# Intercession

# John Updike

THE DROUGHT that had fallen on all Connecticut that summer fostered illusions. In the burned landscape of orange grass, the little red flags were hard to see, and the watered putting greens seemed hallucinatory ponds. Workmen were straightening the road nearby; rose-colored dust from the construction drifted across the first fairway. A road builder tried to wave Paul on. Paul shifted into second by way of defiance and racily cut in front of a truck bearing a pointed hill of blue spalls and continued in this loud gear a distance up the road that was not being improved.

He parked the car well over on the shoulder and lifted the borrowed bag of clubs from the back seat by the strap, inexpertly, so that the weight of their heads nearly spilled the clubs into the weeds that grew at the edge of the right of way. He was new to the game of golf in all its aspects. His wife’s uncle had initiated him less than two weeks ago. On most of the days since, Paul had dutifully spent some time batting hollow, perforated practice balls back and forth on his own lawn. Their stunted flight was, very quickly, unsatisfying. You could not improve beyond a point; half the shots went straight, humming a little, and the rest dribbled off obliquely. Only on a golf course, with real distances and solid balls, could his prowess be measured. Nevertheless his wife had looked amazed when, after lunch, he threw her uncle’s clubs into the car and left her alone with the house and child. He wrote the plot of a syndicated adventure strip, so she was used to having him home all day.

Inside a white clapboard shed, one entire side of which was painted with the figures 85¢, an old fat dark woman sat brooding like a prophetess, and a bin of soft drinks gave off with peculiar pungency the chemical odor of refrigeration. “You’re alone,” she told Paul, and sold him a scorecard and pencil. Above her head hung stroboscopic posters of Gene Sarazan and Dr. Cary Middlecoff. On another wall a gray cardboard chart demonstrated the progress of a defunct tournament. By the light of this sibyl’s eyes Paul suddenly felt that the shape of his heart was clumsily visible, as if behind bathroom glass. Doing anything in public for the first time—carving a roast, taking communion, buying a tuxedo—made the front wall of his chest feel fragile and thin. He didn’t dare ask her where the first tee was; he left the shed and walked uncertainly around it.

As he emerged from behind the far corner a man not five yards away checked his swing and stared. Apologetically humpbacked, Paul scuttled, with a bobble of clubs, across the man’s line of drive and took a place obsequiously far behind him. The man was freckled and iron-haired, except for red eyebrows; these stood out from his forehead like car-door handles. The gray hair furring the back of his neck in tiny controlled tufts led without sharp transition into a fuzzy cap, tactfully checkered, Scots in accent, its visor too short to shade his eyes except at noon. With one gloved and one bare hand he gripped a beautifully pale wood. Paul wondered what made sandy men so smug. Blond women were the same; these Paul could pardon, but not this old fop. With a swing as lucid and calm as the legendary perfect circle that Giotto in one brush stroke drew to win a commission, the Scotsman sent the ball deep into the fairway, within easy chipping of the green. His face was vacant, his soul flying with the ball. Then, so gently he might have been hooding a falcon, he fitted the golden head of his club with a chamois cover, and replaced the club in a bag on wheels, and pulled this cart after himself.

Paul took some considered swings at the puff of a dandelion. A potent repose, he imagined, was building in him. As the distant Scotsman took his iron shot, Paul planted a white tee in the patch of clay. When he straightened up, a tall kid with bony brown arms was standing close by. Though he had not noticed the boy before, Paul promptly said, “I guess you’re ahead of me.”

“I believe so.” The niceness of the boy’s diction combined oddly with his basketball sneakers.

“O.K. Go ahead.”

“Shall we go around together?”

Paul was flattered to think that the boy had mistaken him for near his own age. He was greedy about looking young; at twenty-six, he looked twenty-three and wanted to look eighteen. “Thanks a lot, but you’d better go ahead. I’m pretty lousy.”

Paul expected the protests an adult would have made, but the boy simply believed him, saying, “All right,” with a monkeyish nod. “Thank you.” The front of his T-shirt, bearing the faded name of Alsace High School, hung as limp as wash from his shoulders. He turned to business; his arms above the elbow seemed no wider than the bone. With a huge loose swing the kid sliced the ball high over the road, the workmen, and the cloud of pink dust, into the yard of a stucco house. “They can keep it,” he announced sneeringly to nobody and teed up again. This time, he both hooked and topped; the ball streamed through the green grass near a watering hose, began to bounce rapidly when it hit a scorched area, and leaped a narrow drainage ditch. Paul regretted that he had not accepted the invitation. The kid, huffing indignantly through his nose, fetched yet another ball from the pocket of his bag. His third try went straight and far.

“Couldn’t be better,” Paul offered.

“Yes, it could.” The kid smiled at him with an unaccountable condescension, considering the performance he had just put on. “But I will accept it.”

“That’s good of you.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Still, Paul was so annoyed that, when his turn finally came, he pressed. The ball followed the route of the kid’s second try: through the grass to his left, over the ditch, into the second fairway, which lay parallel to the first, going the other way. The elegant Scotsman was poised on the second tee. As Paul crossed over he could see the tiny figure against the trees check his swing.

Playing alone did not make for calmness. Rather, the lack of any witness but the sun’s steady eye induced panic. Paul hurried, though there was no one behind him. He left lost balls lying in the underbrush and impatiently picked up disgraceful putts. He felt guilty, guilty about the most innocent things—about leaving his wife alone in the house for a few hours, about not working all day long like other men, about having grown up at all and married and left his parents alone together in Ohio, about being all by himself in this great kingdom of withered turf. The very volumes of air insecurely fenced by the multiple shifting horizons of the rolling course seemed freighted with guilt, pressing his ball down, making it fly crazy. His progress across the course became a jumbled rout. The fourth hole asked that you clear a tangled dry marsh, and the fifth, attacked from a tee that was a rubber mat beneath a plum tree, was out of sight over a crest, where the grass, never shaded, had turned a desolate salmon color and matted into the dirt. A weathered pink flag marked the place to aim at. Walking after his mediocre drive, he noticed, thirty yards to his right, a second pink flag, and when he descended into the shallow valley where the putting green had been laid, the flag in the hole said 7. He had skipped two holes. The approach to 5 had been to his right, and the approach to 6 must be intertwined somewhere, perhaps behind those spruces. The high-school kid, hitting a different ball at every third stride, was coming up behind him. “How’re you doing?” he called.

“Awful,” Paul answered.

“Stupid,” the boy said to his ball as it skipped off the far edge of the green. He dropped another at his feet and swung more gingerly, with better success. He dropped a third and came within inches of the cup. “You better get wise,” he told it.

Caught between the kid and the Scotsman, Paul had to keep going. The backs of his calves ached. His left thumb threatened to blister, and squinting into the sun had pinched his forehead. Paul didn’t expect his body to turn querulous; not long ago it had accompanied him without complaint on any exertion, as forgiving and tireless as a dog at his heels. The Scotsman was setting out from the ninth tee, a little ziggurat by an elm. Paul slumped to the bench there. He glanced skyward to measure the day and noticed, on gauzy cirrus clouds near the sun, the explicable but eerie phenomenon of iridescence—a faint circular rainbow. The distant machines constructing the road made, all together, a squeaking, cranking noise.

The kid joined him. “What’s your score?”

“I haven’t kept it. I can’t count that high.”

“I never keep score on the first nine. My father told me, Don’t bother. Just concentrate on getting tuned in. That’s what I do.” He whirled a club around and stared Byronically into an apple tree. “Do you know how many holes of golf I play every day? How many do you guess?”

“Six,” Paul said.

“Forty-five or even fifty-four. One day I played seventy-two. How many do you play usually?”

“Hardly any. I just started. These aren’t even my clubs—I borrowed them.”

“Want to go around the next nine with me?”

The quaint precision of the boy’s diction, which was what Paul remembered most vividly of his earlier invitation, had relaxed somewhat. His chubby tanned face, cheerful and fat-lipped below the eyes, was betrayed by the nervously moist brown eyes, and the prominent cupped ears. Studying the boy, Paul’s eyes became those of another kid, and he recognized that his companion was generally disliked. At that age, braggarts always are, but they don’t know how to stop. Paul had been stupid to see nothing unhappy in a youngster playing golf by himself all day like a retired banker. The boy’s home, a glance at his glossy new clubs confirmed, was prosperous and fond, the type whose chaste, conceited, unpopular children poke around libraries and luncheonettes and have hobbies intensely and never quite hear the drum.

“Sure,” Paul said, “but I warn you—I’m really poor.” He wondered about the boy’s age. Height told nothing any more. Paul guessed fifteen at the oldest; his elbows were so broad, and he was so bluntly eager to go first, so sure it was an advantage.

The kid stared down at the ninth green, which seemed shorter than the two hundred yards advertised. “I have to be careful,” the kid said. “I usually overshoot this one.” But, though he tried twice, he did not. “Well,” he pronounced, “not too rotten. See if you can get on.”

Paul laughed; such frank competition tickled him. This age was so grainy, so coarse. How coarse he did not remember until he sliced his ball into an apple tree and was unable to find it among the fallen fruit. The kid found it for him and shouted, “Boy, do you have great eyesight!” and, pinching his nostrils, cried for the world to hear, “Peeyew!”

Together they returned to the first tee. Paul had decided the secret was to make believe he was swinging at a hollow ball, casually, in his own yard. Though his drive was less good than the kid’s, his approach was close, and he chipped on in three. By this time, the kid had several balls to play. Relieved at his fair showing, Paul felt friendly enough to confess, “Now, if I could putt I’d have a par. But I can’t putt.”

“Let’s see you.”

“It’s your honor. I’m closer.”

“Go ahead. I want to see you put the ball right in. What’s your grip?”

“It’s nothing. Just a grip.”

“O.K. now, just swing naturally. You’re less than six feet away. A stinking baby could do it blindfolded.”

Tense, Paul pushed too weakly, and the slant of the green dragged the ball off to the right.

“Look,” the kid said, “be natural. You know how I putt? I’m just natural.” He scrunched into an arabesque and, his hands braced against his belt, switched the club awkwardly. “And then just naturally put it in,” he said, “bingo, like that. Look at me. I just step up to the ball”—Paul’s now. “I’m not afraid. I just look at the hole, take a natural grip, and … bingo!”

As the kid led the way over a path through trees that were, with the heat and the insects, already starting to drop leaves, he said, “I got two fours on that hole. What did you get?”

“I suppose five. You sank my putt for me.”

“We’ll call it a five.”

“If I’d sunk my own putt, I’d have had a four,” Paul said.

“You want to hear some of my scores? Thirty-three on one round. Thirty-five another time. Seventy-two and seventy-three on one day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. You know how long I’ve been playing? Guess.”

“Seven years,” Paul said.

“Eleven days.”

“Really? You’re very good, for eleven days.”

“I like the game,” the kid said. “I don’t like it as much as fishing, but next to fishing I guess I like it best.”

“You like fishing? Isn’t it dull?”

“Dull, listen—there isn’t a sport you can say that less of.”

“Is it a sport? I think of a sport as taking skill and fishing just a lot of sitting,” Paul said.

“Trout fishing? Are you kidding? Marlin fishing? Listen, there’s nothing more skillful, believe me. Ted Williams is the most skillful baseball batter there is, and he’s only a fair fisherman.”

“I thought he was pretty good.”

“Yeah. That’s what the sportswriters say.”

“Well, he probably isn’t much good at shot-putting, either,” Paul said.

“There’s no comparison between those two things.”

They crossed a little wooden bridge and came to the second tee. Paul asked, “Who goes first?”

“You can. Go ahead.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. It’s your honor. You got two fours and I only got a feeble five.”

“Go ahead. I want to study your swing.”

To the right of the tee, for perhaps a city block, were woods. Paul arranged his hands, squeezed, bent his left knee, inhaled, and kept his eye so intently on the sphere of dimpled rubber that the intervening air seemed to petrify. Like a bird escaping, his swing fluttered through his hands. The mathematics of the parts had felt perfect, yet, in sum, the drive sliced into the woods, ricocheting forever into the frothy green depths.

“You know what you do? You use your wrists too much. Use your arms. Here—let me see your grip. Is that it? Ugh. Now what’s your thumb doing all the way over here? You going to be a contortionist or something when you grow up? Look how I hold it—natural. Be natural. Who taught you to stick your thumb down there? You’re going to get a blister.”

“My wife’s uncle said, to keep the face of the club from turning.” The fact was out: he had a wife. A little freeze of surprise did perhaps catch at the kid’s features for a second, but immediately he recovered and went on the attack again.

“Who’s her uncle? A golf pro?”

“No, he just plays a lot.”

“Boy, all these people with their crackpot systems. You listen to all of them, you’ll go nuts. My father, and a guy he plays with who’s pretty near a pro, he’s as good as a pro, he was second in a tournament three years ago that was nearly statewide—they say just take a natural grip and pay no attention to everybody’s weird systems.” He teed up and said, “Swing nice and easy, with your arms pretty stiff. Like this.” But the double load of talking and showing was too much for him, and his ball, topped, skittered thirty yards down the burnt-out fairway. He turned and said to Paul, “That’s your way. This is my way.” His second drive was beautiful and long. “Now. Which way is better, your way or my way?”

“Your way.”

“O.K.” With a touching clownish grin, the kid bowed from the waist. “Never argue with Professor Shaw.”

“All right,” Paul said. “Which is better: your way”—he pointed into the woods, where he had driven his first ball—“or my way?” Paul had primitive faith; he really believed that, having thus committed himself, he would be rescued. During the moment after impact it seemed true, for the connection had felt solid, but while they watched, the ball, high as an airplane and piloted from within, curved more and more to the left and finally fell on the bank of ragweed and thistle near the road. The workmen had gone, their day done.

Professor Shaw said, “That’s good?” and walked off down the center of the fairway, retrieving his topped ball on the way, without looking back. Perhaps Paul’s having a wife had scared him after all.

Paul had expected him to ask, “What do you do?”

The answer would be, “I think up the plot for a comic strip called Brace Larsen.”

The boy’s face would be blank.

“One of the Hartford papers carries it.”

“You just think up the story and let somebody else draw the pictures?”

Imagining this conversation while walking along with the dry grass in his eyes and the strap of the golf bag irritating his shoulder, Paul was losing patience. “That’s right. I wanted to draw when I was a kid but the syndicate bought my ideas for this other guy to do up. They say anybody can execute; it’s ideas that are rare.”

Yet the boy’s face would retain, clear as day, Paul’s own conviction as a child that ideas were nothing and the actual drawing all that counted.

He was gone from the third tee when Paul reached it. It was a very short hole, 115 yards, backed by maples and flanked by fruit trees; the kid was walking toward the green, well to one side. Paul shouted, “Whajja get, Professor?” There was no answer. The strangeness of the illusion that the warps of the course had confronted him with himself of ten years ago had obscured the plain fact that he did not really like the kid—the fat-lipped, daddy-loving brat. To be patronized and then evaded by a minor offended Paul’s dignity as taxpayer, as husband, as father of a daughter to whom he was half the world, and as the creator of a plot which appeared in seventy-eight newspapers including one in Hawaii. It struck him as especially unjust, this daily extension of himself halfway across the Pacific yoked to this childish snub. Too annoyed to arrange his feet, Paul swung a mashie powerfully and with a start of pride and alarm that swelled his throat saw the ball coming down right on top of the kid. “Jesus, look out!” he called. The boy turned and threw up an arm as if shielding his eyes from the sun, and remained in that pose some seconds. Either Paul’s eyes lied or the ball passed right through his body. Heaven protected fools.

When he got there, Shaw was among the maples, looking. Dappled by shade, the planes of his face had the innocent frowning bluntness of an animal’s.

Paul said, “Gee, I’m sorry. I damn near killed you.”

“You didn’t even come close. Boy, are you wild.” Paul liked the idea of his being wild. It was a long-lost kind of companionship, poking around together in dead leaves and the roots of brush. “I got a three on each of the last two holes,” Shaw announced pleasantly. “This might be one of my better rounds.”

“That’s wonderful. Hey, you needn’t bother to hunt. The thing only cost thirty-five cents.”

“What was the name on it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was it Wilson?”

“I don’t know. I doubt it.”

“I just found a Wilson. I guess it’s mine if it’s not yours. Was yours new?”

“Not terribly.”

“This makes three I’ve found today. A lot of these rich guys, they don’t even bother.”

They searched a bit longer. Paul, certain that what the boy had pocketed was what he was looking for, angrily smashed at small green plants and split young saplings by bringing his club down on their fork.

“I give up,” he said. “Let’s go on. This leaves me one goddamn ball.”

Professor Shaw glanced at him, somewhat offended by the swearing. “I can sell you a couple,” he offered seriously. Paul disdained to answer.

At the fourth tee, the kid flubbed one into the marsh and teed up a second time and got across.

“If at first you don’t succeed,” Paul said, “try, try again.”

“Huh?” He had, of course, heard. The boy’s face went slack with such distinct fright that Paul momentarily relented, and addressed the ball. All he wanted was that his drive be perfect; it was very little to ask. If miracles, in this age of faint faith, could enter anywhere, it would be here, where the causal fabric was thinnest, in the quick collisions and abrupt deflections of a game. Paul drove high but crookedly over the treetops. It dismayed him to realize that the angle of a metal surface striking a rubber sphere counted for more with God than the keenest human hope.

“Boy, you’ll never find that,” the kid said. This time he didn’t help Paul hunt. The ball must have landed in a breadth of desiccated swamp on the other side of the trees. The mud of the swamp, in drying, had cracked in neat rectangles; the weeds were filmed with dust that ballooned upward at a blow. As Paul circled, his ankles gathered burrs. His thumb hurt; his face burned with sun and shame. Panic added its own blush; it was late, he should be home, he had no business here, he must hurry. That had been his last ball. He floundered to the edge of the short grass, reaching for his wallet—he would buy a couple of balls from the kid—and saw a white speck yards away, high and clear on a brown slope. He was so sure he had played into the swamp that it was several seconds before the feeling of the ball’s placement in space being miraculous wore off. He went up to it, and it was absolutely his own. A Maxfli with a smile in it. His faith surged back. He had outplayed the boy here; he was, when you came right down to it, the better golfer, being the older man, a resident of real life.

“I found it!” he called to Professor Shaw, who was walking past, on his way to the fifth tee.

“Why’d you bring it out so far?”

“I didn’t bring it out. This is where it was. It cleared everything.”

“I got another three on that hole.”

“Well, who the hell couldn’t get a three if they took as many chances as you do? Hell, all you do is take about nine shots and then count the only three that are any good. If you played according to any rules, a stinking baby could beat you. I could beat you.”

For the first time, the boy laughed; his teeth gleamed like the rims of two cups, but his averted eyes showed he had taken the wound. “I was demonstrating to you,” he weakly said.

Now Paul laughed. “Look,” he said. “I’ll bet you a dollar a hole I can beat you. If you play according to the rules I’ll put up a dollar of mine against a beat-up golf ball of yours on every hole. That’s five dollars you can make. Holes five, six, seven, eight, and nine.” He pulled out his wallet.

The boy was standing far enough away so that they had to shout across the intervening space; his image shimmied as a wave of heat came off the ground. His voice came: “Keep your money.”

“You’re afraid,” Paul told him. “Rotten a player as I am, you know I’ll beat you.”

“No,” the boy said in a strained voice and began walking.

“I’ll catch up!” Paul shouted. “Easy money, Professor!” He waved the wallet above his head, but the boy wouldn’t look.

Paul chipped onto the green and hastily putted twice. On the fifth tee, beneath the plum tree, looking across toward the two pink flags, ivy red in the rays of the declining sun, Paul felt exalted and certain. The kid, a burnished and melancholy stick figure, passed in front of the far flag, and Paul aimed for the double image. Socked flatly, the ball floated for a great distance in a leftward sweep and never rose, it seemed, six feet off the ground. That he had hooked did not diminish his conviction that he was destined to give his opponent a deserved trouncing. The ball bounced once in the open and, as if a glass arm from Heaven had reached down and grabbed it, vanished. His eyes marked the exact spot in the air where it had disappeared.

He walked there. The scarcely sloping land where his ball should have been was unmarked by a bush or tree or ditch; on this table of stricken grass any hint of white would have glared. There was nothing. Heaven protected fools.

Hardly aware that he had made a decision, Paul shifted the bag of clubs on his aching shoulder and walked toward the road, where his dusty car waited. It was almost dinnertime; the little girl would be in the tub, gurgling in glee at Daddy’s return.

He had never seen the fifth green of this little course, and inadvertently pictured it as paradisiacal—broad-leaved trees, long-tailed birds, the cry of water. Professor Shaw might wonder why his new buddy failed to appear over the rise, but kids accept things easily; they haven’t lived long enough to be sure of what’s customary. Paul pictured himself at that age with disgust, as if holding a grub in his hand. The abandoned road-building machines stood among piles of dirt like beasts paleontologists had uncovered. In all the landscape no human being was visible, and a fatiguing curse seemed laid on everything. Damned game.