!

Saw a movie the other night about 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. The killing of Israeli athletes. I visited that stadium in 1976. Also Dachau concentration camp not too far away. The movie – actually, a documentary – is very dramatic. German government comes off looking inept and even devious. Same with Olympic officials. They continued the Games even after two of the Israeli athletes had been murdered. Then the Games were suspended until everything was all over. A fiasco at the airport! Ambush by police snipers that went all wrong. All remaining hostages killed as a result.

So, there it is for this Sunday. Talk to you soon. *Love, Michael*

December 10, 2000

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Still dark outside. Bitter cold. Part of cold front covering most of Canada. And yet it was little more than a week ago I saw the last geese visiting the little beach not far from here and very close to the bicycle path on which I run. Speaking of running, I got attacked by two big dogs on Friday. I'd almost arrived home and was cutting through a little park near two busy streets. Two big ferocious dogs acting and attacking like guard dogs. Acting as if the park was their terrain to protect. No owner in sight

but one had a collar on his neck. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd escaped from some compound. Anyway, it was quite scary because they both came at me at the same time and meant business. Numerous kicks to their faces had little or no effect. Finally, I extricated myself by retreating in the direction I'd come. Of course, I made sure not to turn my back on them. Had they not finally desisted, I would've been worn out. They worked as a team, one coming at me first and then the other. I went to the nearby Holiday Inn and had the clerk call the authorities. As far as I know, they sent somebody out to go after them.

I think it's preferable to run into a snapping turtle than two junkyard dogs. Amazing the situations you can get into just by going out for a jog!

Just finished marking some exams. Actually, only had to do part of the job. Another TA doing the rest. Took me only a day. Quite easy. Fill-in-the-blank stuff. Over two hundred of them.

Contacted a professor at nearby Carleton University who knows Jacques Derrida's work. Last night I received an answer from her, and she said she'd be happy to meet me. This is good news because, as you know, there's no one at the U. of O. who's particularly interested in Derrida. I'll probably phone her office tomorrow and leave my phone number. She told me she's going on sabbatical in January and will be out of the city for six or seven months. From what I've heard about her, she's a good head.

I'm arranging a small informal student conference for some time in the New Year. It's my very own idea and the theme will be philosophy in the university. It's a bit off-the-wall and may or may not work. However, some people have expressed an interest and I'll go ahead and see what happens.

Had a flat with my bicycle the other day. Had to bring the wheel into my room to repair it. Otherwise, it goes well in winter. Little mountain bike gets me all over downtown. Oh, by the way, did you hear that Ottawa is experiencing an economic boom? Some experts are predicting the population will reach 1,300,00 in twenty years. High-tech industry here is the main driver. Ottawa and surrounding municipalities are amalgamating come January. Just like what they're trying to do in Montreal only in that city there's a tremendous resistance from towns like St. Bruno and English parts of the Island of Montreal like Dorval, Baie d'Urfe, Outremont, etc.

The same thing will happen here in Hull. Outlying areas right now are separate entities: Aylmer, Gatineau, and Buckingham. These are all surrounding municipalities where a good many people live who work in the large federal government buildings in downtown Hull. They clear out of these buildings every day in the afternoon after work. These buildings are themselves like a city with their thousands of offices, overhead passageways, stores, cafeterias, huge underground parking lots, and so on.

Classes are over and exams are being written now. Kids will soon start trekking home for Christmas. Campus becomes quieter and far less crowded. Good time to use library and, as it happens, I've a short article in Spanish to pick up at the inter-library loans department. I'll try translating some of it myself before getting help. It's only six pages.

I plan to send off a few carefully written letters to the small handful of scholars who've written on the Ricoeur-Derrida debate about metaphor. One can never be sure what will come of this, maybe nothing, but at least I'll have tried. One problem is the professors are so damned busy. Another is they're usually not interested in anything but their latest work.

Now there's light outside my window. Odd tenant has moved in. Thought he was a fag and it turned out I was right. Showed me a form letter saying he came up negative on his AIDS test. He's a bit of a nuisance but otherwise harmless. Spends most of his time in the hallway trying to strike up conversations. *Love, Michael*

January 7, 2001

Dear Mom,

Another start, another year. Much milder winter at this end of Canada though lots of snow. Fortunately, skiers and snowmobilers press down the snow where I run on the bicycle path. Ottawa River still flowing, unlike Red, ice only covering it near the sides. Huge mound of snow outside my window that's the result of clearing next door parking lot owned by landlord. Arrived back home very early last Monday about 6am. Bus very crowded from Sault Ste. Marie on. Glad to get off it finally and stretch my legs. Walked all the way home from bus terminal. About thirty minutes. Not a problem even with bulky duffel bag. Then went to bed and slept for a few hours. Now back to routine of working every day. Want to send a letter to scholar in Brussels. Have read his book which I like and is close to what I'm doing. Feel I need some contacts given lack of interest in Department for Derrida. Maybe ask him some questions but then I'll have to find some people to correct my letter. Fortunately, there are a lot of francophones in the Department.

Also, I've a short article in Spanish to translate. Fortunately, there's a young woman from Venezuela who's willing to help me. (She's a student in the Department.) I'll meet with her Tuesday.

Also, I've taken on organizing a couple of things. Shouldn't take up a lot of time. Inhouse conferences where students can present their latest work. Would like to present something myself later this year.

Also, I'd like to audit one course in French if it proves not too demanding. It's good to keep a hand in the goings-on of the Department. Don't want to get too isolated by working only on thesis.

I want to thank you for your hospitality, generosity, and services rendered while I was in Winnipeg. When you go, there'll be no one to replace you and no doubt the world will grow colder for me.

I trust that Carla and family enjoyed their holidays in Mexico. I'll call her up maybe tonight.

Room nice and tidy when I got back. Not its normal state. Maybe now make more of an effort to keep it this way. (Wishful thinking!) A little bit of housekeeping after this letter will be enough to fill up a Sunday morning.

Forgot to register for winter term. Received warning about it in email. Go there tomorrow and do it. Have to pay twenty-five dollar fine. Completely slipped my mind. And it's just a matter of signing a piece of paper. New person in office so maybe that's why I didn't get a phone call about it.

Am having one of the turtle photos blown up to eight by ten inches. I'm curious to see how it turns out.

Another nuisance tenant to deal with who's loud, makes noise, drinks, and is stupid to boot. Can't go out of my room that he doesn't jump out of his. Social parasite! Does shit all day! No wonder he's always in need of distractions. Wants to know what everybody else is up to. But I hear he's pulling out at end of month. I hope it's true. Can't stomach the guy. He's ugly as hell and he thinks, for some reason, I should take an interest in him.

Will probably meet soon with a professor who teaches at Carleton University. Read a book of hers – a collection of essays. She seems to be a kindred spirit, but I didn't really care for the essays. (Oh, boy!) I took the risk of writing her a short note outlining my thoughts about them. I tried to be both gracious and honest. Now, we'll see whether she'll still be interested in meeting with me.

Well, that's about it. I've done my four pages. You see what a thing habit is? It quickly turns into the form and rule. I trust you're well installed in your snug little apartment after having been over at Carla's where the heating is uneven throughout the house. Old people need that, don't they? They're a bit like cold-blooded animals. Body temperature related to outside temperature (ha-ha). *Love, Michael*

January 14, 2001

Dear Mom,

Early morning as usual. Decent weather this past week. Not too cold but still below freezing. No snowfall. Snow is packed on cycling path by snowmobiles and people out on skis and snowshoes. Makes running much easier. Ottawa River largely frozen, but wouldn't trust it to walk on, at least, not near the middle. First mild day and usually you see it opening up – ice always stays very thin. Not like Red River in winter which reminds me: I think I had a dream about it overflowing and inundating Winnipeg. One giant lake encompassing the city. What a mess in everyone's basement!

Just kicked out another tenant here yesterday. That makes two in one week. The second had only been here one day. Albert, the owner, sure doesn't fool around. He warned Raymond to respect the other tenants but, as is often the case, the guy has a drinking problem. And when he drinks, he forgets everything else. So, as a consequence, he was making noise while others, including myself, were trying to sleep. I didn't complain directly to the owner but rather mentioned it to Jocelyn, his right-hand man, who comes here regularly to clean the washroom and vacuum the hallway carpets. As you might expect (and, no doubt, I expected), he informed the owner about the problem shortly afterwards. Some other tenant also complained who was even more disturbed because his room is right next to Raymond's. (Raymond was entertaining his girlfriend in a room about half the size of your bedroom.) So, Albert paid him a visit yesterday morning and told him to ship out. No mercy, no second chance. And, before the problem with Raymond, there was the gay guy who got the heave-ho. He was occupying the same shoebox of a room that Raymond occupied. He was another guy who couldn't hold his booze but, unlike

Raymond, he was more of a nuisance than a noisemaker. Christ, I couldn't use the bathroom that he wasn't in my face. He'd be standing in the hallway, practically ready to follow me in. And no doubt he would have if I'd invited him. As for the other tenants, you'd hardly know they were here. Philip from below paid me a visit the other night with his little four-year-old daughter, Melanie. Raymond was his friend but Philip wasn't sorry to see him go. Albert won't let this place become a crack house like the one Raymond was in before he came here. With people coming and going at all hours, doing drug deals, getting high, and playing loud music without a thought for anyone else.

I was entertaining Philip the other day with various stories about my life. For example, the skydiving I did in Gananoque. All about my first jump, the serious knee injury, the operation in Kingston Hospital, the bar fight I got into shortly after, the second operation on my knee, the year off work, the slow healing process, and then doing my second jump a year later. He thinks I've lived a pretty eventful life.

Well, I can safely say there haven't been too many days when, apart from being sick, I stayed in bed or moped around. Actually, I recall only one such time and it was when I was travelling on my bicycle in Europe or, more precisely, southern Germany. I'd already been travelling for seven or eight months, and I was feeling a certain malaise. I was even considering cutting my trip short and returning to Canada. Just too many overcrowded German youth hostels (they're huge!) and too much rainy weather. So, I finally ended up finding this *Gasthaus* and renting a double room (*Doppelzimmer*) because it was the only one available. And then I just cocooned in the room for two days in the large double bed, although I wasn't sick but simply worn out by too many new sights, sensations, discomforts, etc. After two days, I felt fine and forgot about returning home. Such a change of plans would've meant having to pay extra on my return-trip ticket for the *Stefan Batory*. The ticket I bought was only good for the September crossing (i.e., the off season) whereas it was still May when I was in southern Germany.

Work is proceeding as usual. Writing some letters to scholars at other universities who've written books that I'm interested in. Takes time because some of them are in French, and so I need to get my letters corrected. But this way I get a real feeling for and appreciation of the language. It's rather like learning to play a musical instrument. French demands a certain precision of expression. English relies more on context. Also, if I'm not mistaken, English has more ways of saying the same thing. *Love, Michael*

January 21, 2001

Dear Mom,

Mid-morning. Got up a little later than usual. Was over at Puqun Li's last night. Had a Chinese meal, mostly meat dumplings served with several saucy spices. Even took some home with me. His wife is pregnant, expecting baby in March. He's getting close to completing his doctoral thesis. (He's well ahead of me.) I played Chinese chess with his five-year-old son, Star, who treats me like a favourite uncle. It was quite cold last night cycling over to his place. He still lives in a very large apartment block where over half the tenants are Chinese. I took over a bottle of wine and some wine glasses. (They don't have any.) Bought them in a nearby used clothing store that's like a Salvation Army. Only paid two dollars for a set of four.

Still struggling to get out a letter to this professor at Liege University in Belgium. I actually have several people working on it who're francophones, but still it's not easy. What I neglected to do earlier was to make a perfectly satisfactory English original.

Am managing a small thing called "The Current Research Program" for students doing thesis work. Put up some notices last Wednesday for the first conference. Had to type it up both in French and English. A second conference is scheduled two weeks later and even a third is in the works. But I don't want these to take up too much of my time. I'll be correcting ninety test papers two weeks down the line and this will occupy me for at least a weekend.

I'm also working on a book review which will likely be published in *De Philosophia*, the graduate student philosophical journal. Looks very professional with flashy cover. I tried to publish a couple of things before, but they were rejected. Reviews doesn't undergo such a tough scrutiny as articles. The students managing the journal have to dig up professors from other universities to read and assess the submissions. Usually, two make assessments and both have to be favourable. And here I am, someone who's never written stuff with the primary objective of pleasing other people. (I have to please myself first and foremost.)

Scholarly journals are, as a rule, sticklers for form. Hence, a certain standardization, no matter what the content. The scholarly ideal is truth by argumentation.

My mountain bike holding up well in winter. Even gears work and this makes it much easier. Sure gets filthy though, and so do I. Sometimes have to wipe spattered road dirt off my nylon jacket. Oh, I also found a backpack in good condition in snowbank at the other end of Alexandra Bridge. It was probably stolen and then lost or abandoned. (It was full of dirty old clothes.) No identification except a couple of crumpled up certificates. After getting to the university, I walked to a police station but it was closed, so I decided to keep it.

It's moving past 10am. I'm going to do a bit of room cleaning, then go out for my run, have lunch, and work on my book review.

Oh, talked to Carla last Sunday! She told me about their vacation in Mexico that was ruined by too much sun, sickness, and other unpleasant things. Maybe should've done it differently. At any rate, it's back to the rat race for them. She told me it was much easier for Earl the first time around when he started HASH JEANS.

So, there it is for this week. I trust you're feeling well and are happy to be back in your apartment. Harshness only down below on the Winnipeg streets. (You're not in the best of neighbourhoods.) Well away from your snug quarters.

So, now I'll sign over and out. My Chinese friend received a letter ending with "over and out." He didn't know what it meant, so I explained to him it was military jargon used for signing off on a radio or walky-talky. Popularized later, no doubt, by its use in the movies. *Love, Michael*

January 28, 2001

Dear Mom,

Busy week as usual. Still struggling with writing a special letter. Now have a competent person going over my French translation. Even paying her for the trouble. Syliane Charles is her name, from France, young person, doing exceptionally well for herself. She's fully prepared to do me a favour, but I don't want to take advantage of her. Only trouble is, she doesn't understand what I've written. She finds my prose too dense or convoluted. Like others, she thinks it should be simplified. Perhaps I didn't take well enough into consideration that, with respect to Derrida and Derridean scholarship, extra demands (this no doubt is an understatement!) are placed on the reader.

In spite of all this, I'll send it out as a letter with two columns, one consisting of the English original and the other the French translation. If the recipient has trouble with the second, he can easily check it out with the first.

One of the student conferences I set up took place on Friday. Only a few people attended but definitely enough to make it worthwhile. The next one is scheduled for February 16. Before then, I have some work cut out for me as TA. I have to mark about a hundred tests. This will definitely take a weekend to do and perhaps one or two days more.

I gave my letter to Madame Letocha and a young part-time professor who's teaching a course on Derrida and Gadamer (another major twentieth century philosopher). But what a disappointment! Instead of concentrating on the substance of what I'd written, they limited themselves to style. As if I'm not capable of writing rings around them.

What's the main thing wrong with being an academic thinker? It's the built-in tendency to assert your authority and competence on the basis of your position. It's the built-in inability or unwillingness to admit ignorance in any particular area.

Nobody seems to know how to do it otherwise. Perhaps it's because one has to deal with so many students. Thus, one comes to rely on simply one's professional authority. Here constant self-critique becomes a troublesome matter, a nuisance, a thing which can be easily dispensed with for the simple reason that the vast majority of students don't care about it or don't put up much resistance. (A far cry from when they go to protest on the streets!)

On the other hand, I'm always doubting their competence in certain areas and prepared to challenge it. So, I wrote Madame Letocha a polite but tersely worded letter. ("What! A francophone trying to correct my English! How dare you!")

At the same time, I went to see the part-time prof in her office. Nice friendly, lively woman, but she's not anybody I'd rely on for profound thought. And yet, she told me she's got a book coming out soon in collaboration with two others.

Will shortly clean up my room. Have made it a habit to do so after writing this weekly letter to you.

Place has been very quiet lately after getting rid of those noisy assholes. As for the other tenants, you wouldn't know their rooms were occupied.

Lots of salt on the streets. Mountain bike all salted up. Rub it off every time I come home but still...

Went and saw first movie upon coming back from trip to Winnipeg. It stars John Malkovich and William Dafoe and it's called *Shadow of the Vampire*. Set in Germany in 1921 and based on the story of famous German director making equally famous silent film *Nosferatu*. Spellbinding acting by Dafoe in role of vampire. It was campy with numerous comic moments but still quite chilling. Ordinarily, I don't care for horror movies, but it was neat to see how they filmed movies back then. That's the year you were born, isn't it?

So, enough for this week. Now I'll get on with the room cleaning. Next weekend I'll be in the middle of correcting a pile of tests. Such joy! *Love, Michael*

February 4, 2001

Dear Mom,

Well, here I am in the midst of a pile of test papers that need correcting. Not much fun, and I can't run through them quickly as some do, that is, without making hardly any corrections or comments. Started Friday evening but still have most ahead of me. Might carry me through to middle of this week. Young student professor by the name of Bruce White, who's a friend of mine, is teaching this first-year philosophy course. Nice guy but wants to make sure he's in control and not in danger of having his role usurped by me. His personality is not as strong as mine and I sense his insecurity. While certainly intelligent, his thinking is not the most rigorous or penetrating. Of course, I don't tell him this. Nevertheless, it's clear he's worried about me encroaching on his turf.

Received an answer the other day to an email I sent to a professor at Oxford University. The guy has written a book close to what I'm doing. I asked him a question and, after answering it, he told me to look him up if ever I was in England.

Still having another letter worked on. Syliane Charles is correcting my French translation. Should be ready soon. This one will go to Liege University in Belgium. Rather special. Taking pains with it. Will have two vertical columns, one in French and the other English. Also have a third letter in works. It will go to Memphis University. Have to extend my contacts. No one at this university to rely on.

I hope you don't mind, Mom. I'm going to cut this letter short. I have a ton of unpleasant work to get out of the way. I'll have more time next weekend. Staying rather mild but some recent snowfall. Too bad about Ryle. Must worry you. Where is the small boy of yesteryear? And what a mistake he made to cut so many moorings in life!

No, he was never guided by the best knowledge of himself or others. He never truly sensed his own fragility and precarious state. *Love, Michael*

February 11, 2001

Dear Mom,

Weather report, first of all. Yesterday morning very cold and windy. Day before, rain and drizzle without letup. Ice everywhere. In Eastern Townships a lot of powerlines down. Sound familiar? (I'm thinking of the time in Chambly when freezing rain brought power lines down and we had to spend a few days with Aunt Ethel and Uncle George in Mont-St-Hilaire.) This morning clear and on the cold side. Wind has abated. Went to student party Friday evening. Night of freezing rain. Not many people showed up, but I was engaged in stimulating conversation all evening.

I'm working out a plan to hold an informal student conference to be held at end of March or early April involving both graduate and undergraduate students. This is a rather novel idea because, normally speaking, the two groups never come together. I've been told the undergrads feel threatened by the grads, and some grads don't think the undergrads have anything to contribute. Therefore, there's the feeling it might flop (lack of interest, poor turnout, etc.). But, I believe it should be tried, so I'm feeling out as many people as possible. I'm particularly well placed at this time because I've been a student in the Department for over three years and have lots of contacts. The focus of the conference would be a general question that goes to the heart of philosophy. There would be contributions in the form of short selected submissions open to many different approaches. Generally speaking, they don't have to be of a particularly scholarly nature. Rather, I have in mind a sort of freewheeling event with five to ten presentations at the beginning and then a period of interaction with the audience.

So I'll keep you posted on this as the next few weeks go by. Have to start by drawing up an announcement with necessary information that can be distributed and posted. Will do this sometime in coming week. Also Tania, a visiting professor, is going to feel out her class about this conference and let me know about the reaction. She's a young person who's very pleasant and willing to let me be take the lead.

I spent all last week marking a hundred and one tests and making a lot of corrections and comments. At the same time, I was generous in giving out the marks. A good number of these kids are only in the class because they have to be. Under these conditions, they operate as automatons and little else.

Received two emails from professor at Oxford University. Short answers but very encouraging. He said he'd be happy to respond to future questions.

Still waiting to get back letter from Syliane, the lovely woman who's correcting the French. This letter's special because the professor in Belgium to which it's addressed may have the most to offer. The prose I've used is complicated but only due to the subject matter. Therefore, I won't change it despite criticisms. I think I'm the best judge of who my reader is and what he'll comprehend. As a scholar, it's easy to get in the habit of thinking that things can only be done one way. One loses sight of the merits of flexibility and moulding one's writing to the matter at hand.

At this stage, I find university life to be very interesting and certain possibilities seem to be converging. Of course, hard work will be necessary as well as the cooperation of others. The outlook is good, even excellent, on most counts. I have a good rapport with the majority of people.

So, there it is for this week. All is well in the world. It's a matter of striking while the iron is hot. Of putting to best employment one's time and energy. There has probably always been a certain malaise in the philosophy department that's kept under wraps. Perhaps it's incorrigible. Nothing stops one, however, from striking out at it. *Love, Michael*

February 24, 2001

Dear Mom,

It's Saturday evening. Tomorrow, I'm having a meeting with my chief supporters at 2pm. (I'm referring to my informal student conference.) I also want to do some copying when the store opens at 11am, so I thought I'd write this letter today rather than tomorrow.

Once again, many thanks for your beautiful birthday card and the check for a hundred dollars. You're so generous! Perhaps too generous! I often wish I was making more money than I am. It's a mere six thousand dollars per year (two sessions) as a teaching assistant.

Which reminds me: I'll be marking a second text come March 6. Last one took me a week. Not a single student of the over one hundred in class came to me then. Mind you, the student prof, Bruce White, had made it clear to them he wasn't going to quibble over a mark or two.

Before the marking of this test takes up all my time for a week or more, I want to do as much preparation as possible for the conference. Hopefully, I'll be able to delegate some of the work to others.

I've written a manifesto or proclamation for the conference that I'll include with this letter. You'll need your glasses to read it. It's also the article I sent to *The Citizen*, the Ottawa newspaper. Now, whether they publish it or not, I don't know, but it's meant to stir up things.

I'm prepared to write similar tracts to be used as so many spurs or arrows. Actually, most of the stuff was written when I was having trouble at Concordia University. It just needs to be touched up.

Will stuff these tracts in mailboxes of philosophy students both at U. of O. and Carleton U. The latter's philosophy department is on the twenty-first floor at the top of a high tower. It's a small department with no doctoral program. Carleton is somewhat isolated and on the outskirts of the city. In this respect, it resembles the University of Manitoba. By contrast, the U. of O. is like the University of Winnipeg in that it's situated downtown. (The U. of O. is much bigger though.)

I just received a phone call from my Chinese friend, Puqun Li. His wife is expecting their second child in two weeks. He complimented me on the letter I just mentioned. He thought it was well written and provocative.

Puqun Li is ready to hand in his thesis. He was hoping to do so before the birth of his child.

Still in the grip of the coldest weather we've had all winter and yet it's still nothing like Winnipeg. Lots of times here, there's water on the streets because they put so much salt on them. It leaves white streaks all over my bike. Have to wipe it off every time I come home.

Well, I was going to clean my room tonight, but I think it's too late. Was on the phone with Puqun Li for at least an hour. He's definitely my best friend here. I've already been over to his place a number of times for supper.

He would like to be working as a prof by September. Will it happen? His credentials are not outstanding but solid enough. His main advantage is he can teach Chinese and Asian philosophy. It's in demand in some places.

So, there it is for this week. By next weekend, I should have a better idea of the interest level among students and profs for this conference. All I can do is keep planting some of my ideas in the Department and other places in the hope it will improve the turnout.

I remember being on a school bus going to St. Stephen's School when I was about ten or eleven and asking myself: "What will it be like in the year 2000 and for me, in particular, when I'm forty-nine?" Well, we're a year past that now, and I guess I've had the answer. *Love, Michael*

March 4, 2001

Dear Mom,

It's March 4. Do you remember the March 4 blizzard? It was in 1966 when I was a fifteen-year-old newspaper boy on Crystal Avenue and Sunset Boulevard. The city was paralysed for two days, and the drifts were up to the roofs of the houses. I've never seen the same since.

Here it's been cold for the past week. Colder than most of January, I think. Today is sunny with no wind which is quite agreeable.

Been very busy week. Went into a lot of classrooms with philosophy students first year and up. Professors allowed me to make a brief announcement about my conference at beginning of class. Went as well as could be expected. It's a lot of work to arouse interest because everybody's busy with their own thing.

But I feel I'm making some inroads. Some more undergraduate students have come forward to introduce themselves to me and express their willingness to help. Even some of the more reserved, cautious, and preoccupied graduate students have been shaken out of their lethargy. I never suspected I could be such a hustler! I go around well-dressed and with an attaché case. (I found this in the shed in back.) Also, there will be a write-up about me in the French student newspaper *La Rotonde*. I'll send you a copy of the article which includes a photo of me.

I also put an announcement of the conference on the University of Ottawa website. Now anybody can get the info on their computer at home if they're hooked up to the internet.

Also, made up an address list on my computer so I can hit twenty or more people with one message at the same time. Believe me, I've come to appreciate the amazing things you can do with a computer!

Also, visited Dominican College Friday morning, a theological institution which nevertheless teaches philosophy. I spread the word there while a student conference was going on.

Also, I've been writing a series of short pieces which I call "Address to All Philosophy Students in University." You have the first and longest of them, but I've also written others. I leave them in the graduate student mailroom. Anybody who wants to can read or take one. I've had a few compliments on them, but the rest is silence.

Come Tuesday, I'll be busy marking mid-term tests for my friend, Bruce White, the student professor. No doubt this will take me at least a week. But now I'm relatively free of the conference work and I can stay at home and answer the phone if it rings. Also, will check my email at the university every evening.

Also, should tell you I've changed the originally planned format of the conference. Instead of eight speakers, we'll go with three or four. The rest of the time will be open to the audience. I'll be the moderator and, on the basis of my experience addressing classes this past week, I think there's not a single person who can do it better than me.

Right now I'm cleaning my room. In the afternoon, I'll go once again to computer room at university. Then I should get some clothes washed.

Everything is hectic and hurried. I sometimes wonder if this is congenial to best thought. Probably not because, for that, one needs solitude and tranquility. However, I've certainly had my share of that and now it seems the time to act.

Went to a doctoral thesis defense Friday which I found it to be rather pathetic. The guy passed but not without being asked to make a number of revisions. He did a bad job of defending it. It seemed the confidence had been sucked out of him.

Enough for now. I shall finish with this room cleaning, then get to other matters. *Love, Michael*

March 10, 2001

Dear Mom,

Saturday evening. Am in the midst of marking mid-term tests. The usual boring, arduous work. Hope to be done by Monday or Tuesday. Have got ninety-nine of them to get through. It's so repetitive! To read the same answers over and over again! Damned memory work! It has little to do with philosophy but maybe a lot to do with philosophy in the university or, more precisely, with first-year philosophy. The experience is enough to turn a large number of students off and few will take a second course.

Started the correcting Thursday evening. As far as the conference goes, progress is satisfactory. I have the article in the French student newspaper about the conference and me, so I'll send it to you with translation. This will take me some time, so I'll keep this letter short. There isn't really much to say except I've written seven short "Addresses to All Students in Philosophy." I hope they spur people to come to the conference.

Submissions aren't exactly pouring in, so it looks like we'll have to do things differently. It may be that half the conference will be simply a general discussion.

Puqun Li's wife still carrying the child. Should be born very soon.

Picked up a cold a couple of days ago. Seems better now.

Missed my dental appointment because I was so busy. Won't bother rebooking till this conference is over.

So far I've spent \$250 on laminated posters and still need to advertise some more. Also, have to buy refreshments for conference totaling another \$200.

So, now I'll pass on to translating the newspaper article. It'll probably take me a half-hour. How do you like the photo? It was taken in the philosophy department with my poster in the background.

Well, what will come of all this? Anybody's guess. Will be interesting to see how many people show up. But if there's only a mediocre turnout, it'll be hard to say all my efforts bore fruit. *Love, Michael*

March 18, 2001

Dear Mom,

Well, the big day of the conference draws close. Less than two weeks. Unfortunately, I've only received a handful of submissions. I want to keep the proceedings open and freewheeling with as much audience participation as possible.

Given the limited number of submissions, there's really no point in having a sophisticated selection process. I will simply go with what's been offered.

I've been hearing a lot of other people give presentations the last couple of weeks. Yesterday I was at a symposium at Saint Paul's University. Ten speakers on the theme of current challenges in philosophy. All except one were in French. I was given an opportunity to make a brief plug for the informal conference of philosophy students. Of course, I was trying to reach mainly philosophy professors and get them to come out. I've also been setting up and organizing a program in the philosophy department called *The Current Research Program*. Whoever wants to can present their thesis work on a certain scheduled day. Most of the work is simply running off notices to put on the walls.

Also, I've been to a couple of thesis defenses and to another conference. The latter was a week ago at Dominican College. So, I've been around to the various institutions to pump up interest in my conference and will do even more of this.

All of this, of course, doesn't leave much time for anything else. My thesis work has been on hold for a month and will be so for at least another two weeks. I spent a week marking and correcting mid-term tests. I was very glad to get that out of the way.

It's hard to say whether philosophy in the university is apart from the rat race. Perhaps it's only the most questioning part, although I'm not sure it's the most self-questioning one. Everyone blames the government for not granting the universities sufficient funds. In the meantime, the rectors have six-figure salaries.

We are lucky and well-off in this country, but few think of leading a less material life. The issue never arises, not even philosophically.

In the meantime, a kind of discourse keeps grinding away about what's the meaning and purpose of philosophy. Hardly anyone puts it in terms of a lifestyle, a mode of living. It's always supposed to come as an answer arising out of discussion. Few are they who really live it but, rather, it's the community wanting to preserve itself.

It's a question then what I'm doing here. Is it just a passage? A sort of experiment? Where do I fit in? Do I even want to fit in?

When you're in debt up to your ears, there's a lot more pressure to feel you should.

Well, I'll take the matter as I always have, step by step, stage by stage and try to do the best I can along the way. *Love, Michael*

March 25, 2001

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Bright and sunny. Sound of birds chirping outside my window. Sign of spring. Have meeting with speakers for informal conference this afternoon at 2pm. Two can't make it, so only four of the six will be there. Chance for them to get to know each other before the conference. Also, will inform them how I'd like it to go.

Yesterday, I made a bunch of personalized invitations in a fancy handwritten style. It's easy to do with a word processor. I delivered them by sliding them under the professors' doors and inserting them in the graduate student mailboxes. Now, it won't be so easy for them to dodge it.

It's quite possible it will generate a good turnout. Ordinarily, events of this order fail to do so because everyone's too busy doing other things.

On Tuesday, a four-inch by four-inch ad will appear in the French student newspaper *La Rotunde*. They're the ones that interviewed me. On Thursday, a five-inch by three-and-one-quarter-inch ad will appear in the English student newspaper *The Fulcrum*.

I put up notices saying wine and cheese will be served, but then I found out you need a \$250 liquor permit. So I can't do the wine, but I'll let the ads stand. (I'll offer an apology at the conference.) I don't want to do anything to wreck it.

I feel relaxed going into the home stretch. I've done everything I can to make it come off. I've one speaker from Carleton University and another from Dominican College but no one from Saint Paul's. Perhaps I'll pay a visit there Tuesday.

I want to encourage active audience participation. Also, I want to try to make the event as bilingual as possible. One of the speakers will be delivering his text in French. In addition, there's a young man who will be the co-host and speak in French while I speak in English. It remains to be seen whether this will work. (We'll try a rehearsal.)

Oh, by the way, instead of wine, it'll be apple cider and cheese.

What you told me about Ryle is a form of madness and must be accepted as such. His internal world has drifted off from its moorings in the one we all share. What he reasons is not what we reason. Madness operates with a different set of presumptions which, of course, are wild and imaginary.

In my opinion, what he envisioned for himself as entrepreneur far exceeded his life strategy. He relied too much on a whimsical belief that things would simply fall out or be given to him on the basis of his personality, his skills as a raconteur, jokester, and entertainer. Perhaps part of Dad's problem was along these lines (though I don't say his personality was as sociable as Ryle's). This might account for the tendency, both in Ryle Senior and Ryle Junior, to blame the world for their failures.

Neither of them were pliant or tutored enough to cultivate a thoroughly professional spirit nor independent enough, at least in their formative years, to forego it.

Such is my diagnosis largely based on my experience. I think it's time to sign off. A week from now, if not sooner, I'll report to you on how the conference goes. I'm hoping for a resounding success.

In the meantime, spring is making slow but steady progress. A lot of snow has melted. Of course, it's dirty all over. Big mountain of snow still outside my window. The accumulation of what was dumped there from the adjacent parking lot.

I wish you a good spring, and I'll phone Patricia sometime soon. Love, Michael

March 31, 2001

Dear Mom,

Day after informal conference. I certainly can't tell you it was a smashing success. Despite my best efforts, there was only a mediocre turnout. The undergraduates stayed away in droves. This was truly a disappointment given I'd visited so many classrooms, put up so many posters, placed advertisements in the student newspapers, offered wine and cheese, and had the interview in *La Rotunde*.

Just received your phone call. So, you know the general state of things. The lack of excitement of the event was due, in large measure, to the poor undergraduate turnout. Their voice wasn't heard apart from the four undergraduate speakers. It's clear they have other things to do.

I'll have to turn myself completely around in the next few days and seriously get down to writing my thesis. I don't want to have it hanging over my head beyond the summer. As it stands, people are waiting months between submission and defense. It's really become endemic. The problem is the professor/graduate student ratio.

As far as getting a job at a university goes, it would certainly take some fattening up of my CV. All this is an uncertain area, even the question of whether or not to go in this direction. I don't want to lose part of myself the university may not value but I do.

A time for readjustment to get a new bearing on things, on future work, on the thesis which, I believe, is important. I've delayed long enough. Now is the time to make a decisive move on it.

I'm having trouble writing this letter because I thought I'd be outlining more about the conference. But now I find myself uninterested in doing so. I don't want to be guilty of calling something excellent that wasn't. If I gave it a letter grade, it would be a C+ or a B-.

Later on this month, in April, I shall have to correct a whole batch of tests once again. What inspiring work! Speaking of which, the student professor I'm a TA for (Bruce White) was a little pissed off with some of my comments and corrections on the mid-term test. Fortunately, we straightened it out and didn't damage our friendship.

Where would I be, I wonder, if it weren't for my excellent health! Everything else is so precarious and uncertain! It's been one of the few stable factors in my life (apart from your love, of course).

I shall shortly go to the grocery store and buy a few items. Probably take it easy this weekend and meditate a bit. I need a break from being an organizer. In addition to the conference, I organized speakers for the current research program. These people read from their theses in progress.

It's been very quiet at this place for some time. No troublesome or noisy tenants. That's a good thing for me because it would've been very difficult if I'd had to contend with them while being as busy as I was.

Of course, I know what my problem is. I want the total control of the artist. The complete mastery of the material. The possibility of attaining perfection. That's what's always been missing despite holding to it as an ideal.

Well, it's time to think of going to the store. I haven't really said much in this letter. Things are hanging together. They're just not illuminated, shining, radiant, as I'd like them to be. This puts me in mind of Sylvia Plath's poem "Black Rook in Rainy Weather." Plath is the poet who committed suicide, leaving behind, as Sharon did, two young children.

*. . . I shall
Patch together a content
Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.*

April 8, 2001

Dear Mom,

Saturday night and no going to the bar for me. Has just got dark. Fairly nice day today. It's safe to say that spring is here but still large mound of dirty snow outside my window. Dumpings from nearby parking lot. Spent the past week writing an outline of my thesis which I presented Friday. Not many people turned up but, of the few who did, there were three professors, a rare thing for this sort of event. Writing the expose was very helpful in terms of finding a better focus. So, now I'm pretty much in a position to start writing the thesis proper. Why not tomorrow?

Went to hear a celebrated speaker, author, and professor from Boston University last Friday. He gave a stand-up comedy act for scholars at the expense of one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger. Overall, it was entertaining, but he still struck me as being, despite his eight books and sixty articles, a lightweight thinker showing off by making fun of a heavyweight one.

Large crowd. Lots of laughs. I asked him a couple of hard questions. Also remarked about his habit of interrupting questioners (which also drew laughs).

Have received some feedback from the conference. It was hot and cold. Nice idea but... Some people, perhaps myself included, don't realize such undertakings should be viewed as tentative and exploratory. It's how they're employed in the future that may turn them into gold.

I definitely want next year to be my last. I plan to hand in my thesis by September. Then it's a matter of waiting for the defense. The waiting period has reached ridiculous lengths (up to ten months). The system has broken down, but nobody knows how to fix it.

Went and saw a movie Thursday evening called *Dancer in the Dark*. Young mother who likes musicals. Comes to U.S. from Czechoslovakia. Works in factory. Is going blind. Wants operation for young son who has inherited same problem but doesn't know it. Has been saving up for years. Money in a shoebox. Her landlords are local sheriff and his young attractive spendthrift wife. Sheriff has inheritance but his wife has already gone through it. He's obviously afraid of losing her. He's about ready to lose all his property and go bankrupt. Under these circumstances, he ends up stealing the money of the young woman going blind. She works, by the way, in a noisy factory which, in her imagination, she changes into the different lively scenes of a musical. One of the movie's supreme effects is to periodically give the audience entrance into her imagination. The result is gritty realism side-by-side with a working man's *Sound of Music*. Anyway, getting back to the plot, after the young woman discovers the theft, she confronts the sheriff who feels remorse but, at the same time, resists giving back her money. His gun is out, he accidentally gets shot. Then he pleads with her to kill him. She's at first unwilling, on the point of breaking down, but he still resists giving her the money and keeps pleading with her to end his life. The result is a shooting frenzy mainly because he doesn't die easily, and she can't aim the gun properly.

Of course, the next thing is her in jail charged with first-degree murder. It goes to court and, between her hiding certain facts (she doesn't tell the court she's been saving the money for her son) and having virtually no way to defend herself against the mean-spirited prosecutor, her fate is sealed. She's found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. But, later, new evidence comes up, so she gets a new lawyer only to reject this opportunity to save herself because the money to pay for him must come from her savings. The rest of the movie takes you step-by-step to the gallows. She's hanged before your eyes but not without the musical breaking in at the last moment (For me, this was mind blowing!)

I guess that's enough for this week. Well, consider me now starting on my last phase of getting my doctoral degree. Maybe then I'll have to go to China. Big demand for English teachers over there. *Love, Michael*

April 15, 2001

Dear Mom,

Sunday morning. Early. Bright sunny day. Yesterday was sunny but cool. Just a few pieces of stray ice left on the river. They wash up on the little beach along the cycling path where I run. A profusion of song birds are back to join the gulls already there. Makes for quite a different sound than you get in winter. And downtown people are hanging out late at night. Strange-looking young people with rings in their noses. Ottawa's downtown is much more people-oriented than Winnipeg's. There's the Bytown Market with all its little streets, restaurants, outdoor cafes, bars, and novelty shops. And then there's the Rideau Centre, a big shopping complex on Rideau Street. All over, there are a lot of attractions within easy walking distance.

Am busy now getting ready to write my thesis. Working on the organizational end of it. Shouldn't take too long before I can start the actual writing.

In a couple of weeks, I'll have to take a week off to mark a batch of final exams. Not much fun but at least this time I won't run the risk of offending Bruce White, the part-time professor. You see, these exams won't be returned to the students. However, if a student does wish to look his exam over, he can do so upon request. But few avail themselves of this right, the vast majority being only interested in getting their marks and a passing grade. If I wanted to then, I could forego making comments or corrections. No doubt lots of people do this but, in my opinion, when you stop treating yourself as a student, you stop being the best possible teacher. It has to be said, however, that, in the present setup, it's not teaching that counts at universities but publishing articles. It's the latter that gets their name bruited about.

A couple of people I know will be defending their theses this week. I'll go to both these events not because they work in areas of particular interest to me, but simply to support them.

Would you believe I'm still reading *Remembrance of Things Past*? Volume Seven now (the last). It's up to World War I and the style of writing has changed. It moves along quickly now whereas before it was at a snail's pace. Proust can devote dozens of pages to describing just one soiree. The thing about the book, what makes it exceptional besides its length, is the ongoing change of interpretations the hero makes about the past based on new information. And this goes on and on because nothing stands still in the way of comprehending various situations and what makes people do the things they do. The perspectives are always partial and therefore misleading. Of course, most people don't bother their heads over this. The hero, however, is an artist: He wants to explore all ways of knowing and understanding not only the life about him but also within.

It's the day of the week to clean my room. I finally bought myself a second-hand toaster. Tired of cleaning up crumbs on my hotplate. Was using bent coat hanger to make toast.

I've heard the vacancy rate is very low in both Gatineau and Ottawa. I've also heard it's easy to get work in the area. Not that I've tried, but some of the overseas students might benefit because they pay double or more on their tuition fees, and they also can't get loans from the Canadian government. So, I'm lucky to be in a position where I can focus everything on my work.

My Chinese friend, Puqun Li, is busy with his second child: washing, cooking, cleaning, etc. His wife has gone back to working part-time in a Chinese restaurant. He handed in his doctoral thesis a month ago. I wonder how long he'll have to wait before defending it.

Gee, I just remember! It's Easter today! Well, Happy Easter! I shall start cleaning up my room. Doesn't take too long. Then I'll go for my run. And then lunch. And then after I'll do some more work on thesis.

So, that's it for this week. I hear the Red River won't present a threat this year except to some farming communities south of Winnipeg. Boy, was it a sight in 1997! A veritable monster! And it could've been worse. If it had inundated a part of the city, what mayhem that would've caused. The city would still be living with the effects today. *Love, Michael*

April 23, 2001

Dear Mom,

Bit dreary this morning, but I think it's going to be quite warm. Yesterday was nice. Just in the process of cleaning my room. Soon I'll be busy marking a load of final exams. They're longer than the first two tests I marked, but I should get some help from Bruce White (the part-time professor).

Went to a couple of doctoral thesis defenses this week. People waited a long time for them, practically a whole academic year. They both passed with no problem. Then there was some champagne afterward though I didn't wait around to taste it.

Another fellow coming in from out-of-town Monday to defend his thesis project which, to remind you, isn't the same as the thesis defense. The subject interests me, so I'll try not to miss it.

Just listening to news on radio about some of the stuff going on in Quebec City both inside and outside the barricades. A contingent of students went there from the U. of O. to join the demonstration. A bit of anarchy side by side with world order! Also, the clash of generations! A complex issue even more complicated by diverse motivations and interpretations. Pulling all of the Americas into an agreement will likely prove more difficult than organizing the European Common Market. Here the difference between rich and poor nations is vast, and the U.S. isn't anxious to spread its wealth except as a spinoff of its becoming wealthier. Of course, the majority of Americans, whether they know it or not, are on side with this. And so, no doubt, are many of these young people who're now charging the barricades in Quebec. As T.S. Eliot said: "Between the motion and the act falls the shadow."

Flowers are already coming up, some even in bloom. A few warm days does it. Green grass. Spruce trees all looking spruced up. Glossy green. Miracle of spring. New life and sounds everywhere. Streets downtown now filled with crowds in the evening.

Went to a movie the other night about the Spanish painter, Goya. I'm familiar with some of his stuff, but I didn't like the movie. Not a serious character study but rather a series of clichés about genius.

I continue to think about the organization of my thesis. I feel I must do this prior to the actual writing but, in a sense, I'm already writing it. Once I've got the marking out of the way, I should make good progress over the summer. I should be able to devote most of my time to it with few distractions. I have high hopes for this as I do with all my projects. I believe I'm penetrating into an area very seldom explored. It views philosophical discourse as being a kind of doing as well as saying. It's impossible to know where one leaves off and the other begins. The desire to know something and the desire to know it in a certain way are inseparable. The truth of illusion and the illusion of truth continually play off one another.

Not many philosophers want to hear about this. They think about truth as one thing and the way to it another. But this too is part of the necessary illusion, the motivation for chasing the rainbow and the pot of gold at the end of it. One way and one interpretation continually replacing another. The life of

philosophical inquiry is this perpetual chase only to end when philosophy ends, when human inquiry exhausts itself.

Others have a view of eternity as a kind of knowledge heaven (Hegel) or, if not quite this, they see no point in an inquiry which focuses on its inherent limitations or makes these limitations the object of closest scrutiny. I'm sure that, for them, all of this is self-defeating and absurd.

Still a few more things to straighten away in my room. Also, have to file my income tax soon.

Have a Quebec driver's license now. It's much simpler and more elegant than the Manitoba one.

So, there it is for this week. By this time next week, I'll still be up to my neck marking final exams. Boring! Boring! Boring! Though I have to try to make it more interesting than it would otherwise be.

I hope spring is coming along there in Winnipeg and you're able to get out and about more. *Love,*
Michael

April 29, 2001

Dear Mom,

Sunday evening. After supper. Bright sunny day today. Only a trifle cool. Still nice for walking in shorts. Went for a walk after a day of marking exams. Still lots to do. Pretty trying work. Trouble is, I have problems with the answers that Bruce White, the student professor, gave for his questions. It makes my job twice as hard and more stressful because I don't feel comfortable ignoring this problem. (I find his answers to be somewhat imprecise or incomplete.) I have to find ways to work around it, although I'll bring the matter up with him. It's a sensitive area, as you can imagine, and I risk offending him. However, I don't believe in taking the easy way out.

Called Aunt Jane the other night. Brief chat. She asked about you. I told her that Carla and Earl had their hands full with their foundering garment business. She thought I looked pale when I visited at Christmas. If so, nobody else noticed. I've had no serious colds over the winter. Not like some in the Department.

Went running today. A number of people out on the cycling path. Didn't see the geese that fly in every spring and usually hang out at the small beach. They show hardly any fear of people. Must be getting fed. Many of them only stay a short time before flying north.

Back to these exams. How I long to get them out of the way! How they make me detest the "processing plant" dimension of university! How did Bruce White, a PhD student, get to where he is with slipshod work? It's all rather depressing! There's nothing here that bears any resemblance to excellence. (Oh, no doubt, I exaggerate here and overvalue myself.) One hundred kids and most of them, the vast majority, probably wouldn't be taking the course if they didn't have to. I know people try to do their best under difficult conditions, but it certainly doesn't excite me about the future.

Well, I will continue to weigh things as I go along. That's all I can do. Isn't it strange? People twenty years younger than me are further down their life path. They seem to go along with few self-doubts, with few questions about the "side effects." Becoming a teacher technocrat seems to sit well with them.

And here I am, complaining about my TA work, but nobody's forcing me to do it. And I certainly don't begrudge the \$18,000 it's provided me with over three years. If I hadn't done it, my debt would be much bigger than it is.

Maybe I'll teach a course in September. God, I only hope my thesis is out of the way by then!

Yes, there's much that dissatisfies me. Some people, I know, would breeze through what I'm agonizing over. (They'd be able to correct the test without holding their nose). Just put in the effort that's necessary. Mark according to the given standards and let the rest be damned. Marking isn't doing philosophy, many would say. Just get on with it!

Enough! Don't worry! This is only a temporary mood. I make it unpleasant for myself, being what I am. Despite this unpleasantness, things are ultimately what they should be. *Love, Michael*

May 6, 2001

Dear Mom,

Bright promising morning. Not as hot as it was a few days ago. Up to 20 degrees perhaps. I finished correcting the final exams yesterday. A big relief! I sent away my income tax last week. Should be getting back about \$1200. This is about what it takes to pay for spring/summer registration. May, June, July, August: These are the four months I have to try to finish the thesis. Everything is pretty much in place. I still want to give more time to preparation. It will make the actual writing of it much easier. Work conditions now are essentially good despite the neighbours using the backyard outside my window. Also, the parking lot is due to be repaved and a sewer system put in. I hope this doesn't prove to be noisy and distracting.

Saw a film the other night (*Life without Death*) about a guy from Ottawa (believe it or not!) who crossed the Sahara Desert, covering 6500 kilometers by camel and going from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. He filmed it himself as well as narrating it. Faced numerous dangers, the worst of which was getting lost and running out of water. Signs of death everywhere. Strange thing! This guy, Frank Cole, went back to the Sahara nine years later and was killed by bandits. They were a common threat for him during his earlier trip as well. Also, civil wars in the various countries he had to pass through. He seemed obsessed with taking these risks, with repeatedly confronting and overcoming the threat of death. Haunting film and made on a shoestring.

Much is green now. And the tulips are up and blooming. Pretty soon, Ottawa will be having its annual tulip festival, and Hull will be hosting the francophone games this summer. A big event involving a large number of French-speaking countries. Don't know if I'll get to see any of it.

I'm having difficulty coming up with other things to say. Most of my thoughts turn nowadays on whether or not being a university teacher is a career suitable for someone of my temperament and outlook, someone who yearns for a degree of freedom not likely attainable in an institution. And yet I must persist and see how far this effort will carry me. I'm thinking of teaching a course in September rather than being a teaching assistant as I've been for the last three years. I believe I should at least have this experience and see what comes of it. It requires a lot of work, a lot of preparation, so this is why I'd like to have my thesis out of the way.

I'm still having difficulty telling you much more. Life passes. I still dig, am digging into myself, into life but meeting with lots of resistance. Not sure if there's much further to go. I don't trust the institution to deliver the goods. It's there for other reasons: a business, a technical school, a training camp, an arena, a general belief that knowledge is an inexhaustible well of wisdom, whereas I have my doubts.

All this is uncertain as opposed to having a job, a profession, prestige in the community, a good salary. The vast majority of people take these to be what's important and, as a consequence, there's little incentive to play upon any doubts one might have. And, then, look at all the hard, excellent work that's going on! Certainly better than I can do! And so, perhaps it's only envy, jealousy that drives me. I don't have the intellectual investments others have in what they're doing and what they call philosophy.

Such speculations are a screw without end yet constitute the conditions that define me. Out of all this I try to forge my way.

It's small wonder then I'm alone. Who else would want to live like this? Even the vast majority of people doing philosophy want more security than I do. They want the ground secure under their feet and far away from the abyss.

There it is! I managed to fill up four sheets of paper. It's 10am now and I shall go out and mail this letter, have my run, clean up my room later, check out some papers, and then have lunch.

The sky remains its deep heavenly blue. How enchanting! Earth's eggshell! What mystery! What depth! What promise! Its eternal youth! An implacable curtain as well as a reliable and recurring backdrop that holds blackness at bay. A saying of something on the very verge of nothing. *Love, Michael*

May 13, 2001

Dear Mom,

Sunny day. Cool this morning. High of ten degrees predicted. Heard on the radio you'll reach twenty-five in Winnipeg. Yesterday raining. Tulip festival is on near Parliament Buildings in small park at Ottawa end of Alexandra Bridge. Pass it practically every day. I know a couple of guys from university who are scheduled to entertain there on May 17. One is a musician and the other a poet. The musician, who's a third or fourth-year philosophy student, helped me with my informal conference. Perhaps I'll go and take in his act.

Been busy all week in computer room (I even went there earlier this morning) with notes I wanted to type out and put in better shape. They're more than notes, really. You could say I'm already writing my thesis. Thinking my way into all aspects of it, including the minor ones. All this before the final structuring and writing.

Received the newspaper clipping you sent me about their business closing. At least, Earl got some nice things said about him by the employees. I spoke to him briefly a few days ago. Carla was already in bed. He didn't sound depressed. He said he'd already had a couple of drinks and felt relaxed. He mentioned trying to save the house.

I'm put in mind of a poem I wrote some twenty-five years ago when Earl and Carla were the proud owners of the old Eaton house on Wellington Crescent. It's called "Keeping Perspective."

Visiting

I see the proud Jaguar crouched on the front drive
and the spacious lawn with big blue spruces
pinnacled skyward.

The Tudor beams excite my eye
and the vast expanse of masonry
has an impact of which I am not certain.

Could it be (I ask myself)
that I look pleasurably upon this place
or enviously take account of the luck that has it?

The blue sky excites my eye too
and reaches right around the property.

I round the house to view it from all angles
and when I'm done and leave the house behind
I look up once again to find
that sky and senses are perfectly transportable.

To think that such a modest poem can survive while things much more important do not.

I met a young Iranian woman recently who has made an impression on me. She's with her husband in Canada, just having left Iran some three or four months ago. Fluent in both English and French. Will be beginning the doctoral program in philosophy in September. Very friendly and attractive. Good sense of humour. Her philosophical interests are far removed from mine. They lean towards the sciences and logic as opposed to the arts and literature. In Iran, the study of philosophy, if it doesn't lapse over into religion, is scientifically oriented. There are a fair number of students from Iran in the philosophy department.

Later on, I will do my weekly room cleaning. Paid my registration for the spring/summer session right on the deadline (Friday). If I hadn't done so, I would've had to pay a fine. God, they don't give you much time! I received the bill only a few days ago.

Feel good about the work that lies ahead of me. I see no reason why I shouldn't succeed the way I want to while fulfilling normal requirements.

Will I publish this thesis later? It's too early to say. Of course, if it were well received, I'd be strongly

tempted, but, so far, nothing I've done has generated a level of interest matching my expectations.

Time to pack it in for this week. Will buy some bananas at the store. Eat them every day. Not because I'm crazy about them, but because they provide a non-fattening snack. *Love, Michael*

May 20, 2001

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Bright sunny day ahead. Promising to be a little warmer than it has been lately. Another full week of work. Making good progress. Seeing better now how I must do things. Still in the preliminary writing stage, but this is an important one. A lot of people launch into the actual writing too early, that is to say, before everything is well thought out.

Will clean my room up a bit later, then maybe my bicycle. Take some time off from thesis work. I haven't been to the university all week. Should go and check my email (not that I get a lot of it). Also, have some notes to type up but this is boring to talk about. Haven't been to any movies lately but I see where one is coming up I don't want to miss. It's an adaptation of the last volume of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. The volume itself is called "Time Regained," and it just so happens I'm reading it now. This movie is coming up in June at the Bytown Theatre. To judge by two reviews, it's excellent. Other attempts have been made to translate Proust's novel onto the screen but, apparently, none so successful as this one.

In the last volume, Proust takes you into his workshop as writer. He shows you how imagination fuses with memory to form his characters and their lives (and quite memorable characters too!). Of course, this is a break with convention where the illusion is kept to the end. But, in another sense, it's a continuation of the writer's autobiographical story. The line between fiction and non-fiction gets blurred.

One of the patterns throughout the whole novel is a continual reinterpretation of past events. New information, new feelings, new perspectives always feed into the process. (There's no end to it!) Take an example from our own lives: Ryle's problems with Carla and Earl twenty years ago. Now, how many interpretations could you come up with? Earl and Carla have their version, Ryle his, and we ours. Who is right? Which one is right? What actually did go down there? Given Ryle's tendency to exaggerate matters, to even become hysterical, and Earl's character as playboy, as someone who could easily have been doing what Ryle accused him of, what he told us is both credible and dubious. And we all know of Carla's loyalty to Earl, perhaps even to the point of turning a blind eye to certain goings-on. So, how much was true and how much false? How much only imagined and how much actually the case?

If all the parties are not one hundred per cent reliable, you can see what the problem is. Truth and falsehood are so mixed up with each other that it becomes impossible to untangle them. And this is precisely the state of affairs for the complex relations between human beings. (Politics is without doubt the most exaggerated form of this.)

Courts try to untangle truth and falsehood, but, when you think of something like the O.J. Simpson trial, you can perceive even their limitations. (Always someone will be unsatisfied with the outcome.)

Well, I suppose I should get moving with the morning. Almost 9am. Light traffic outside. Very little breeze. Have been running in the evening and along bicycle path. Different from day. The difference mainly between a visual and an auditory experience. One pays more attention to sounds at night. Especially along the river. All natural sounds. No traffic. Bird sounds mostly. A lot of song birds chirping amidst the raucous noise of gulls. Still some geese around. Completely at ease with humans passing close to them. And ducks too, some even in ditches. I always wonder why they go there to raise their little ones. Do they go back to the same place every year?

Time to close. I expect you'll call later in the day some time after I post this letter. How is the Shibou family doing? If you stay around long enough, everything changes. That which seems durable only outlasts what perishes at any particular time. *Love, Michael*

May 27, 2001

Dear Mom,

Overcast morning. Rainy weather all week except Friday. Bit on the cool side. Tulips and lilacs have already lost their bloom. Early spring passes. No more geese around beach near bicycle path. Funny animals! Little beach is a favourite landing spot for them.

Visited my friend Puqun Li last Monday. Had Chinese supper. Green tea. Used chop sticks. Later played with Star, his six-year-old boy, in nearby park. Tulip festival was winding down, so people were out at Dowd's Lake, which is part of the Rideau Canal System. Popular spot with green open areas full of trees, park benches, and bicycle paths alongside canal. Puqun Li's teaching Chinese part time to some foreign service people who work for the federal government. Puts bread on the table and pays the rent. Will be sending Star to live in China for two years. He'll live with and be spoiled by a slew of relatives. Will learn to read and write Chinese. (It will be total immersion for him.) Puqun Li waiting to defend his thesis. Will probably take place this summer. Has many job applications out. It's not all that easy.

Found out Friday that part-time teaching positions for the January–April term will likely be posted in September. Good chance I'll apply for one. It's about time. And surely the writing of my thesis will be out of the way by then.

Finally got reimbursed for expenses for the conference (\$460). Comes from the Graduate Student Association. Maybe should do another one now that I've got the experience but, so far, no brilliant ideas.

While doing my own work, it really amazes me to see how much some philosophers have done themselves, how many books and articles they've written. What I'm doing is a drop in the bucket by comparison. What's more, the particular bucket to which I'm adding my meagre contribution is, in a manner of speaking, already full.

The campus has physically changed over the last year or more. Now some new big tall residence buildings joined to the ones I stayed in (Stanton and Marchand). Room for a ton of students. Staying there was fine for a year, but I wouldn't want to repeat it. God, not at my age! Some of them can become quite noisy despite the student monitors on each floor. Little fresh-faced bossy types who get free rent. They also get a few weeks' training before they take on the role.

Fire alarms going off all the time in those places. Clear the whole building or maybe more than one building. Fire trucks come. Investigate what usually turns out to be nothing. Twenty minutes later, all back in.

They use the rooms in these residences for conference guests, visiting students, etc. Especially in off-season. Then functions like hotel.

So, what do you think of Stockwell Day? I think he's living on borrowed time. And Joe Clarke's laughing now because nobody gave him a chance against Day. The guy's such a klutz, even more than Joe Who (as Joe Clarke used to be called). He puts his foot in his mouth on a regular basis. Just look what he said about the Palestinians. Blaming them for the trouble! As if it were that simple! The trouble is, he's a moral simpleton without the moxie of even an average politician. As an actor on the political stage, he would do better if he were a better actor (i.e., in the sense of hiding his faults).

I'm thinking of getting a laptop computer to save time writing my thesis. You know, the kind that fold up like a small attaché case. Second-hand ones are not too expensive. Yes, it's definitely something I should do. They're such a handy tool nowadays. For printing out things, I'd continue to use the facilities at the university. The laptop puts everything on a diskette.

So, that's about it for this week. It's 9am. Maybe a bit of room cleaning, then later out for my run. Then probably back to my thesis. Nothing else pressing to do today. Weather kind of shitty.

I seem so far away now from driving taxi in Winnipeg though I think of it often enough. Got to know the city like the back of my hand. Takes years and years of driving. Now, like an old familiarity in all its aspects, even the strangest and most sordid.

I'll never know Ottawa or any other city as well as I knew Winnipeg. On the other hand, no city I've lived in intrigued me more than Montreal. *Love, Michael*

June 3, 2001

Dear Mom,

More rain today. It's coming down heavy. Time for a change, I would say. Too much wetness and greyness. Preparations on thesis going apace but, oh, how much work! How much thinking! And, of course, taking much longer than I anticipated. Some difficult material but it's just a matter of time. Feel more in control of what I'm doing and confident I'm breaking new ground. However, I must be careful to get everything right, so I ask myself a lot of difficult questions. The most arduous stage is nearly completed, and this will put everything on a solid basis. It required a new way of looking at the conflict

between the philosophers in relation to truth telling, in relation to the insurmountable obstacles in finding agreement on certain issues. An immeasurably long gestation period and soon will be the time to deliver the project well-formed, sound of limb, and full of vitality. I'm confident that, while working with the best material, I'm doing something different from the two philosophers in question.

If I attempt to rush this business, I know I won't get good results. The right thoughts don't necessarily come on command. One has to make a sort of space for them. The best thing is not to have a life full of distractions. If I did, I'd probably have to do what others do, that is, focus on technical proficiency rather than doing original work.

In brief, my aim has always been to find what I can do that no one else can. Under such conditions, one looks for what has been neglected, overlooked, undeveloped, distorted, covered up. One does not let go of it. It becomes an obsession!

It wasn't always so. A good part of my youth was more of a concern with worldly experiences, with examining and thinking about the varied face of the world. And, of course, with perhaps finding the sweetest face of all in the form of some loved one. But precious metal itself, money, was never a main attraction. Either way, I found the world to be varied, interesting, sometimes fascinating but also cold, sluggish, grey, monotonous. Comprised of the all-too-familiar, the all-too-friendly, the all-too-less-than-fascinating. And all this in the very prime of youth with physical powers at their peak.

And I was fortunate enough to have my adventures in Europe between the ages of twenty-four and twenty-five. But who was it who went there? Somebody who undoubtedly aspired to be a great writer, to get things published and win acclaim. Well, none of this happened and, instead, I've ended up being a frustrated writer with most of my work ending up in the trashcan.

Rain has stopped. This means I can go out for my run. Still have to do some room cleaning. Trying to break habit of working on thesis even on Sundays. No point in letting it be an obsession. How you start the day sets the pace for the rest of it. The mind always a clenched fist. Fortunately, this subsides before I fall asleep. Then I take myself out of it entirely.

You should be keeping these letters I send you. Put them in a shoebox or something. Who knows who might like to read them in the future? And, don't forget, they can't go on forever.

So, now it's the time to wind up. The rest of the day beckons. It wants to be occupied. I was walking around the other day with my eyes closed and imagining myself blind. I suspect just about everybody has done this at some point. (Of course, I mean those who have a choice in the matter.) Anyway, one can only take a few steps before feeling compelled to open them. How limiting this blindness is! How frightening! Now imagine if one's hearing went too. Then the world almost ceases to exist! It's as if one were plunged into a pitch-black and soundless cave. No azure dome overhead. No sound of chirping birds. Just the memory of them, perhaps, but for how long?

Alright, that's enough. Until next week. *Love, Michael*

June 10, 2001

Dear Mom,

Nice summer weather has returned. High of twenty-six for today. Sunny. Went and saw the movie *Time Regained* at Bytown Theatre Friday night and, last night, by coincidence, I finished the last volume of Proust's immense novel. The action takes place in same historical period as represented in the movie. It was a great effort but not a great film. If you didn't know the novel, it would be pretty confusing. And it's long enough that a handful of people left before it was finished. A lot of memory scenes that're off-putting because the characters don't change and always look the same. In the novel, on the other hand, the physical changes are described in minute detail.

But, really, it's an impossible book to try to make into a movie. Perhaps the best format would be a TV series.

Another week of carefully working things out before the actual writing of thesis. It excites me that I'm developing my own philosophical thoughts in conjunction with the works I analyse. At the same time, these thoughts necessarily add another layer of complication. It's therefore increasingly important to get everything across as well as possible.

Instead of doing the usual thing, arguing one position against another or mediating between the two, I'm analysing both positions as a dynamic relationship in the form of a debate with not only epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions, but also ethical concerns as primary determinants.

Was running the other day and a red-winged blackbird hit me on the top of the head. It was near the river close to Moussette Park (where the little beach is). It was very aggressive, making several dives at me. Guess it was protecting a nest in nearby tree. Reminded me of Hitchcock's horror movie *The Birds*. Who knows? Perhaps it was an incident like this that inspired the film.

Just heard on the radio somebody else has put a knife in Stockwell Day's back, and the Alliance Party is plummeting in the polls. Guess he's toast! Of course, they're always hoping for a miracle but, seriously, can anyone imagine this guy as prime minister? He's so uncool, despite his photogenic looks. Remember all the photos before? Stockwell Day in his karate outfit, Stockwell Day in his wetsuit, Stockwell Day on his sea doo. His speaking French is of course an asset, something Preston Manning couldn't do despite taking lessons. When Day started off, he was still a bit of a mystery, still had some allure, still had the look of someone who could give a new impetus to the party. Instead, it all fell flat because he has neither intellectual depth nor good political instincts. In short, Manning was the better man in at least the first department. Who knows? Maybe he'll end up being hoisted back into the saddle.

Room-cleaning day again and then maybe look over my bicycle. Clean it up. Repack the bearings of the back wheel. Front one's already done. Amazing how it held up after going through the winter. All that salt and dirt and snow. Looks good for another one. Oh, God, shall I ever finish? Four years going on five! Not that I feel I'm lacking in strength or energy but just a certain strain sets in. Physically, it registers in those little muscles in my back which I periodically massage. Not that the muscle contractions have

come back again, no, but it still registers its presence and bears a reminder. The doctor I went to has the same problem and called it his barometer that told him when to ease off.

Well, should get on to attending to the things of the day which will be a past day by the time this reaches you. A day of the past which now before me is present, making its particular demands though nothing extraordinary and so, no doubt, it will fall into oblivion.

I hope the weather has changed for you as well. So much better, I'm sure, to get out of Lion's Place once in a while. And are you growing tomatoes this year? How's the car holding up?

I shall now begin my chores. Set a different pace for Sunday. More relaxed. Think of other things besides my project like the maintenance of my bicycle. Paying my phone bill. Oh, happy thoughts!

So, bye for now. This letter will shortly take wing on its long flight halfway across Canada. *Love, Michael*

P.S. A guy I know who just got his PhD recently had his phone disconnected. He racked up a \$300 phone bill. He's got no regular job but still a phone is important. Not a very significant event, I admit, but still makes you wonder.

June 17, 2001

Dear Mom,

Hot weather this past week. Plus thirty. Today not so hot. High twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Sunny. This morning showers predicted. Have been sniffing and blowing my nose a lot, even more than usual. Can't be anything but allergies. No other symptoms but these. Damned nuisance! Like, right now, I'm sneezing and blowing my nose. Indoors or outdoors, it's all the same. Only when I'm running do I get relief.

Well, I did it! I bought my computer! A brand-new laptop! Black with a thirteen-inch screen. Bought it at the university bookstore. Probably the most expensive thing I've ever bought. With tax included, it cost me \$1900. The beauty of it is it's so easy to transport and, when hooked up to internet, I could be in contact with anyone in the world. But, right now, I'm just using it as a word processor. An internet hookup, as you know, requires making telephone-like payments every month. At present, however, all that matters to me is writing the thesis. Having the computer now at home will be very timesaving. It's too bad I couldn't show it to you. It has so many features I don't even know about.

Have started writing the Introduction to my thesis. When I'm finished, I'll give a copy of it to my thesis director, Professor Feldspar. It's about time he received something from me. I haven't shown him anything since I did my thesis project defense last October. And, since then, I've developed it much further. I'm sure it will surprise him because it even surprises me. Which is to say that I continue to discover things as I go along. I'm very excited about what I'm doing and proud of myself for having stuck to my guns and not given in to subtle institutional pressures.

In short, I've aimed as high as I could. My grasp of the subject matter is firm and secure despite the slippery nature of it.

Initially, I was thinking of getting a second-hand computer, but the only one I found was a four or five-year-old laptop for \$600. Maybe it would've been alright, but I never got to look at it because the owner was slow getting back to me. In the meantime, I made my decision to buy a brand-new one to reduce the possibility of technical problems. So, here I am now with an Acer Travelmate 210 that has a one-year warranty with an option to extend it. Acer is a world-wide company, so the computer can be serviced anywhere.

Another day for room cleaning. Get on to it shortly. Then I'll go for my run. Then, in the afternoon, probably open up my new computer and do some more thesis work. I keep a copy of it on a diskette for safekeeping.

This computer operates with a rechargeable battery, so it can be used for several hours without hookup. But, right now, it's just my home computer with a smaller screen than a regular desktop. As far as a printer goes, it could always be hooked up as an accessory. In fact, it can be hooked up to many things: larger screen, microphone, earphones, alternative keyboard, etc.

So, you've heard enough about my new computer. It's time for me to get on with the other stuff.

Pretty soon schoolkids all free for their summer holidays. Always puts me in mind of Chambly and, among other things, the neighbours we had: the Drummonds, the Miller's, the Mathieu's, the Daudelin's, the Eaglenest's (not their real name, which was French and never clear to me as a child, but a phonetic play on it), the Martel's, the Cunningham's, the Murphy's, and so on. Our phone number: Olympia 8-8404. Our address: 1084 Rue de Salaberry. Our post office box number: 274. The serial number of my Glider bicycle: TE 77636. *The Books of Knowledge, Volumes 1-20*. One left out overnight in the rain: *Volume 3. The Popular Books of Science, Volumes 1-10. Lands and People, Volumes 1-7*. Dad's 1950 Oldsmobile that he bought around the time he lost his job at Pratt & Whitney and before the curtain closed on all those childhood years in Chambly. Something about them now seems idyllic. *Love, Michael*

June 24, 2001

Dear Mom,

Dull this morning but comfortable temperatures. St. Jean Baptiste today. Quebec's national holiday. Rained heavily yesterday. In some places, evening festivities postponed to today. There will be things going on around here such as a small road show set up in a nearby park, and I noticed yesterday an outdoor bandstand has been set up near the Museum of Civilization.

Not a great deal to report. I registered my computer with Acer to make it easier if it should need servicing. I'm not hooked up to internet because it would just be an extra expense.

Here's a strange thing!. Got a call a few nights ago from my friend, Puqun Li. He asked me if I'd read my emails lately. Since I only get email at the university and hadn't been to it for some time, he went on to explain he'd just received a bizarre message from Anoop Gupta, a fellow graduate student in the philosophy department. This message, having gone out to all other graduate students, was an odd plea

for help. Anoop, who is of East Indian extraction but Canadian born, confesses in it to having entered into a marriage by arrangement in India. According to custom, he received a dowry which he claimed to be worth \$15,000. Then he came back here to continue his studies and presumably the agreement was to have his bride follow him over. But, for one reason or another, this didn't happen. The email goes on to say the mother of the bride, having used up all her life savings for the dowry, died recently on account of this breach of contract. Apparently, in India, it's very difficult for a young woman, once married and then abandoned, to continue on in society. In any event, the email goes on to say he's suicidal and wants help from anyone who's willing to give it.

The email had gone out an hour before Puqun Li called me. I had Anoop's telephone number so, after ending the call with Puqun Li, I called him. He was out but his roommate answered. After a brief conversation with her (which I'll get back to), Anoop came in and quickly informed me the email was bogus. Apparently, his mother, living somewhere in southern Ontario, also got it. According to Anoop, she freaked out and called the Ottawa police. What is odd, however, is that Anoop said all this happened a few hours before, around 6pm. But the email Puqun Li received went out around 9:30pm. Anyway, Anoop sounded sensible and calm enough, even mentioning an out-of-town conference he was going to the following day. Certainly he didn't sound suicidal. On the other hand, he didn't elaborate on the contents of the email but only said it was phoney. Then he told me he had to call his father in India. He asked me to pass along to others that everything was okay. Also, he told me he'd no idea who could've done such a thing or why. After a few more words, we ended our call.

Now, here's what complicates matters. Shortly after, I talked with another student in the philosophy department, Mark Brown. Mark told me Anoop let it slip out some three years ago he'd got married in India but didn't say anything more about it. Secondly, before Anoop arrived home, I talked briefly with his roommate. When I explained to her why I was calling, she went off on a tirade, claiming Anoop was not only suicidal, but strange, had bad karma, and she didn't care to be living with him. To be truthful, she sounded quite young and not the most reliable witness. So, what is one to make of all this? Anoop's never been the most forthcoming sort of guy, but I never would've pegged him for an out-and-out liar or scoundrel who stole a dowry.

Well, if I hear any more about it, I'll let you know. *Love, Michael*

July 1, 2001

Dear Mom,

Happy Canada Day!

Overcast this morning. Didn't hear the weather forecast. Fireworks will go off tonight in the Capital but they're visible from where I am in Hull which, by the way, should have its name changed soon to Gatineau. All surrounding municipalities amalgamated into one city. This name is considered to be the most appropriate to the region: Gatineau Hills, Gatineau Park, Gatineau River, etc.

Am very close to beginning the writing of the first chapter of my thesis. Have already written the Introduction (only nine pages) . The title of the thesis is *The Dynamics of a Deep Disagreement: Derrida and Ricoeur on Metaphor and Its Relation to Philosophy*.

Metaphor, according to Aristotle's definition is the transfer of the name of one object to another, and the classic form of metaphor is what is called metaphor by analogy. Aristotle gives this example: *Evening is to day as old age is to life*. Therefore, metaphorically speaking, one can say: *Evening is the old age of day* or *Old age is the evening of life*. But the problem is that metaphor or what comes to be called metaphor doesn't always follow the rules. For example, there are often "bad metaphors." Let me explain: Suppose something happens or comes into being for which there is no name. Let's say some people view a strange object in the sky and shout, "It looks like a flying saucer!" Well, of course, it's not a flying saucer but only looks like one. However, the name sticks and this is what might be called a bad metaphor.

As you can well imagine, our language is full of such metaphors. The question then arises: What consequences, if any, does this have for philosophy, for the language of philosophy itself and, finally, for the ability to control language?

Has been hot all week but, still, I go running in the mid of day. Heat doesn't slow me down much. Oh, I just heard on the radio: Storm this afternoon. Not so good for the Canada Day festivities. By the way, I've grown a moustache. It's not too bad. I experimented a bit before deciding on a slender, pointy one.

Update on the Anoop affair: He went to his conference in St. Catherine's and got attacked by somebody. I don't know anything more about it except that the emails (for it seems there were more than one) throwing dirt on him were sent to some people at Brock University where the conference was held and Anoop got his master's degree. The attacker was likely somebody who knew his movements and who, as it is alleged, broke into his computer to send the false emails. Perhaps a vengeful relative behind it. Anyway, police are investigating. Very serious offense to break into somebody's computer.

Oh, the sun is peeping through the clouds right at the moment! I'm slowly making my way through all the left-over cheese from the informal conference I organized back in May. I bought way too much, anticipating two hundred people when in fact only forty turned up. So, it's been sitting in my fridge since end of March. Some of it growing mouldy but only on the surface. Still good to eat. I figure I'll finish it all by Christmas.

So, there it is for another week. How is your health? Are you eating okay? Anniversary of Sharon's death in three days. Now, twelve years have gone by, the life span of a cat or dog. Reminds me of the line in *King Lear*: "How can a cat, a rat, a dog, a horse have life / But thou no life as they?" And then the old king imagines he sees his daughter, Cordelia, reviving before he too, due to his advanced years and worn-out condition, passes away.

Now, I shall begin my room cleaning as usual. Till next week. *Love, Michael*

July 8, 2001

Dear Mom,

Much cooler weather this past week. Somewhat overcast but the sun threatening to break through this morning. Another week of work. Found some texts I'd overlooked but now I'm almost finished studying them. Actually, I'd already read them but just hadn't given them sufficient attention. So, everything is well on course, and I'll shortly be able to continue with the writing of the thesis.

My friend, Puqun Li, still awaiting the defense of his thesis because a couple of his committee members haven't yet sent in their written reports. They've gone past the deadline, but there's nothing to be done about it. One can only wait and keep reminding them. Nevertheless, it should take place before summer is out.

I haven't even seen any movies lately, just been keeping my nose to the grindstone. The other day I came across a little snake while running on the cycling path. I stopped to examine it. Damn, the little critter was aggressive! It struck out and bit my runner over and over again! I toyed with it with my foot for a minute or so, but it didn't tire out. But what was funny was a middle-aged man stopping in his tracks about fifty feet away and timidly inquiring whether it was attacking me. I said yes but only because I was molesting it. Since it was obvious he wasn't going to come closer with the snake on the path, I let the critter escape and slither off into the underbrush.

Just heard the weather report. Will be clearing this afternoon. High of 25 degrees. Quite comfortable. So Mordecai Richler gave up the ghost. More coverage of his death and funeral in English newspapers than French ones. He made more than a few enemies in this province with his well-published attacks on Quebec nationalists. Especially that article in *The New Yorker* in 1991. A number of Quebec intellectuals dumped on him. He no doubt went too far but that's his style – journalistic, polemical, satiric, call it what you will.

On the one hand, I feel too much was made of this but, on the other, by going to the United States to vent his wrath and cast dirt on the nationalists, he undoubtedly engaged in feeding the prejudices of people who, though they be our neighbours, know little or nothing about Canada-Quebec relations.

Perhaps he threw a stone without thinking too much about the consequences. Perhaps it was a cheap shot. In any event, while the Prime Minister of Canada paid homage to Richler, the Premier of Quebec, Bernard Landry, did not.

I haven't read much of Richler's work and yet, strangely enough, I know the titles of his main novels: *Barney's Choice*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Joshua*, *Then and Now*, and *St. Urbain's Horseman*. He was planning another novel before he died, so he died in harness. I don't see why anyone should be grieved over this.

His last novel is wildly popular in Italy. Lucky guy! To go out like that!

So, that's about it. You can see I don't have much to say unless I continue my discussion on metaphor which, by the way, means "transport" (epiphora) in ancient Greek.

Lots to do still and the summer flying by. Oh, for those sweet summer days of childhood when every day stood still and made the deepest impression! An always new beginning and new discovery! Oh, not just another day, but TODAY!

Just one final item: I received an email the other day from Pablo who says he's bought a house and planning to get married. Look how his life has progressed over three years! And he's working and has a position and office. All the earthly and material trappings of success while I stay with my memories. But, to be honest, I'm not envious of him. Or, at least, no more than Baudelaire, the great poet, was when he came across a happy young couple with children and exclaimed: "*Ils sont dans le vrai !*" Love, Michael

July 15, 2001

Dear Mom,

Bright morning. Looks like it'll be hot. Abnormally cool July. Another week of work. Finally moving along now in the writing stage. Things are going well, but I didn't feel happy a day or so ago. You see, I gave the Introduction to my friend, Puqun Li to get his opinion. Well, the long and short of it is he hardly understood a word. He attributed the problem to my writing style. (Unfortunately, I didn't react well to this criticism.) However, I know he's wrong for these reasons: First, what I'm doing is extremely novel and complex. The style follows accordingly. Second, Puqun Li reads only a certain type of philosophy stressing simple statements and logical argument. Third, like many others, he isn't familiar with the material. Still, I worried about it enough to decide that the Introduction needed to be reworked by bringing the texts I'm analysing into it. Since there are only three of them (these are primary texts), it's a relatively simple matter to give them a certain presence in the Introduction. On top of this, I called another friend of mine, a doctoral student at nearby Dominican College who was a speaker at my informal student conference. I asked him to take a look at the Introduction and point out any parts he finds obscure.

The francophone games started yesterday. Big event here. See a lot of the athletes at the University of Ottawa. A lot of blacks from French-speaking Africa. They're staying at the university residences where I was the first year, but now there are even more high-rise buildings, recently constructed, for students to fill up in September.

Very happy with new computer. There are a million things you can do with it like watching movies, listening to CDs, sending emails, faxing, and surfing the net.

Haven't heard anything more on the Anoop affair. Guess he's watching his back. He's obviously made some enemies.

If all goes well, I should have a fair amount written come September. There'll be four chapters, but I'm not sure how long the thesis will be. I'll have a better idea after I've written the first chapter.

They finally started work on the next-door parking lot putting in a drainage system, so now it's all torn up. Later, it'll be covered in asphalt. Government workers mostly park there, their huge office buildings nearby. It'll look a lot nicer once they're finished.

Now will attend to my room as usual. Weekly cleaning. What do you think of Stockwell Day's situation? Doesn't he resemble a sad clown? And to think how he comported himself during the federal election, trying to look cool on a sea doo and wearing a wetsuit. Almost Shakespearean as an *alazon*, a type of character described by Northrop Frye, a celebrated Canadian literary critic. Here's one definition: "A character of this model is usually either hypocritical or simply ignorant, and he tends to view himself as more important than he actually is." However, all the fools who elected him as party leader over Preston Manning aren't much better. The guy had never proved himself at the federal level before they anointed him.

His days are numbered and yet, hoping for a miracle, he still clings to power. But every time he makes a move, takes some initiative, he gets into more shit and alienates more members of his party. He's nothing more than a crass opportunist.

Enough! I hope you're getting some of your appetite back though, with the pabulum diet you're on, it's difficult to see how.

A few days ago, Philip's ex-wife looked at the photos on my wall of John and Patricia's kids and asked if they were my grandchildren. Of course, I was taken aback, but no doubt she thought this possible because she was a teenage mom and her mother too. *Love, Michael*

July 22, 2001

Dear Mom,

Very hot and muggy this morning. Has been hot all week. As you know, I talked with Carla last Sunday. She seemed in good spirits but told me she's going through menopause. Also mentioned having pains in her hip. Had them for a long time now. Thinks it's arthritis. I have no such aches or pains. My daily running no doubt helps. I even run sometimes twice a day, once before noon and once in the evening. I can still power up a hill and overtake some cyclists.

Another week of hard work. Moving along in Chapter One of thesis. The only worry that's cropped up recently is my thesis will probably run over the official limit of 250 pages. At least, that's what the Department has been asking for the last few years. But, to my mind, they can't enforce it too strictly. After all, how can you determine beforehand how long it needs to be? About two years ago, somebody defended a 500-page thesis.

I think Carla and Earl are possibly making a mistake holding onto the house (I mean, do they really need a place with a backyard pool now?) and not using this opportunity to rearrange their lives and those of their children. All the old habits are likely to prevail, and this will only create friction and discontentment. Perhaps Meka could stay with Carla and Earl for a while, but I believe Aaron and Jordan

should clear out. Nothing prevents them from still having frequent contact with their parents, but, at least, if they move out, they won't be dumping their problems on their parents every single day.

Still work going on next door in parking lot. It's been torn up, drainage system put in, and fresh gravel. Now just awaits the asphalt. Will certainly improve the surroundings. The city is even supposed to fix up Rue Bagot next year. It's a dinky little cul-de-sac where the rooming house I live in is situated. Not much else on it, but it runs off a busy street, Rue Montcalm.

Francophone games must be over or nearly over. Haven't been keeping track. Tons of athletes at U. of. O. They use computer room to send emails back home. A happy good-looking lot! Lots of black athletes with some wearing colourful African costumes or else dressed all in white. France won the competition. No surprise there because they're the biggest French-speaking country.

The world is a complex place full of connections and disconnections. Our efforts are only one factor and, sometimes, it's hard to say whether they're the most important one.

The dog days of summer! Heat hard on people (particularly old ones)! They'd like it to pass!

Heat doesn't bother me, but I hate overhearing loud music. Fortunately, there's not been much of it lately.

Steady as she goes! I'd like to be at sea! I'd love to see the ocean! A full horizon! The song of the Eternal!

On the other hand, if one sees it every day, one stops seeing it. It becomes a technical affair, not a song. A song only lasts so long. How else would it be a song? *Love, Michael*

July 29, 2001

Dear Mom,

Bright summer morning. Not too hot. Hardly any breeze. Busy week. Getting close to finishing first chapter. Hard work. Difficult material. But I've a good sense of where I'm going due to all my planning and thinking. Now, it's mainly a matter of finding the right words. I don't think it's going to be a short thesis, but I'm not going to worry about it. I'll just concentrate on doing the best I can.

Still haven't been able to contact my thesis advisor, Professor Feldspar. Always seems to be on vacation. He's part of Puqun Li's thesis committee, so he should be showing up soon for the defense. When I get a chance to talk to him, I'll tell him where I'm at. The man's not brilliant but he's very nice. I don't know how much he'll understand or want to understand.

Parking lot close to finished next door. Just waiting for asphalt. New curb put in all around. Also a fence where it borders the rooming house. (A definite improvement!)

They've also been renovating a nearby park used for the recent francophone games. Plaques with a few lines of poetry attached to big blocks of limestone bordering the low-lying tiers of the park. With this

and other small improvements (perhaps major ones to come), the immediate surroundings are being spruced up.

Place has been good here all summer. Quiet. No troublesome tenants.

Haven't been to any movies lately. Last one I saw was a stinker (I walked out halfway) about a young computer whiz who pays a stripper \$5000 to spend three days in a luxury hotel in Los Vegas.

Sometimes I run in the evening as well as afternoon. Take it easier then. Usually there's a number of people on path. Mostly cyclists and people on roller blades. The park with the little beach can be quite busy during the day. I've never made use of the beach myself. Lying around sunning never seemed a great pastime to me. I don't even consider it healthy. And as far as swimming goes, well, all there is to do is splash about. This would only interest me if I had kids.

I have to go to the university tomorrow to renew my library books. Very expensive if you let them go overdue, especially if you have thirty or forty out. Also will check my email in the computer room.

Another day to spruce up my room. Boy, these letters of mine are getting to sound boring! It's just that I don't have a great deal to say about my day-to-day activities. Everything is centered on my thesis writing, and I can't very well go into that.

Let's see. Episode in Europe. I'll pick one out. Paris. What a devil of a time finding the youth hostel! Huge city! On bicycle coming in from the direction of Verdun. Had to ask fifty people for directions. Finally arrived. Huge hostel. The Hilton Hotel of youth hostels. The biggest in Europe! Also the most expensive. Thirty-five francs per day. About seven dollars. This is 1976. Most hostels cost me less than two dollars. It was April and the weather was good. Saw Arche de Triomphe, Louvre, Eiffel Tower. And at the youth hostel made friends with a twenty-seven-year-old Swiss guy who spoke four or five languages. And then we met the two German girls in the youth hostel, both students in their early twenties. All four of us went to take in Paris. Did it more than once. I got pretty intimate with one of the girls called Karen. She, along with her friend, Barbara, spoke English very well with only slight accent. On one occasion, I walked down the street with both attractive women at my side. It was just after I'd gone up the Eiffel Tower and waved to them from on high. Each of them had taken me by the arm. It's one of the few moments in my life where reality and romantic longing exquisitely united. *O, verweile doch, du bist so schön!* (O, stay awhile, you are so lovely!)

Well, enough for this week. Back to the old grind or, as the poet William Blake would say, the same dull round. *Love, Michael*

August 5, 2001

Dear Mom,

Bright sunny summer morning. Hot weather of late. Another week of the same. Almost finished first chapter. Another day or two and I should have it.

Puqun Li will be finally defending his thesis this Friday, the 10th. Big day for him. Of course, I'll attend. Scheduled for 1pm. Then we'll go out. He's invited me over to his place for supper. I'll buy him a bottle of good wine. He wasn't too crazy about the dry red wine I brought before. Prefers the sweet. So, I was thinking of what you used to drink, Du Bonnet. Maybe I'll get him a couple of bottles.

I think I told you he sent his six-year-old son to China to live there for two years. Lots of relatives to look after him. Wants him to read and write Chinese well. The relatives used to talk to him regularly on the phone. It's not as expensive as it used to be.

I've little else to report, so back to Europe or, more properly, the beginning of my European trip. On the first of October, I boarded the ocean liner, *Stefan Batory*. This was after I'd spent an eventful week on a side trip to Quebec City which, in turn, took place shortly after I'd hitchhiked across Canada and arrived in Montreal. A preview to Old Europe is what Quebec City was for me with its old houses, narrow, windy, up-and-down streets, and historic sites such as the large stone fort called *La Citadelle* with its ramparts and cannons pointing across the river. A wooden promenade high up, running along the St. Lawrence and giving a panoramic view of it. (It's like a canyon or gorge below.) This was late September. Still summer weather. I easily found a cheap room to stay in. (The youth hostel was full.) I played the tourist but, being only a backpacker, I didn't go into expensive restaurants with their menus pasted outside or even take a ride on a calèche, a horse-drawn carriage popular with tourists.

But I did meet some German students, all guys, who'd been working in the Ontario tobacco fields during the summer. They were on their way back to Germany. I went with them to a few bars, met some girls, and made out with the youngest of them. I've both sweet and bitter memories of this episode because, contrary to my strongest desires and deepest fantasies, I've always been a half-assed lover. (It's not easy to say this!)

Not much later, I passed Quebec City on the *Stefan Batory*. It took about two days of sailing just to get out of the St. Lawrence River. And the further one goes seaward, the more the shores recede until, finally, one reaches the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

I quickly made some friends on the ship. There weren't many young people onboard, but what ones there were found each other and got together on the first day. In fact, one of them regularly shared a table in the dining room with me and two other passengers.

Good meals in that dining room. Three and four courses. Like a huge banquet hall. Waiters going all about. I remember there was a middle-aged French woman sitting opposite me. A rather refined and civil manner about her. By contrast, another middle-aged woman, black and from Jamaica, who was crass, comical, and boisterous. In fact, she provided most of the conversation at the table. Often she'd mention she was out to meet a suitable Polish gentleman. Her manner was comical, and once she asked me (as she might have asked other young men), "Oh, by the way, are you Polish?"

Yes, she certainly kept herself busy. She was always to be spotted with some man or present at some social activity. I also remember she'd no qualms about telling us what was wrong with the *Stefan Batory*

and the service on board. Having already crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Elizabeth*, she compared our ship unfavourably to it.

My cabinmate was another young man from the States. (The one at the dining table, just mentioned, was from Boston.) I remember he was reading the French writer, Albert Camus, who, at that time, I didn't know. He spoke of his work enthusiastically but otherwise kept to himself. I remember he was gracious enough to stay away from the cabin when I wanted to bring this Swiss girl to it. She was a hardy chunky type with a sweet manner who'd spent a year backpacking in the U.S. We did a little petting, nothing more.

She was returning from an adventure and I was starting one. A year later, once again on the *Stefan Batory*, I would meet some young people going to North America to start theirs. The wheel turns.

Well, so much for this week. Next week, I'll tell you about Puqun Li's defense. *Love, Michael*

August 12, 2001

Dear Mom,

Bright sunny morning. Already hot and humid. All week it's been like this with hardly any letup. A bit cooler on weekend than it was during the week. We had some real scorchers up to 34-36 degrees with a humidity factor putting it to 40 degrees. Room unbearable, particularly in afternoon. I spent one day at the local beach. First time for me. Otherwise, just have to bear it. Makes working difficult, sometimes almost impossible. And to complicate matters, I've just gone through a period of self-doubt and uncertainty. I'm still not sure how to deal with the second chapter. Now, however, I realize I must spend more time studying the basic texts. The thing is, to learn patience. It's no good getting frustrated and worrying about how much still lies before me or how slow it's going or, for that matter, how the work will be received. I take a big risk departing from standard procedures and format. Lately, this has been driven home to me. To tell you the truth, I experience now and then some genuine fear, moments of self-doubt and anxiety which, of course, does very little good and only inhibits me. I realize it's necessary to focus on one step at a time and measure progress and satisfaction accordingly.

Puqun Li successfully defended his thesis Friday. All went very smoothly. He handled the questions put to him well. It was a very scholarly effort, the kind committee members like. A good clear line to follow. Nothing upsetting or worrisome. Nothing particularly challenging to them. And this was how I was advised to write and present my thesis.

After the thesis defense, we went to a nearby popular bar for students. We sat on the partly sunny, partly shady terrace. Puqun Li, his thesis director, three members of his committee, and me. Later, I went to Puqun Li's for supper. I ate and drank more than I usually do. So, now Puqun Li is no longer a student. He's already looking for a teaching position. Let's see how he does. It's becoming increasingly clear it's not all that easy. Competition is fierce, hence the scramble to put together a good CV. Publications, teaching experience, scholarships: things which I've largely ignored.

I don't know what will come of it. I'm truly uncertain about everything, but this is the way it's always been for me. In many ways, I hate the machine-like aspect of institutions and society (though I recognize its necessity). I'm sure I take after Dad in this respect. I hate the way it takes control of one's personality or modifies one's character. Like him, I refuse to let some worldly advantage tempt me into taking on some other role.

In the meantime, I'm getting older and my prospects, I suppose, don't look so good. Plus, I have the additional burden of a large debt. So, there are reasons to worry but, as I keep telling myself, the basics are secure: health of mind and body. I try to look after these two as best I can.

I suppose it's been extremely hot in Winnipeg too. All across the country, in fact. But at least you've got an air-conditioned apartment. Not like a lot of people living in rundown places, the kind I'd go to when driving cab.

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them.*

So, time to get on with the rest of the day. Spruce up my room as usual. Then go for my run. Then lunch. Then work on my thesis this afternoon. And then do some important reading in the evening. Moving my way slowly to the writing of the second chapter.

I hope you're not feeling too badly, Mom, and getting lots of love and attention from your grandchildren.

They've finished with the parking lot next door. All nicely paved with yellow lines. Not like that dusty patch of gravel before. And next year they're supposed to be fixing up this street. *Love, Michael*

September 2, 2001

Dear Mom,

Quite a bit cooler this morning. Sense the change of seasons. Different light. More mellow. Called Patricia earlier this week. Spoke with her briefly. Like me, she didn't have much to report. A sort of lethargy in our conversation. Oscar Wilde would've recommended not talking about uninteresting subjects or else he'd advise finding a way to make them interesting. But, doing the latter would probably call for a certain amount of fictionalizing, something not everyone is willing or able to do.

Ryle is the only one in the family who had a knack for it. I certainly never had and neither Patricia. So, we end up boring each other with uninteresting conversation in the form of understated and uninspired reports.

Well, guess what? At fifty years of age, I finally decided to learn how to type properly. No more of this pecking away with two fingers. I went to the library and found a good step-by-step book on the subject. Now, I'm happily following the lessons and making good progress despite the slight tremoring of my fingers. (I've always had this problem.) I take time out two or three days a week for short lessons. Just long enough to be stimulated by it and make some small gains.

As for the thesis work, would you believe I haven't gotten around yet to writing the second chapter? There's no question I severely underestimated the challenge it posed. In fact, the whole undertaking is daunting because it's not just about metaphor but the whole of philosophy.

I'm still undecided whether or not I should teach a course from January to April. I'd love to do it, but it would probably interfere with my thesis writing. Given that I usually underestimate how long something is going to take, I should probably stay away from it.

There's such a complexity to be mastered, and I've made it even more complicated by thematizing truth telling as complication and even over-complication. I believe this to be its essential nature even though the object of truth telling is quite the contrary.

What I'm doing is a far cry from what academics want to be presented with. My project is always threatening to be too wide, too ambitious, too presumptuous, and, as a result, carries with it the risk of being loosely written or overstated. It carries the risk of not grounding everything in referenced sources or providing sufficient coverage of all relevant material.

Oh, I forgot to tell you! I've got my computer now hooked up to the internet, so I can do handy things like send emails and other documents, check the university library, and renew my library books. It only costs \$70 per year.

My friend, Puqun Li, has found a temporary job tutoring university students online. I don't know how many students he has. (They're from some university out West.) As far as I know, it's only for one term. It's a first-year course combining Western and Chinese philosophy. He doesn't consider it to be much of a job though. The pay is terrible, but at least it's a start.

I'd better get on with the day. Got up a bit late this morning. Unusual for me. About time now to go out for my run. I'll post this letter. Bye for now. *Love, Michael*

September 9, 2001

Dear Mom,

Early morning. Already hot and muggy. We're having a mini-heat wave in September. Supposed to get to 30 degrees today. And yesterday it was the same. Almost as hot as it was three or four weeks ago. And yet some of the geese, the vanguard, already flying in from up North. I still see them coming here in early December.

Another week of reading and note taking. I've yet to begin my second chapter. Still have one more step to do before I can feel confident. This involves going through an extremely long and complicated book to

see how it functions both ethically and epistemologically. Normally, the ethical part of doing philosophy is totally ignored. It's only when philosophy takes up the ethical itself it becomes visible. The common way is to treat philosophizing as being either ethically neutral or ethically sacrosanct. To raise a question about this is beyond the pale.

I received your note and check. I don't know what to say except thank you. Your generosity truly overwhelms me. It almost makes me a trifle ashamed because I'm not a young person starting out in life. Normally, people my age are the ones in a position to give. Mind you, I suppose there's more than one way to do this. In any event, the amount you sent me far exceeds the cost of the hookup to the internet, which was only \$70.

Good news! I'm going to get a TA position this year. A fellow student phoned me earlier this week and told me the Department has enough money for fifth-year students like myself. You'll recall that first to fourth year students in the doctoral program get priority. I'll go to the university tomorrow and sign my contract. I'll also make sure my tuition fees are covered by these earnings.

I was thinking of teaching a course from January to April, but now I've decided against it. I want to devote myself entirely to the thesis. I've already done a lot of work, but there's still much to do. And, to say it again, I want to perfect it so there's no chance anyone can raise serious objections.

I'm progressing in my typing skills. I told you I took out a book from the library with easy-to-follow lessons. I'm on lesson ten right now. There are twenty-two lessons in all. I still haven't incorporated enough letters in my new typing skills to be able to spell my full name. I'm still waiting to bring in 'm' and 'n'. Lesson twelve brings in 'm'. You see, with each lesson a new number or letter is added. You start off more or less with half the alphabet.

I see some of the leaves are changing colour despite the heat. Also, the water is very low in the river. The St. Lawrence and Ottawa River systems are down, in fact. I believe it hasn't been like this since 1934. And the captain of the Montreal Canadians is stricken with abdominal cancer at age twenty-six! His chances of survival are not great, they say.

I'm anxious to get to the point I can properly type instead of pecking away with two fingers as I've been doing for a quarter of a century. Isn't it terrible I've put this off for so long?

It reminds me of learning to play a musical instrument with a keyboard. On the other hand, what I learned to play as a child was a stringed instrument, the mandolin at age ten with Mrs. Swedenga as my teacher. She was a young Swedish woman who, with her husband, had bought the Drummonds' house across the street. I remember her as being very nice and patient. Then they moved to Fort Chambly and my lessons stopped.

Well, that's enough. Thanks again, Mom. I'll use the money to go to Winnipeg at Christmas and, hopefully, I'll be well along on the third or fourth chapter. *Love, Michael*

To My Dying Mother (September 11, 2001)

I have no proper words for this,
no words that can match the fifty long years
of your absolute constancy.
I never felt it to waver in these fifty long years,
not once, not once in these fifty long years, not once –
until now.

Now that I know that you need to go,
that you cannot stay,
or at least that you cannot stay
as you've always stayed,
so solidly, so supportively,
so much in life, so very much in life,
so much an anchorage, a harbour,
a haven, a port of welcome and return
in my own life;
so much a force, an energy,
a hope, a wish
pushing at the back of me,
at the back of my life;
but now must go,
must be all hope, all force,
all energy, all wish
in my life,
in my thoughts,
in my memories of you,
in the pain that will come from missing you,
for in that pain will be found finally
what was always owed to you,
owed to you, dear Mother,
as what was never fully expressed to you,
as what could only be —
prayed to you,
prayed to you, dear Mother,
prayed to you as . . .

My Mother,
Though you are no longer physically present,
You are still with us,
Still offering us your love and support.
I hear your voice,
More than ever now
It comes to me,
A source of inspiration.

How well you tried,

How admirably you
Made the best of things
All throughout your life;
And in your most trying hour
Went even further
To take on the Sublime,
To leave this too
As your legacy,
Graven in our lives,
Source of Inspiration,
Your final counsel,
Surpassing all previous,
Everything you ever said.

Everything you ever said
To guide or to instruct,
To encourage or to support,
Is now in the Shadow
of this Terrible Beauty,
This tremendous Wisdom
Which becomes you finally.

Letters from My Mother

April 7, 2000

Dear Michael,

(3:30am) Although I'm sleeping somewhat better, tonight is not one of those nights. So thought I'd start a letter to you. Perhaps it will weary me a little so that I will go back to bed. I fortunately do need a great deal of sleep. My cough is much better so that helps tremendously at night.

Received a letter from you today. Thank you. They make my day, Michael. You're chatty way of writing always relaxes me for the day. Happiness does that. I have no trouble staying up and partake in many activities and do a lot of things with Carla and Patricia and especially the grandkids Meka, Gillian, and Patricia's three. Sunday, we (John, myself, and the three angels) went to the Shrine Circus. Enjoyed it tremendously but I had to use a shot of nitro two-thirds of the way through the performance. But John took tremendous care of me. Did all the running back and forth for treats for the kids, water for me and waited till the crowd thinned out and helped me out of the arena. Got the car from the parking lot and picked me up. The circus was much longer than expected. Therefore, I became quite fatigued. However, it still was a wonderful day. Then, on the 23rd (Easter), will sleep over at Tricia's and John's. On the 25th, Tricia, Meka, Siobhan, and I will see "Stars on Ice." I'm really looking forward to this performance. Got the tickets six weeks ago.

Yesterday we had our amateur talent show. Meka and her classmate Carly (from St. Mary's Academy) raced over to see it between classes. I was surprised and delighted, as you can imagine. Anyway, by the

congratulations Al and I got, we became “stars for a day.” We had a ball singing to each other a love song, yet we had the hardest time not to laugh out loud because you know our relationship. Pushing each other’s buttons daily. But I think it helps to keep each of us alive. The contest of wills keeps us both fighting to stay well and reasonably healthy. *C’est la vie*.

Then on the 19th it will be Passover and Earl invited us for dinner. Aren’t we loved? He also bought me a walker on Thursday. (Meka delivered it.) I need one now to go outside on my own. Cannot go out by myself unless I’m with another adult. This way I can get out whenever I wish with the security of a walker. The outdoors I’ve always loved and to walk will mean everything to me even if it’s just around the block. The streets are bare so it’s safe. I’m all set for summer now and to spend some time at the lake with Kay. I’m one lucky lady!

Bev Bagley will be visiting me next week. She’ll take me to Assiniboine Park and, as usual, we’ll have a ball. She is such a “lifter-up” and we have so many laughs together. A truly wonderful friend!

Quite a social agenda for this month, don’t you think? The busier I am, the happier and healthier I feel. I play cards four nights out of the week. Anything to keep my hands and arms busy. My circulation for all limbs is very poor, so I move whenever possible.

Haven’t got hold of *Remembrance of Things Past* yet, but I should very shortly. We don’t have it in the Lion’s Place Library. But, at the end of the month, two people from the Winnipeg Library come here and we can order any book we want. A wonderful opportunity for seniors. Lucky us. We have formed a book club to discuss whatever we read and find interesting.

Hope you solve your problem with your neighbour. I know it can be terribly annoying. Had it once in Greenfield Park when you were two years old and Carla was a baby. The upstairs people had a two-year-old who constantly used a small wooden pedal car on hardwood floors. Your father spoke to the man nicely but he allowed the child to do this at all hours. I was always worried your father was going to punch him out. But, fortunately, we moved after two years to Churchill Drive and met the O’Connor’s. So ends the first chapter. Will continue tomorrow.

(9am) Al’s not up so will try to get a few lines in before I make his breakfast. Yesterday we had a going-away or good-bye party I should say for our social program coordinator Pat Hasiuk. She is one wonderful and talented lady who was the hub of the complex. Twelve and a half years and she’s leaving because of money. Hasn’t had a raise in five years. Lion’s Place recently refused her a raise, their policy being to let the good people go and hire younger and cheaper employees. A terrible business practise! We’ll have been here seventeen years in June and Al and I have seen it over and over again. Lion’s keeps buying land and expanding, but they have a very poor reputation for low salaries. Constantly changing staff is one clear message of their policies. Glad I’m not working anymore and having to put up with that kind of B.S. (Excuse the printing, I’ve been doing this on my lap.) Al’s got up so will continue this after a poker game tonight. Am going to Cosco’s with Carla this afternoon. She’s at work this A.M. as usual. Wish she had someone to carry part of her load at work. Of course, no one can fill her shoes at home. Talk to later, Mom.

(11:45pm) Can't sleep again. Carla and I didn't get to the Cosco Supermarket but plan to go tomorrow. Played poker tonight and lost five dollars. But we will win it back next time. I'm quite lucky at cards.

Next week will be very busy too. Monday Rowena is coming over. Tuesday Bev is visiting. Wednesday Gilly comes for lunch before leaving for Vancouver the next day. She's on cloud nine – never gone anywhere by herself. She's going with Leah, her tall slim beautiful friend. (She was there at Carla and Earl's New Year's Party.) She's a ballet dancer and actress. Doing a film right now at the University of Winnipeg. A really beautiful girl and her and Gilly really get along well. I know she has to have some substance or Gilly would not bother to befriend her.

Wednesday I have guys coming to clean our windows. The worst they've ever been! The dry dusty winter has left them so dirty you're barely able to see out of them. So it will be nice to have them cleaned. Lion's Place does them once a year but not to June. Too long to wait.

Thursday I'm having my upholster come to look over the loveseat (it's one hundred years old now) and will bring fabrics for me to choose from. Three years since I had it last covered. In case you forgot, it originates from England and was bequeathed to Norman by his mother. Friday going to lunch with my friend Fran. Then Siobhan is coming at 5 P.M. for a sleepover. So a good time for sure!

I'm ready for bed so will end this, Michael, and tell you once more I always thought you'd be a special person. Different from the run of the mill. And I firmly believe all your dreams will be met in the next few years. Believe in it and yourself. Goodnight. Love, Mom

June 6, 2000

Dear Michael,

Received your letter today and, as usual, enjoyed your thoughts. Gilly was here at the time and I read it to her. We had a laugh when I recalled your reminiscing about Chambly. I added to it by telling her about your saying you'd never have your hair cut in a brush cut when you got older. Look at you now! And also I told her about having to bribe you with comic books. The only way I could get you to go to the barber shop without too much of a fuss. Gilly said, "It sure sounds like you, Grandma."

I'm sending the cheque to help you get yourself another bike, Michael, as soon as you can. You need it under your circumstances for transportation and I'm more than happy to assist. Don't know what you can do about the thieves, though it's a fact of life, I guess. And your responsibility here lies in using a better lock, right?

Went to a lovely annual Sportsman Dinner last night as a guest of Earl's. Seventy-five dollars a ticket. He had the whole family at a table (ten of us). Aaron was nominated as one among four Jewish athletes of the year. A girl Olia Berger in judo won. She had won it before and is top ranked in Canada. Her father coaches her. She has won many championships over the past few years. The guest speaker was a black man called Hurricane Carter, a former boxer who was wrongly convicted in a triple murder. The case against him was finally dismissed in 1988. Now a writer and lecturer at Harvard and Yale law schools. Gave a very interesting but scary speech on how easily people can be wrongly convicted and the years of

pain and frustration getting it reversed and your name cleared. The dinner and speeches lasted five and a half hours. Al and I were very tired by the time we got home but certainly were happy to be included in the event.

I'm feeling great and much stronger mentally, emotionally, and physically than at any time this past year. How lucky I am. I feel blessed. So hopefully it will continue. Do a lot of walking once again. Have had some great days. Sunshine and relatively warm weather lately. Temperatures ranging 18 to 25 degrees. Am gardening in the back of this place and on two 4 X 6 plots. Tomato plants, a few flowers, and enjoying it immensely. Fresh air and exercise (wonderful medicine). And I have the whole summer ahead! Lucky me!

Al is holding his own but has really slowed up in every way. Helps me as always whenever and however he can. Really a devoted husband and I keep trying to measure up. A better person than I when it comes to unswerving devotion. I'll keep trying, however. This is it for now, Michael. I'm tired and must rest a little. My prayers are with you in the coming weeks (re your thesis proposal). For all your hard work over so many years, I'm keeping my fingers crossed and my mind open. Take care and many thanks for your letters. They have played a large part in my excellent recovery to date. A million thanks. Love, Mom.

July 26, 2000

Dear Michael,

Just spoke to you and decided to get the cheque off. I've taken on a small job for Lion's Place. Doing some telephone surveying on the habits of aging seniors. They pay roughly \$8-\$10 per completed survey. Something to do. Also I find it interesting talking to people. Something I do best of all, Al says. I guess the aim is to find out the wants and needs and interests of seniors as they change.

Glad you're getting some summer weather. Hot and humid tonight. I can certainly put up with it as I know it lasts for such a short time. I feel good and keep learning what my limits are. Can live a long time, I feel, and certainly can enjoy many things. How lucky can one get! Am off to bed as I get up pretty early and am usually outside checking up on my tomatoes and flowers. Really enjoy growing things. Hope your wait doesn't last too much longer. Like being pregnant, don't you think? Must say goodnight. Love, Mom.

September 14, 2000

Dear Michael,

Surprise! I'm actually writing a letter. Just laziness, I think. The enclosed article is something I cut out of our paper. Al brought it to my attention and just left to get the book mentioned. He didn't give me a clear idea what he thought of it. But my opinion was the article is about the men themselves and not their ideas right or wrong, reasonable or unreasonable, logical or unlikely and to me that's what's important and not necessarily who they were. But I suppose that comes into the equation too. Not smart enough to figure it all out. Anyway, what do you think, Michael?

Am I correct in thinking perhaps this is what you're challenging? Boy, what a project!

I enjoy your letters immensely and am glad that, as you say, they are helpful in that you write of your state of mind. How nice to hear! I was always thinking how lucky I was to hear from you so regularly without very little effort on my part to return your gift.

Thought I'd take a basic computer course. Made arrangements and took a class but found the effort too much. The walk to and from the class, the stairs, sitting in class for an hour. Too much! My back acts up and practically leaves me useless for a day or two and in pain. Will have to do things at my own pace without deadlines, day-to-day activities, based on how I feel. I feel good when I do this – I guess listening to one's own body and state of mind.

Have enrolled though, once a week, in a class at Sherbrook Pool for Aquaside exercises. Probably will be helpful. We'll see. Supposed to be for heart patients.

Haven't seen much of anybody. Everyone back at school or university and all their activities. Ezra did come for lunch Monday between classes and will come regularly which will suit us fine. He's a great kid. Don't know about Gilly yet as she is sick at the moment with suspected "mono" (can't spell it) so not sure of her schedule as yet.

Lovely weather lately. Sunshine and cool crisp air. Nice for leisurely walks. Expect a letter from you today. Will leave this one open in case. Meanwhile, stay well and my thoughts are with you and the challenge that lies ahead. I know you can handle whatever life holds for you.

Lucky me. Your letter written on the 11th arrived this afternoon. Very interesting your thoughts about yourself and your father. I often wonder why he chose (maybe he didn't) to make choices that inevitably led to such an empty and loveless life especially when he once had it at his fingertips. Life, I think, is made up of a series of choices sometimes right, sometimes wrong. I know, in my own case, I've ended up a reasonably happy, loved and loving human being. All my experiences have helped guide me to this end, for which I'm grateful.

Am making cabbage buns today, waiting for my dough to rise. Too bad you're not here to have a few. Will make them when you come at Christmas. Al loves them, one of his favourites. Must sign off for now, Michael. Thanks again for your very interesting letters. Take care. Again will have a little rest and then start rolling out dough. The buns take hours to make but are worth it. Love, Mom.

January 27, 2001

Dear Michael,

This arrived yesterday in the mail so will forward it with a short note.

Had a little night call from Lola two nights ago telling me Ryle had flipped out and was talking and acting very weird. Thought he was headed this way as he had plane tickets for Winnipeg. However, we waited at this end but he didn't show and, as I said to Lola, they probably wouldn't have allowed him to board the plane in his condition anyway. Told her to do whatever it takes to get him into a hospital. With the help of a friend, she did manage that yesterday. Talked to her last night again and she said he was pathetic, crying and totally incoherent. The doctors at the emergency in Bellingham said it could be

some of the new drugs he's been issued. Prozac is one that can cause the symptoms Ryle is displaying. Lola said he yelled and screamed with so much agony she was relieved that they finally got him calmed down. I'll talk to her again tonight as she says she'll spend the day at the hospital. I'm staying calm but brings back memories of Sharon and her torturous times. But felt a bit better about her as I was always near by and felt I could help her cope with her pain at times. With Ryle, I feel helpless. I'm lucky I have Al to keep me steady.

Still cool here, damp and windy. Will go out for a short while to get a few groceries. Had Ezra for lunch Monday. Nice kid and easy to talk to. Also Bev Bagley came for a visit. I was baking. She wanted to go for lunch, so we made arrangements for this Wednesday. She always brings me some good reading. I think of her as a truly good friend.

This Friday will be going with Carla and Meka to a place outside of Minneapolis for a hockey tournament over the weekend. Looking forward to the trip and Carla and Meka's company.

That's about it, Michael. Thank you so much for your interesting letters. Always look forward to them. Take care. Love, Mom.

March 25, 2001

Dear Michael,

Don't get into a tizzy because of the cheque. Just a little something to let you know I'm proud of you and also to send congratulations for your perseverance and stick-to-itiveness. (Is there such a word?) Still very cold here and windy. Tricia's kids on mid-term break. Meka too, so I'll probably have a few sleepovers. No snow around, at least downtown, so it makes walking a lot easier for me. Hear of too many older people slipping and falling. Not for me! The hospital is the very last place I ever want to be again. So I'm pretty careful.

By the time you get this note, your conference will probably be over. Hope it proves successful, enlightening, and interesting. Certainly a challenge! Good for you. Will phone you Sunday. Love, Mom.
