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*Αδ. θανῆ γε μέντοι δυσκλεής, ὅταν θάνης.
Φε. κακῶς ἀκούειν οὐ μέλει θανόντι μοι.*

Admetos: Don't expect the world to praise you
when you die, if you ever do.

Pheres: What the hell do I care what people
say of me after I'm dead?

Euripides, *Alkestis*, lines 725–26
(translation by William Arrowsmith)

HONOR AND LEGACY

I recall vividly when I first heard the quotation on the facing page. It may have been the night I first imagined I might well spend my life studying ancient literature. The inimitable and deeply missed William Arrowsmith, whose translation I have used here, was giving the Ward Phillips Lectures at Notre Dame University and was at the moment mulling over the explosive generational quarrel at the center of Euripides' *Alkestis*. Arrowsmith pointed out how shocking to an ancient audience would have been the verbal savaging of a father (Pheres) by his son (Admetos), and added that Pheres too, in the words cited for this piece, morally exposes himself in the end as thoughtless and without honor. I wanted to concur at once with Arrowsmith's words, knowingly and wholeheartedly; but, like a newborn endowed with huge ears, I would have to grow into them. The truth was that I only sort of knew or felt it mattered what people would make of me after I'm gone. Sticks and stones and all that; and if names can't hurt me now, how can they hurt me later? It was a good question, and one to which I have given only occasional thought in the intervening years.

Now, thirty-five years later, I read the concluding words of Bob Woodward's current best-seller, *Plan of Attack*. Asked what he thinks people, history, will say of him after he's gone, President George W. Bush shrugs and answers simply, "We'll all be dead." I find myself shocked like an ancient Greek audience. These are shameless, dishonorable words. But why? I suddenly remember Arrowsmith and Pheres. I focus on the "we." Is this the "royal" we, or a reference to his inner circle? Regardless, I know that it fails to include my children and yours, our grandchildren, and their grandchildren. This presidential "we" is too small, not only for a head of state but also for a head of family, for anyone in

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fact. And when we think small, we think without honor, without responsibility. The reason why it matters what people in the future will say of us is that they will be the ones to endure or enjoy the consequences of what we do or fail to do. They alone will recognize our footprints, our lingering fragrance or stench. They will pay our debts. They alone will know the truth about us, our worth; and not to care about all that is indeed shameful.

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