College of Arts & Sciences
Faculty Excellence Award
Application Form

Name: Peter Selgin
Rank: Assistant Professor of English / Creative Writing
Department: English & Rhetoric
College: Arts & Sciences
Years at Georgia College prior to academic year 2016-17: Four (four)
Tenured: ✔ No Yes If yes, when:

Award applying for:

	Excellence in Teaching Award
✔	Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavors Award
	Excellence in University Service
	Excellence in Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Award

GEORGIA COLLEGE
GEORGIA'S PUBLIC LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY
College of Arts and Sciences

Department of English and Rhetoric
Campus Box 44
Milledgeville, Georgia 31061-0490
Phone (478) 445-4581
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11/21/2016

Dear Dean Procter:

I would like to nominate Peter Selgin for the 2016-2017 College of Arts & Sciences Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Award. His record of achievement during the past two years has been exemplary, and I believe the committee will enjoy and appreciate seeing what he's accomplished. Peter is currently a tenure track assistant professor of English, and he has not been previously nominated for this award.

My initial impulse to normative Peter for this award is the publication of his book, *The Inventors: A Memoir*, which was published by Hawthorne Books in April, 2016. *The Inventors: A Memoir* has received national attention and brought recognition to Georgia College; Peter's book has been reviewed in *Brevity*, *The Colorado Review*, *Library Journal*, *The Rumpus*, *Fiction Arcade*, and *Kirkus*, to name a few of the venues. I could easily provide many comments filled with praise, but here are just two that speak to the book's merits: "The Inventors is a book destined to become a modern classic…A remarkable model of the art of the memoir, this book will satisfy all readers. Highly recommended," *Library Journal*; "What is refreshing about literary memoirs like Peter Selgin's is how they transform the reader through writing and self-invention. *The Inventors* is a sensitive examination of how friends and family are responsible for inventing a person," *Fiction Advocate*.

During the past two academic years, Peter has had to be on book tour for *The Inventors*, and while doing this and maintaining the highest quality of instruction in the classroom, he's had shorter work anthologized. "Mr. Fresh and the Meaning of Life," appeared in the anthology *Thank You, Teacher*, published by the New World Library in April, 2016. "From a Paris Notebook," appeared in the anthology *Paris Anthology*, published by Serving House Books in Fall, 2015. And of equal significance and importance, Peter has published 5 new essays during the past two years: "The Strange Case of Arthur Silz, *Gettysburgh Review*, Oct. 2016; "Noise," *Bellevue Literary Review*, Fall, 2016; "Barber," *Madcap Review*, April, 2016; "Swimming with Oliver," *Colorado Review*, Spring, 2016, and "S - - t," *The Manifest Station*, February, 2015.

In addition, Peter has been writing and publishing reviews, and critical and craft essays: "Truth & Delight," *Brevity* online, January, 2017; "On the Pleasures of Not Writing," *Brevity* blog, online, Fall, 2016; "A (Plot) Twist in the River," *Poets & Writers*, December, 2016; and "Writing vs. Painting," *Brevity* online, April 2016.

What all of this signifies is that Peter leads an exemplary literary life; you can walk by his office on

almost any morning, and the door will be open, welcoming students if they have a question about a story or an essay or any prose form, and fellow faculty members always know they can stop by if they wish to talk. Peter is also always writing, though, and this demonstrates a rare discipline that few professors can uphold.

I nominate Peter with the highest level of enthusiasm; his work during the last two years exemplifies excellence in scholarship and creative endeavors. Please don't hesitate to contact me (478-457-7627) if you have any questions about his candidacy.

Sincerely,

Allen R. Gee, Ph.D.
Professor of English
Acting Coordinator, Creative Writing Program
allen.gee@gcsu.edu

College of Arts & Sciences Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Activities Award
Applicant: Peter Selgin, Assistant Professor of English / Creative Writing
CREATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS 2014 – PRESENT

PUBLISHED WORKS:

"Truth & Delight," *Brevity* online, (forthcoming) January 2017

"A (Plot) Twist in the River," *Poets & Writers,* December 2016

"On the Pleasures of Not Writing," *Brevity* blog, online, Fall 2016

"The Strange Case of Arthur Silz," *Gettysburg Review,* Oct. 2016

"Noise," *Bellevue Literary Review,* Fall 2016

The Inventors: A Memoir (book), Hawthorne Books and Literary Arts, April 2016

"Mr. Fesh and the Meaning of Life," *Thank You, Teacher* (anthology)
Holly Holbert, Editor, New World Library, April 2016

"Barber," *Madcap Review,* April 2016

"Writing vs. Painting," *Brevity* (online)*,* April 2016

"Swimming with Oliver," *Colorado Review,* Vol. 43, Spring 2016

"From a Paris Notebook," *Paris Anthology* (anthology)
Jessie Vail Aufiery, Walter Cummins, editors, Serving House Books, Fall 2015

"S - - t," *The Manifest Station,* February 2015

"My New York: A Romance in Eight Parts," *Best American Travel Writing 2014* (anthology)
Guest Editor: Paul Theroux; Series Editor: Jason Wilson, Houghton Mifflin, 2014

AWARDS & CITATIONS:

Best Books of 2016 / Honorable Mention, *Library Journal,* Dec. 2016

Pushcart Nomination, Colorado Review Editors, "Swimming with Oliver," Dec. 2016

Semi-Finalist: Big Moose Prize, Black Lawrence Press, *The Water Master,* May 2016

Semi-Finalist: Big Moose Prize, Black Lawrence Press, *The Water Master,* April 2015

Second Place, AWP Award for Creative Nonfiction, *The Inventors, a Memoir,* June 2014

"My New York: A Romance in Eight Parts," Best Notable Essay, *Best American Essays 2014* (John Jeremiah Sullivan: Guest Editor), 2014

PANELS & SEMINARS:

Speaking of the Dead: Craft & Ethics in Nonfiction, Panel Moderator, AWP,
Washington D.C., (forthcoming), February 2017

Celebrating the Craft of Memoir, Panelist, Thirsty Tome Literary Lecture Series,
University of North Carolina, Wilmington, (forthcoming), August 2016

Beginnings, Seminar/Lecture, Augusta Literary Festival, Augusta GA, March 2016

Let the Body Speak: Sex in Literary Nonfiction, AWP Minneapolis, April 2015
The Research Behind the Writing, AWP Minneapolis, April 2015
A Matter of Perspective: Painting & Writing, Antioch University, June 2014
Telling it All, Boundaries in Creative Nonfiction, AWP Seattle, March 2014
"What Can and Will Go Wrong," Antioch University, December 2014

READINGS:

Lost Keys Literary Festival, Macon GA, (forthcoming) October 2016
Literary Guild of St. Simons Island, (forthcoming) September 2016
Vroman's Bookstore, Pasadena CA, June 2016
Green Apple Bookstore, San Francisco CA, June 2016
Chaucer's Books, Santa Barbara CA, June 2016
Book Passages, Corte Madera CA, June 2016
Powell's Books, Portland OR, June 2016
Elliott Bay Bookstore, Seattle WA, June 2016
Byrd's Books, Bethel CT, May 2016
Hudson Valley Writer's Center, Sleepy Hollow NY, May 2016
Porter Square Books, Cambridge MA, May 2016
Kramerbooks & Afterwords Cafe, Washington D.C., May 2016
New Dominion Bookstore, Charlottesville VA, May 2016
Park Road Books, Charlotte NC, May 2016
Malaprop's Bookstore, Asheville SC, May 2016
Pomegranate Books, Wilmington NC, May 2016
Good Karma Yoka Center, Milledgeville GA May 2016
Blue Bicycle Books, Charleston S.C., April 2016
Avid Bookstore, Athens GA, April 2016
Night Blooming Serious, Staged Play Reading, GCSU, November 2014

COMPLETED MANUSCRIPTS: (note: dates shown are dates of completion)

"Duplicity" (novel-in-progress; 61,000 words complete): in-progress
"The Water Master" (novel; complete at 81,750 words; under submission) August 2016
"In the Beginning: A Book of First Pages" (nonfiction/craft; 95,800 words; under submission), February 2016
"The Kuhreinen Melody," (essay collection; complete at 97,000 words); May 2016
"The Opening Credits of Rebel Without a Cause" (essay); January 2014
"Dolphin Dreams" (short fiction); September 2016
"Night Blooming Serious," (play – revised); September 2014
"The Painter of Grounds," (short fiction); August 2014

Reflective Statement: Writing & Authenticity

Topping the stack of books on a table next to my bed (where I read as much as I sleep): *Hocus Bogus (Pseudo, 1976),* the memoir of schizophrenic author "Émile Ajar," who never existed: he was the invention of Romain Gary, who, under that name, wrote *The Life Before Us (La vie devant soi),* the best-selling French novel of the 20th century. The novel won the Prix Goncourt for its author. Good for Ajar; not so good for Gary, who had already won that prize that could only be won once. To satisfy a public clamoring to know more about this bold new author, Gary produced his faux confession, perpetrating one of the great literary hoaxes.

Hocus Bogus confronts us directly with the question of authenticity—a question that, to my mind, is central to judging any work of art, especially works of literature, where subjectivity and ambiguity play such important roles, and where words like "truth" and "reality" are too ill-defined or personal to allow for any consensus. As writers—not just of fiction, but of memoirs, personal essays, and other forms of creative nonfiction, we define and construct our own "realities," we make our own "truths" out of words. If this amounts to lying, it's a special kind of lie: the lie that (to paraphrase Picasso) "tells the truth." But great writing never really lies. One way or another, though it may not attain it, it reaches for the truth. Through its mendacity, *Hocus Bogus* exposed the greater mendacity of the publishing world, and the reading public's obsession with the cult of personality and authors' identities. It was a lie that told the truth.

How to achieve authenticity? It's a question I always ask on the first day of any class. If "reality" and "truth" are too subjective, and "authenticity" is all that we can agree upon, how to achieve it on the page? What choices do we make? These aren't just questions that I ask my students; whenever I sit down to write, I ask myself the same questions. Given the choice between two words, what makes one word more "authentic"? Does my protagonist "glance" at his wristwatch, or does she "look" at it? Does my protagonist wear suspenders, or a belt? It matters. The imagination rarely lies, but our lazy minds lie to us constantly, they feed us stereotypes and clichés and other forms of received wisdom; they grab pre-processed words and wisdom from the convenience store shelf (next to the soda and chips), and fling them on the page. To fend them off the clichés and lies we have to work hard; we have to question our choices.

Nothing is easier than flinging words onto the page; nothing is harder than making them ring with authority and authenticity. Accessing the depths of imagination and intuition (where, thanks to a lack of light and oxygen, clichés don't tend to survive) is a first step, but only a first step. From there conscious craft takes over. This is what I've learned as one who writes, and is what I teach writing.

Whether I'm writing, or teaching in the classroom, or reading a student's work, the question of authenticity forms the common denominator of all three activities. In this way my writing informs my teaching, and my teaching informs my writing. This is why, for me, it's so important to keep writing: so when I walk into the classroom, or in critiquing a students' work, I do so as a fellow writer, as one who, along with my students, struggles daily to achieve that devoutly-to-be-wished-for objective: authenticity on the page.

Peter Selgin is
a born writer,
capable of taking
any subject and
exploring it from
a new angle,
with wit, grace,
and erudition.
OLIVER SACKS

The Inventors

a memoir

PETER SELGIN

INTRODUCTION BY Lidia Yuknavitch
Author of *The Chronology of Water*

Praise for Peter Selgin

The Inventors

- **Finalist: Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize**
- **Finalist: Graywolf Press Prize for Nonfiction**
- **Finalist: AWP Award Series for Creative Nonfiction**

In *The Inventors,* Peter Selgin unrolls the blueprint of his life, investigating how two men – his father and a charismatic middle-school teacher – helped create the man he is today. Lyrical, honest and (dare I say?) inventive, The Inventors is a deeply compelling meditation on how we make and remake ourselves throughout our lives – choice by action, word by glorious, slippery word.

GAYLE BRANDEIS, author of *The Book of Dead Birds*

***The Inventors* is a philosophical memoir that grapples with some of the questions regarding how we invent ourselves and how we in turn are invented by others, particularly by our mentors. Thanks to Selgin's autobiographical candor and the vivid details of his telling, these puzzles of identity seem as fresh, engaging, and befuddling as they were when they first bubbled to the surface of our thinking. A smart, tender, compelling book.**

BILLY COLLINS, author of *Aimless Love*

Peter Selgin writes brilliantly about our mindfulness and forgetting – the necessary inventions and reinventions that help us live. The lies of his father and his eighth-grade teacher inevitably enter into this intricate portrait of inner and outer selves. As he inhabits their action, talk, and thought, he teaches and fathers himself. In language most rare for its transparency, Mr. Selgin reminds his readers of the difference between artifice and the genuine. In these remarkable pages, he has become one of the truest of our writers.

CAROL FROST, author of *Honeycomb*

Peter Selgin's *The Inventors* is brilliant, brave and compelling and inventive all at once. This is an intimately intimate rendering not just of Selgin's coming-of-age, but indeed of his rebirth into a new life of cognitive thought, of making sense of a perplexing world, of inventing out of blood and abstract ideas and hidden histories who, exactly, he is. This is an intelligent and moving book, a gorgeous book, an important book.

BRET LOTT, author of *Dead Low Tide*

Peter Selgin's *The Inventors* is a remarkable study in remembering, in empathy, and most of all in reckoning.

KYLE MINOR, author of *Praying Drunk*

I have never read anything like *The Inventors*, Peter Selgin's incomparable, brilliant, and achingly human memoir. With this deceptively simple story of the author's relationships with two self-invented figures – his father and an influential teacher – and with his own younger self – Selgin has produced a deep-core sample of the human condition. Like William Blake, he finds a whole world in a few grains of sand. He has shown, in language remarkably beautiful and accessible, how we are invented, by the people who profess to love and care for us and by our complicit selves. I was profoundly moved reading this book, by its deep intelligence, its constantly sweet, knowing humor, and the recognition in it of myself and everyone I have ever loved.

PETER NICHOLS, author of *The Rocks* and *A Voyage for Madmen*

This story is about what we make and how we make it. Selves, lives, love stories, life stories, death stories. It is also the story of how creation and destruction are always the other side of each other. And like the lyrical language so gorgeously invented in this book that it nearly killed me, its meanings are endlessly in us. Writers live within language, and so in some ways, you might say we are at the epicenter.

LIDIA YUKNAVITCH, author of *The Chronology of Water* and *The Small Backs of Children*

Drowning Lessons

- University of Georgia Press, 2008
- Winner, 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction
- Finalist: Iowa Short Fiction Award
- Finalist: Jefferson Press Prize
- Finalist: Ohio State University Press Prize

Thank goodness for Peter Selgin, who shares with us the mysteries of the human heart in this electric, revealing collection.

BENJAMIN PERCY, author of *Refresh, Refresh*

A stellar collection deserving recognition.

MELISSA PRITCHARD, author of *Late Bloomer*

Drowning Lessons is a book that deserves serious attention from all lovers of American short fiction.

JESS ROW, author of *The Train to Lo Wu*

Drowning Lessons is an extraordinary book; Selgin's writing creates a current that will carry readers farther than they would ever have expected and leave them on a new shore.

HANNAH TINTI, author of *Animal Crackers*

Life Goes to the Movies

- Finalist: AWP Award Series for the Novel
- Finalist: James Jones First Novel Fellowship

An utterly absorbing novel. A wonderful read.

MARGOT LIVESEY, author of *The House on Fortune Street*

From beginning to end, I kept imagining the funnels of smoke that surely must have risen from his keyboard as he wrote this potent, superbly crafted, and wonderfully ambitious novel.

DONALD RAY POLLOCK, author of *Knockemstiff*

Wonderfully innovative and elegantly crafted, *Life Goes to the Movies* brims with exuberance and wit.

FREDERICK REIKEN, author of *The Lost Legends of New Jersey*

[*Life Goes to the Movies* is] a riveting story, artfully constructed and told with wit, precision, and sensitivity.

JOANNA SCOTT, author of *Everybody Loves Somebody*

Confessions of a Left-Handed Man

- University of Iowa Press / Sightline Books 2011
- Finalist, William Saroyan International Prize

The quirky, intelligent memoir of an artist and fiction writer … An engaging, original modern-day picaresque.

KIRKUS

Tawdry as [his] first love affair with literature may have been, how glad we are that Peter Selgin was tempted into it – and fell head over heels. Without such an addictive beginning, that boy may never have grown up to become a writer of such great substance.

NY JOURNAL OF BOOKS REVIEW

Selgin deftly balances humor and tenderness throughout these life-affirming confessions.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY REVIEW

Peter Selgin is a born writer, capable of taking any subject and exploring it from a new angle with wit, grace, and erudition. He has a keen eye for the telling detail and a voice that is deeply personal, appealing, and wholly original. Fans of Selgin's fiction will know they are in for a treat, and those who are new to his work would do well to start with this marvelous memoir in essays, his finest writing yet.

OLIVER SACKS

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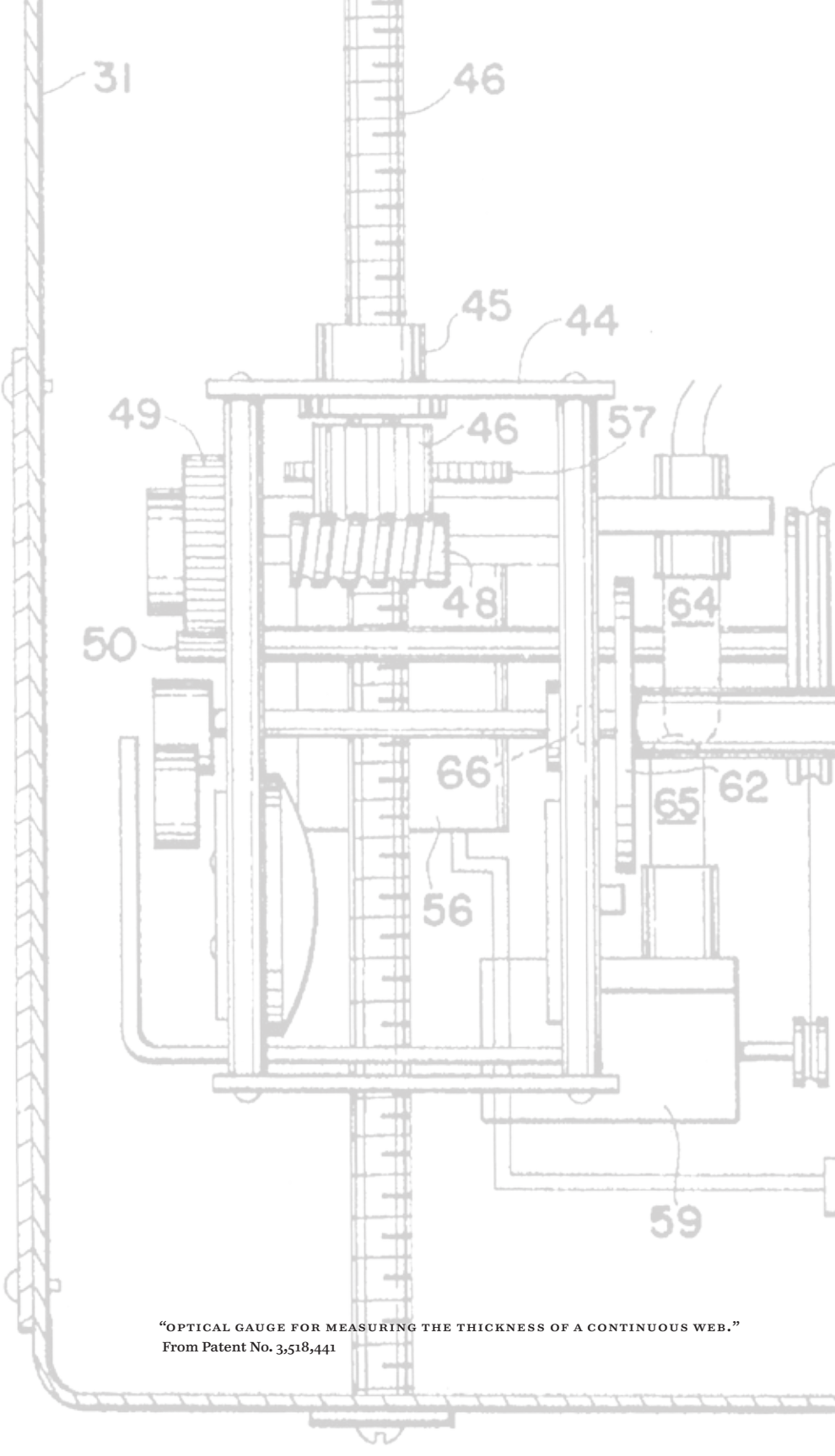


"OPTICAL GAUGE FOR MEASURING THE THICKNESS OF A CONTINUOUS WEB."
From Patent No. 3,518,441

The Inventors

a memoir

Peter Selgin

HAWTHORNE BOOKS & LITERARY ARTS
Portland, Oregon | MMXVI

Introduction

Lidia Yuknavitch

A "PROXIMITY FUZE," AN EVOLUTION OF THE "VARIABLE Time Fuze," was a fuze that automatically detonated an explosive device when the distance to a target became less than what had been programmed. Proximity fuzes were better than timed fuzes, which could go wrong in a myriad of ways. More precise. Less human error. Clusters of ground forces. Ships at sea. Enemy planes, various missiles, suspected ammunitions factories. Those were most often the targets.

And hearts.

At the heart of this book is a proximity fuze in the form of two men who entered and detonated Peter Selgin's life, leaving him to reconstitute a self from the pieces that were left. When we think about the people who come into and out of our lives, there are only a few – or less – who literally rearranged our DNA. You know what I'm talking about. Those people who, for whatever reason, detonated our realities. For Peter Selgin there were two men, one his father, who helped develop the proximity fuze, the other a teacher, who not only changed his life forever, but who had something in common with Selgin's father: they lied their way to selves.

I've always hated the word "lie." It has a bomb in its center. The bomb has a kind of morality trap inside of it. When we point to someone who "lied," we can more easily condemn them while feeling better about ourselves. And yet everyone I have ever met has lied. Sometime, somewhere. It's human to be bad at telling

the truth. Truth is difficult and painful and often self-incriminating. I prefer the word "fiction." It allows for the fact that all of our truths – the stories we tell ourselves so that we can bear our own lives – are always already constructed. Our life fictions are compositions made from memory, and memory, as neuroscience now tells us, has no stable origin or pure access route.

I happen to be an expert on the topic of lies. My mother lied to me. My father lied to me. My family was a lie, my religion was a lie, husbands lied, teachers lied, friends and foes lied, the selves I was meant to step into – girlfriend, wife, mother – were all strange cultural fictions. Writers live within language, and so in some ways, you might say we are at the epicenter.

Peter Selgin's father was a brilliant man who participated in the extraordinary inventions but also the death sciences that culminated in the atomic bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In order to forge a self he could live with, he fictionalized his own past. And because life is always bringing the same trials back around to us in different forms, later in his life Peter Selgin would meet another man, a teacher whose fictions recreated a self that might rise above the human wrongs he'd committed. Peter writes from within the epicenter of each.

This story is about what we make and how we make it: selves, lives, love stories, life stories, death stories. It is also the story of how creation and destruction are always the other side of each other, and – like the lyric language so gorgeously invented in this book that it nearly killed me – its meanings are endlessly in us. It's a book about how we do and do not survive our twin forms of being: the selves we live, and the stories of those selves we endlessly recreate. And there is something at the heart of the story that I did not expect to find.

Hope.

THE INVENTORS

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
from "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT TWO MEN WHO WERE VERY IMPORTANT *to me. The first was there at my conception, the second came along thirteen years later. Each had a profound influence on me. You could say they invented me, such was their influence.*

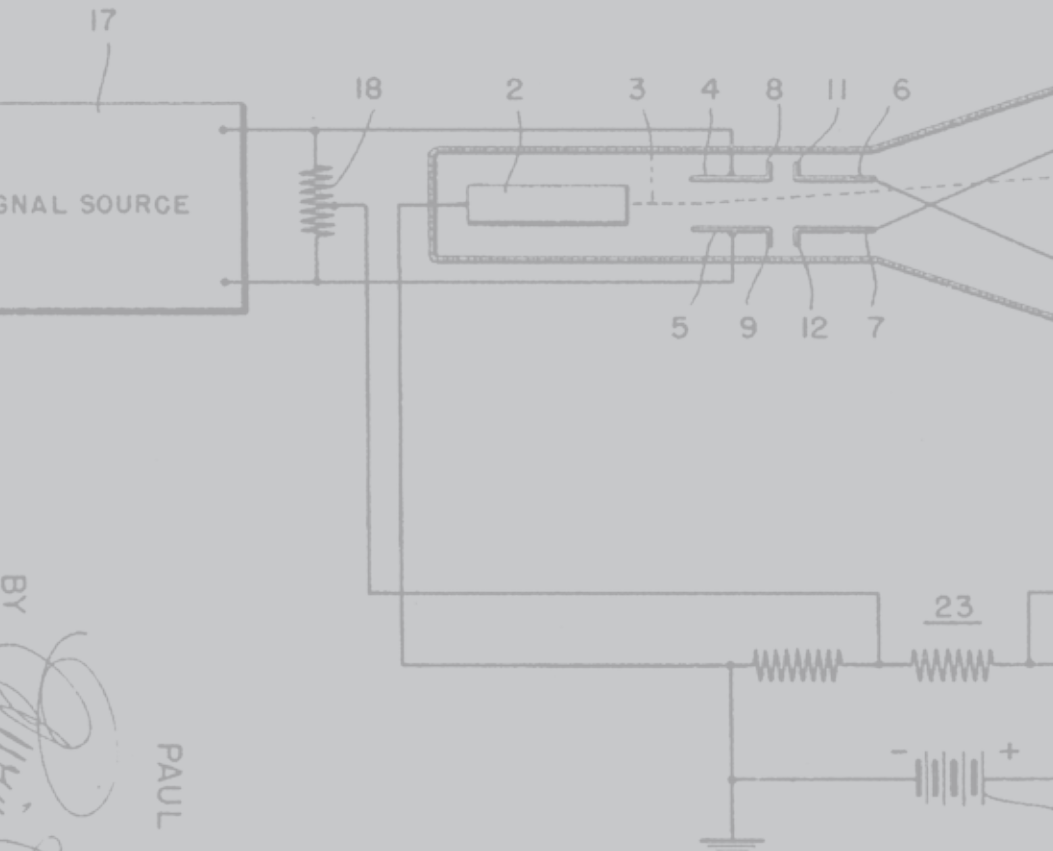
They invented themselves, too. The first man did so through an act of omission, by denying his past. The second did so through a series of fabrications, by lying about his. The first man was Paul Joseph Selgin, my father – who, it so happens, was an inventor. The second was my eighth-grade English teacher.

I've had other inventors, too: a mother, my twin brother, the places I've lived, the people I've known. They all helped invent me.

We're made of the past. What we remember, or think we remember, or choose to remember, defines us. Like my father and my teacher, each of us, in different ways and to various degrees, constructs a myth about ourselves that we embrace in part to deny contradictory, unpleasant, or inconvenient truths. We inhabit fictional narratives that we come to think of as "our lives." From memories sifted, sorted, selected, or synthesized – consciously or unconsciously – we assemble the stories that tell us who we are. In that sense, we're all inventors.

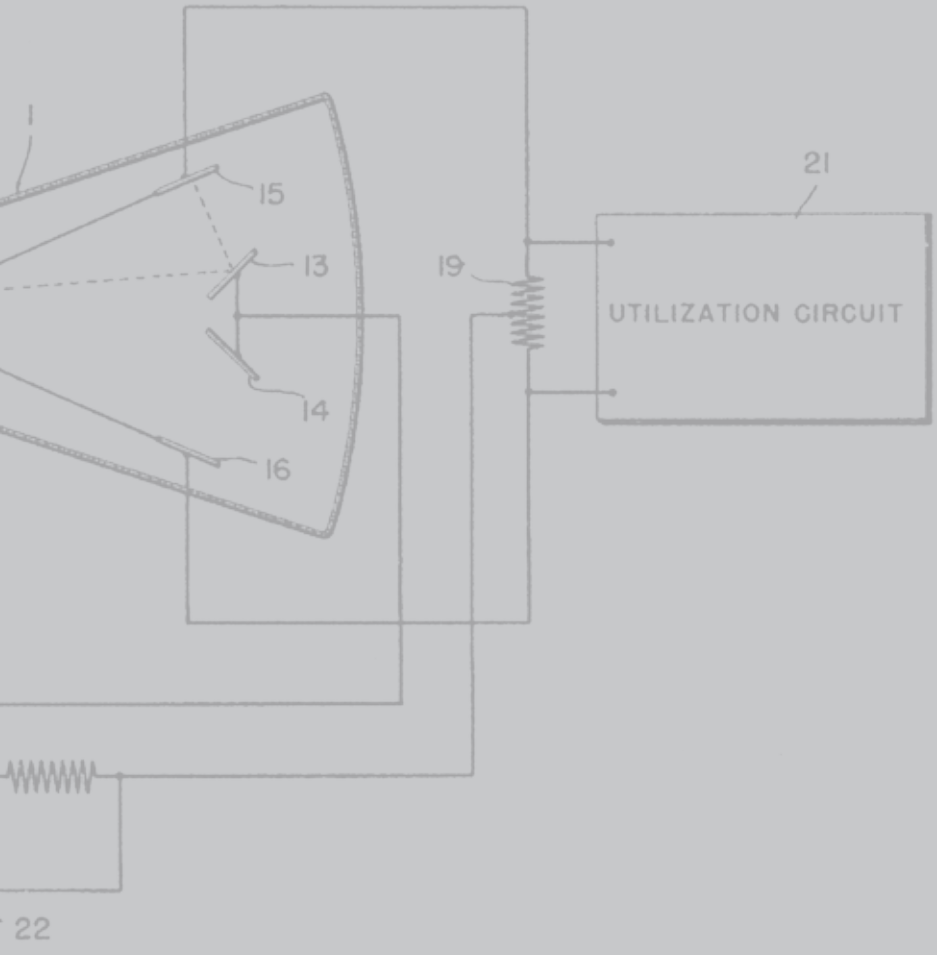
This book is my invention. I've written it to my younger self, but for *you. To preserve anonymity, I've changed dates, place names, and other identifying details.*

May you fall in sympathy with what follows.



"This invention relates to cathode ray tubes and particularly to such tubes for use as signal modulators, amplifiers and the like wherein one or more electron beams are deflected over a target electrode structure." U.S. Patent # 2,489,329, DEFLECTION MODULATION TUBE, Application January 20, 1947, Serial No. 723,034

Exemplary Claims



DEFLECTION MODULATION TUBE

Filed Jan. 20, 1947

I.
Danbury, Connecticut, February, 2000

I BELIEVE IT WAS THE ANCIENT CHINESE WHO CURSED *each other by saying, "May you live in interesting times." I had an interesting father.*

You'll note that I'm not properly dressed for this occasion. In honor of my father, I'm wearing one of his moth-eaten cardigan sweaters, an affront to good taste, fashion, etiquette – all the things my father thumbed his nose at.

As most of you here probably know, my papa was an iconoclast. He had too many other things on his mind to worry about protocols or conventions. Though he was once the director of a division of the National Bureau of Standards in Washington, D.C., his social standards were anything but exacting. Chesterton's "If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing badly" was among his favorite sayings. An electronics engineer and inventor, he disdained all things irrational and considered all forms of tribal ritual and worship barbaric. He loathed – his word – all religions. Nor did Papa care much for parties, parades, sports, movies, concerts, the theater – anything that made him part of a group or audience and divided him from the fertile depths of his own polymath mind. He had no stomach for pomp, ritual, or any form of regimentation or conformity. He hated crowds and large gatherings. Weddings and funerals weren't his cup of tea. This one, unfortunately, he had to attend....

AFTER THE MEMORIAL service, as the respectful file out of the funeral parlor, you gather up the relics that you and your twin brother George assembled for the commemorative altarpiece: your father's

portable Royal typewriter, his oscilloscope, a Color Coder (one of his inventions), his favorite eggcup, the split-spined German dictionary that he kept next to his rocking chair in the living room.

As you do a stranger approaches you. She's in her late seventies or early eighties, tall and thin, with a bent nose and short silver hair. She wears frameless octagonal eyeglasses and a reindeer-and-snowflake sweater in cheerful primary colors that offset her wintry complexion. As your brother chats with your half-sisters Ann and Clare (your father married three times) a dozen feet away, the woman walks straight up to you.

I was a friend of Paul's – of your father's, she says, taking your hands in hers. We knew each other for over forty years, she says. She has an accent – heavy, German. Her fingers are bony and ice-cold. She holds her winter coat draped over one arm and smells like the winter weather outdoors.

Nice to meet you, you say. (Forty. You do the math. Since you were in diapers.)

We knew each other very well, your father and I, she says.

You smile. You're certain you've never seen her before.

Very well, she repeats. Then: *Did you know your father was Jewish?*

At first her declaration strikes you as no less peculiar than the woman herself, who, for all you know, has come from the neighborhood homeless shelter or from Fairfield Hills, the mental hospital in nearby Newtown. For all you know she drops into memorial services regularly to confront mourners with absurd pronouncements concerning their dearly departed. You're about to dismiss her claim as ridiculous when a memory comes back to you, that time in Italy back in your early twenties, at a villa in the hilly outskirts of Piacenza, where you'd gone to visit some relatives on your mother's side of the family, when one of a small army of second and third cousins no sooner set eyes on you than she declared, *Ma lei e' ebreo!* (But you are Jewish!). Her judgment had something to do with the downward curve of your nostrils. But you didn't take it all that seriously, in fact you forgot about it completely, until now.

All this time you've been staring at the old woman, who keeps holding your hands, shaking them.

Excuse me? you say to her.

He never told you?

Who *are* you?

My name is Bernice, says the woman. Bernice Mundt.

Bernice. Berenice. Beh-reh-nee-chay.... The name bubbles up from deep memory. It's one you heard often growing up, during your parents' frequent vicious fights.

I'm afraid you're mistaken, you say. My father wasn't Jewish. He was raised Catholic. My grandmother – his mother – went to mass regularly.

To this the old woman smiles, affirming not your reasoning but your naiveté. You turn to your brother, who's still talking to Ann. Your mother is busy with other people on the far side of the chapel. The memorial service has been more celebratory than solemn. Your father's death was anti-climactic, the cumulative effect of a series of strokes that removed him bit by bit from the land of the living, leaving a cheesy body in a nursing home to dress and feed, until his appetite died. Now his body burns to dust behind the funeral parlor's draped walls. No one else sees the old woman talking with you. It's as if she's not really there, like she's a figment of your imagination, her and her wintry odors and reindeer sweater.

Your father was Jewish, she says at last, firmly, smiling and shaking her head like a tolerant schoolmarm coping with an especially slow pupil. On both sides of his family, she says. They were *prominent* Jews.

Who told you this? you say. Where did you hear it? (You make no effort to conceal the accusatory tone of your voice.)

Paul – your father – he told me. Long ago. I thought you would want to know. I'm very sorry, by the way. He was a brilliant man, your father. A wonderful man.

The woman turns then and – as quietly as she came, with you watching after her – walks out of the funeral parlor.

I HARDLY KNEW MY FATHER. HOWEVER KIND AND (IN HIS *way) loving, he kept a distance between himself and all others, including me. In other ways I'm so much like him that to speak of distances between us is, if not altogether absurd, irrelevant. In a way, his death only brought us closer by eliminating the false dichotomy suggested by our separate bodies. He was as much my twin as my brother, maybe more so. I can't mourn him without feeling as though I'm embracing a solipsism, like I'm mourning myself.*

That I knew (and still know) very little about my father's past doesn't lessen this feeling at all. If anything the mystery augments and strengthens it, since the people we know least well are ourselves. If we think we know ourselves better than other people do, it's because we have access to more memories than they do. We know our stories better – so we tell ourselves, though in so doing we forget that they're stories and not the truth, which is much harder to grasp.

The best if not the only way to discover ourselves is through others.

The discreet subject of any biography is the biographer.

FIG. 3

From ELECTRIC MOTOR: "This invention relates to an electric motor of simplifieds construction. The invention has particular reference to an electric motor which requires one or more simple toroidal coils and no complicated commutator. The coils may be fabricated prior to assembly and can easily be removed from the motor at any time for repair." From Patent No. 3,387,151

II.
Spuyten Duyvil, Bronx, New York, April, 2006

SIX YEARS LATER, YOU'RE SURFING THE WEB WHEN YOU stumble on the obituary:

UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR AND DIVERSITY ADVOCATE DIES

It's two in the morning. You're in your studio, the former master bedroom of the apartment you and your wife share in a section of the Bronx called Spuyten Duyvil. The name derives from the treacherous whirlpools generated by the confluence of the Hudson and Harlem Rivers, where many an aspirant swimmer and many more suicidal jumpers have met their dooms. Depending on what authority you appeal to, the pseudo-Dutch name means either "spitting devil," "spouting devil," "in spite of the devil," or "spit on the devil." On one side the view is framed by the Henry Hudson Bridge, on other the Palisades, with one of the oldest functioning swing bridges in the country – across which Amtrak trains thunder toward Penn Station – dividing them. On sunny afternoons the Palisades glow turquoise; the bridge is a monochromatic rainbow of blue steel. But it's two a.m., and the bridge looms black against toll plaza lights.

Thanks to your insomnia, you and this view have gotten to know each other well. Over the top of your computer you gaze at it from time to time while traipsing through cyberspace, as you're in the habit of doing whenever sleep forsakes you. You search for people you haven't seen or heard from in decades, classmates and teachers you went to college or high school or even to first grade and kindergarten with.

And you search for him, your eighth-grade English teacher, the man who was your dearest friend, a hero and a mentor and even something of an idol to you, and who you hadn't seen since the summer of 1980, when he more or less threw you out of his home.

The website on which the obituary appears is that of a local Oregon newspaper, the notice dated January 5, 2006. It describes the deceased's accomplishments as a university professor, noting his achievements as a champion of human rights and diversity dedicated especially to the causes of indigenous peoples as well as refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The notice explains how as a student the deceased did anthropological fieldwork in Thailand and Laos, how he worked briefly for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, that he was fluent in French, Vietnamese, and Seneca, one of several languages spoken by the Iroquois tribes in what is now New York state. The notice ends with a quote from one of the teacher's university associates, who relates the teacher's conviction that "there would come a time when people of compassion would come together from all over the world to help make it a better place, a place where love, peace, and wisdom can survive and flourish."

Castalia, you say to yourself. *The unreachable star*.

According to the obituary, your former teacher was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1943. There's no mention of his having been a Rhodes Scholar or attending Oxford or Berkeley. Two survivors – a sister and a brother – are alluded to. Nothing about being adopted or having a paraplegic older brother. The cause of death isn't specified.

The article also states that he was a "member of the Seneca Nation of Indians." In the photograph that accompanies the article he wears a Navajo-patterned vest. A bone pendant dangles over the triangle of bare flesh exposed by his opened shirt collar. From the khaki baseball cap he wears a scruffy black ponytail protrudes. When you knew him the teacher was blond. His eyes were blue.

You spend the next hour scanning other websites, looking for what you're not sure, until you find it – another obituary, that

of the man the teacher had been living with when he more or less threw you out of his house. Like you, the man had been a former student. Like you, he had been nurtured and influenced by the teacher. Like you, he had been among a very few select people the teacher numbered among his friends.

This man's obituary is dated February, 2006, less than one month after the teacher's. At the request of the deceased's family the cause of death isn't disclosed.

YOU SHIFT YOUR gaze toward the window, to the unbroken string of red brake lights winking their way toward the toll plaza.

You recall the strange woman at your father's memorial service.

You wonder: *Can we ever really know anyone? Can we even know ourselves?*

Who was my father? Who was the teacher? Who were these two men who were so responsible for making me who I am? Dear Past Self, do you know? Can you tell me?

I LIVE ON A LAKE IN CENTRAL GEORGIA, IN A MODEST *gray A-frame with large triangular windows framing a view of the water and my dock, where two weather-beaten Adirondack chairs are angled toward each other as if in conversation. The view is partly obstructed by a pair of tall white pines, one of which succumbed recently to the dreaded bark beetle and whose needles have turned brown. Soon it will have to come down.*

I start my days with a swim across the inlet and back, a distance of just under a mile. I walk down to the dock, drape my towel over one of the chairs, snap on my bright yellow swim cap and goggles, and lower myself into the tea-brown water via the rusty ladder across which a spider has been busy all night, spinning a web for mayflies.

At that hour the water is warmer than the air. A ghostly layer of fog hovers over it. I dogpaddle to the front of the dock, sight my target – a stand of pines across the way – and head off doing a swift crawl, counting my strokes. Since I moved here two years ago I've been trying to determine the exact number of strokes needed to reach the other side of the inlet. No matter how hard I concentrate, at around 150 strokes I always lose track. By my best estimate it takes between 180 and 200 strokes to cross, a figure that's bound to mean very little to you, though it helps me judge my progress and choose intervals of rest.

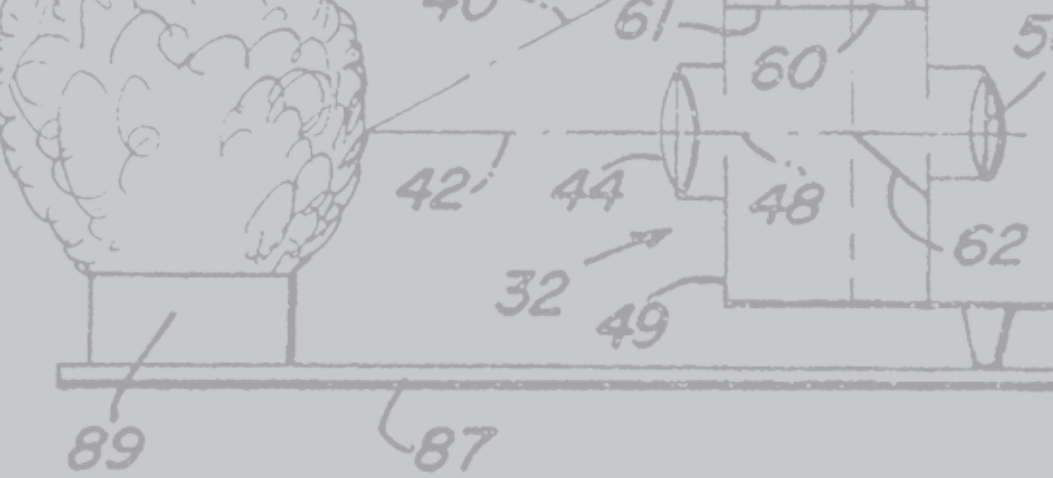
At this hour there are no boats out. That's something lake swimmers have to worry about: powerboats. They don't always look where they're going, especially when towing skiers or screaming kids on rafts or tubes. Jet skiers, that exuberant subspecies, are the most worrisome.

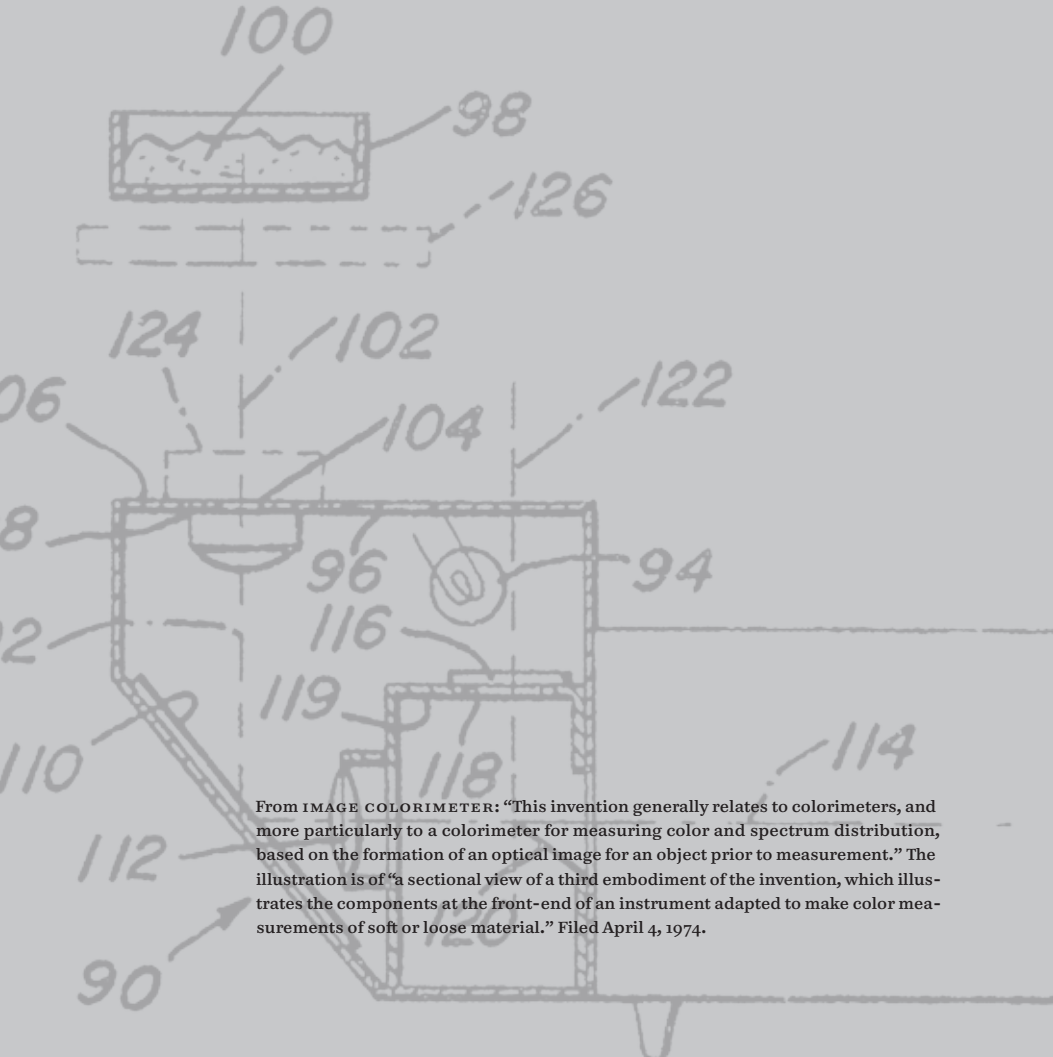
Still, I've made my peace with the possibility of a watery death, preferring that to any death on dry land.

Having counted around 200 strokes I know when I put my feet down they'll touch sandy bottom. The patch of shore by that stand of pines is a favorite hunting ground for herons. Often I'll surprise one, just in time to see him spread his smoky wings and alight – with a primordial squawk – across the water.

Then back to the dock, to my chair and towel. There's enough privacy here so if I wanted to I could swim in the nude. Most of the homes dotting the shore belong to vacationers and retirees. I rarely see my neighbors and they rarely see me – a good thing, since by Georgia standards my skimpy Speedo amounts to indecent exposure.

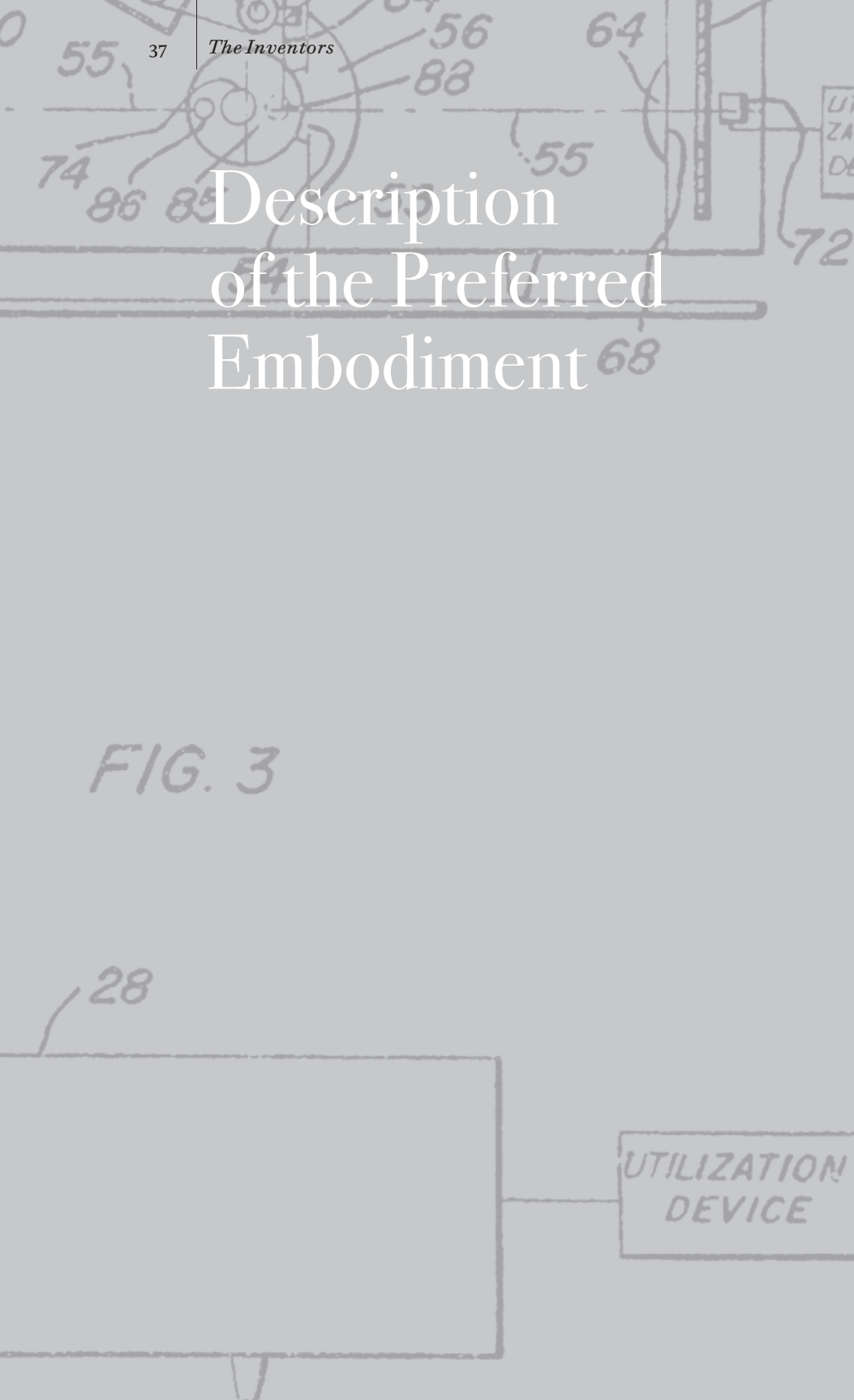
Back indoors, having changed and hung my goggles and dripping Speedo on a brass hook by the door, I make an espresso and take it up to the loft where I have my desk and where – facing the triangular window with its view through the trees of the dock – remembering, I write.





From IMAGE COLORIMETER: "This invention generally relates to colorimeters, and more particularly to a colorimeter for measuring color and spectrum distribution, based on the formation of an optical image for an object prior to measurement." The illustration is of "a sectional view of a third embodiment of the invention, which illustrates the components at the front-end of an instrument adapted to make color measurements of soft or loose material." Filed April 4, 1974.

Description of the Preferred Embodiment



III.
The Blue Door
Bethel, Connecticut, September, 1970

THE RUMORS ARRIVED BEFORE THE NEW TEACHER DID. That he was young, that he had gone to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship, that he wore cable knit turtleneck sweaters with bell-bottom jeans and square-toed leather boots with big brass buckles on the side. He wore his blond hair almost to his shoulders, like Illya Kuryakin in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* He planned to teach a special class, an experimental class for gifted students that he would hand pick. When the time came you, your brother and your mutual friends waited anxiously to learn which of you had been chosen.

The others made the cut. You didn't. You got stuck in Mrs. Schnabel's fifth-period English class, Mrs. Schnabel with her so-called "port wine stain," the purple birthmark on one side of her jaw that constantly changed shape, looking like a rooster's coxcomb one moment, and like a giraffe or the state of Florida or one of the Great Lakes the next. During your first class with her, as Mrs. Schnabel droned on about subordinate and independent clauses, you gazed at her birthmark with horrified fascination, convinced that it would burst open at any moment, splattering you with a mixture of blood and pus.

You made up your mind then and there. Somehow you'd get into the new teacher's class. You were determined.

LATER THAT DAY, when the last bell rang, you ran down the hall to the new teacher's classroom and watched from a distance as a

group of his students, including your brother and your mutual friends, gathered to talk to him.

That's when you got your first good look at the new teacher. He was tall, but not as tall as you had expected. His hair was blond and long, but not down to his shoulders. He wore blue jeans – but they were new, clean, and neatly pressed. And he wore boots, too, but without brass buckles. He looked serious and even a bit concerned while listening to the students, nodding gravely every so often, then suddenly breaking into a smile. When it was time for him to speak he did so with theatrical gestures of his large hands.

While waiting for the others to leave, you tried to come up with something clever to say, something dry and clever and witty to set you apart and prove you worthy of membership in the new teacher's special class. Surely you were as worthy as the others. How could you not be worthy? That you hadn't been chosen – it had been a mistake, an oversight, an aberration. The moment he saw you the new teacher would realize his mistake. He'd take one look at you and say I'm so sorry, I must have made a mistake, an awful, terrible mistake. Can you forgive me?

The teacher's ears – the parts not hidden under his long hair – were long, so was his nose, long and curved, with deep notches hollowed out by the bridge of the round, gold- framed glasses that he wore. His voice was soft, high, and nasal. His lips were thin and hardly moved when he spoke, like a ventriloquist's lips.

But what impressed you most about the new teacher was the way he listened to the other students, his eyes blinking and curious under his round glasses, his head tilted toward whoever spoke to him, his hands propped on his thighs, his elbows relaxed. Everyone, you thought to yourself as you stood and watched from a dozen yards down the hallway, should be listened to like that.

As you kept watching you noticed the scar running down one side of the teacher's face – a thin, pale scar that went from the side of his nose to the bottom of his earlobe.

At last the students left, leaving the new teacher standing alone in his empty classroom. You took a step forward, but then

you stopped, realizing you had failed to come up with anything clever or witty to say. You stood there chewing your lip, not sure what to do next.

The new teacher put some papers and books into a battered briefcase, snapped it shut, and left the classroom carrying it. He locked the door and walked right past you and down the corridor. You followed him.

A CLOUDY SEPTEMBER day, the overcast sky the same gloomy gray as the sheets of stainless steel and aluminum your papa slathered with steel blue and scored for the saw, the drill press, the bending machine.

The new teacher walked quickly, his briefcase swinging with each stride, the thumb of his free hand hooked into a front pocket of his jeans. His long strides carried him past the library and Mullaney's store, across the train tracks, past the lumber yard and Vaghi woodworks and Dolan's hay barn and the fuel oil storage tanks and Stevenson's Sunoco station, with its inadvertent museum of recently wrecked cars. You followed the teacher as he continued down Greenwood Avenue, toward the Sycamore diner and the First National supermarket, past the Catholic Church, with its wicked witch's hat of a steeple.

This was Bethel, the town to which, in 1957, when you and your brother were six months old, with your father's eighty-year-old mother in tow, your parents moved from Bethesda, Maryland, your father having quit his high-paying job with what was then the National Bureau of Standards to try his luck as a freelance inventor. It was where you would spend the next seventeen years of your life.

Once, the towns of Bethel and neighboring Danbury were known for their hat factories. "Danbury Crowns Them All" claimed an elaborate sign mounted on the roof of a coal shed, where it greeted travelers arriving from parts north. The sign showed a derby in red neon hovering over a crown outlined with hundreds of incandescent light bulbs.

According to local legend, the man responsible for bringing

hat manufacturing to the area was a struggling fur trapper named Zadoc Benedict. One frosty winter morning, finding a hole in his boot, he plugged it with a scrap of rabbit fur. That night, after a long day of trapping, Benedict took off his boot to discover that the pressure and sweat from his foot had transformed the scrap into a stiff but malleable substance, one ideally suited – he would in time discover – for making men's hats. Benedict spent the next few years experimenting with various techniques.

Zadoc Benedict, too, was an inventor.

Having perfected his hat-making procedure, Benedict opened his first hat factory. Within a generation a dozen more hat factories flourished in Bethel. At their peak just after the Civil War they pounded out over a million hats per year – including, it's been said, the famous stovepipe worn by President Lincoln himself.

By the time you and your parents moved there, all but two or three of the hat factories had been abandoned or burned down or otherwise come to ruin. Over time the rest of them burned down, too. Your papa would take you and your brother to watch them burn. It was cheaper than going to the movies.

IN 1760, A year after the town was established, Captain Benjamin Hickok built his home at the southwest corner of Chestnut Street and Greenwood Avenue. The Hickok house doubled as a tavern and served as a command post for General Israel Putnam during the Revolutionary War. To its rear stood a carriage house that, two hundred and ten years later, its owners converted into a rental property. They painted the front door blue and laid a path of fieldstones leading up to it.

From the sidewalk across the street you watched the teacher walk down the fieldstone path. He entered the cottage and shut the blue door behind him. For a while you stood there, on the sidewalk, staring at the blue door, not sure what to do next. It was just like you: all initiative, no follow-through.

You heard a rumble of thunder. You had no umbrella. It started raining. You stood there with water dripping down your face.

You were about to give up and go home when suddenly the blue door opened and the teacher stuck his head out.

Care to come in? he said.

A CAST IRON stove. A bed in the corner covered by a rainbow-shaded serape. Improvised shelves packed with all kinds of books. An unvarnished slab of wood mounted on some bricks in the center of the room served as a table, with various-sized cushions scattered around it for sitting. Everything neat, tidy, clean.

The teacher hung your wet jacket. He had you take off your wet sneakers and put them on the tiled apron in front of the stove. He offered you a cup of Chinese tea. The tea tasted and smelled like smoke from a burning hat factory. You asked for sugar. The teacher gave you honey. Seated on a cushion at the Japanese-style table, you took tentative sips from a pottery cup with a fish design and no handle.

The teacher wore sweatpants and a gray sweatshirt with the word OXFORD in blue across the chest. He sat across from you, speaking in a soft voice, asking you questions about your family, your mother and father. He was especially interested to learn about your father, having heard that he was an inventor.

What sort of things does your father invent? he asked.

You told him about the Color Coder, the Mercury Switch, the Shoe Sole Machine, the Optical Differential Thickness Measuring Instrument, the Induced Quadrature Field Motor, the Null Type Comparison Reflectometer, the Neutralized Cathode-Ray Deflection Tube. The teacher smiled.

He has his laboratory at the bottom of our driveway, you explained, in a converted barn. We call it the Building. The floors are all rotten. It's full of mice and spiders and snakes. He doesn't mind. In fact, my father sort of likes it. (You were careful not to say "my papa.")

Sounds like a most interesting man.

He's an anglophile. He was born in Italy, but he talks with an English accent.

Speaks, said the teacher. He *speaks* with an English accent.

You did your best to describe your mother, explaining that she was Italian, too, but that unlike your father, who spoke English better than Walter Cronkite, she had a heavy accent and coined her own distorted versions of common idiomatic expressions, turning "when worse comes to worst" into "bad that it goes," and "don't stand on ceremony" into "no make compliment," and "I don't give a damn" into "I no give a goop." Some people find it charming, you said.

The teacher laughed and so did you.

You told the teacher about your grandmother, Nonnie, who had her own little room in a corner of the house (decorated with Japanese fans, smelling of lilac and mothballs), and the family dog, Pa'al (the apostrophe had been your idea), and how poorly behaved she was, how – to the amusement and horror of dinner guests – she'd climb on the dining room table after, and sometimes even during, the dessert course.

The teacher asked you about your brother. He wondered how you and George got along. You confessed that you fought a lot, you weren't sure why, maybe because people were always comparing you or lumping you together – the Selgin Twins; the Selgin Boys – as if you were one and the same.

Which we aren't, you said.

Of course you're not, said the teacher.

You went on talking, with the teacher mostly asking questions and you answering them. Meanwhile the rain kept falling, pattering against the carriage house roof, dripping down from its eaves. There was a fancy wooden chessboard at the center of the table, its checkerboard pattern formed by alternating veneers of different woods. Seeing you admire it the teacher asked if you cared to play. You'd never played chess before.

It's not hard, the teacher said. I'll show you.

He showed you how to move the pieces. At first it seemed impossibly complicated, all those different pieces and so many ways to move them.

Take your time, the teacher instructed. This is one game that gets played *between* the moves.

By the third or fourth game it got easier, though it still took the teacher less than a dozen moves to checkmate your king. You played until it started to get dark outside and the rain fell less hard. It was time to go. The teacher let you borrow his umbrella.

As you stood ready to leave by the door, he said, I enjoyed our visit.

Me too, you said.

I'll see what I can do about getting you into my class.

You hadn't even asked.

THAT'S ALL YOU'D remember, that and the smell of the stove and candle smoke and smoky tea, and of all the books filling the teacher's shelves – a musty, vanilla-and-mushroom smell. And the sound of rain falling as you played chess.

You'd remember too how, as you walked home that day, things were different. The houses, the church steeple, the gasoline pumps at the Sunoco station, the cars splashing through puddles, the streams of smoke rising from people's chimneys – they all looked the same. The town was the same town you'd spent most of your life in, where you rode your bike and waited for the school bus and watched the hat factories burn down one by one. Nothing had changed, really. Yet nothing would ever be quite the same.

I'VE LIVED HERE FOR THREE YEARS NOW, SINCE I TOOK a tenure-track position at the state university where I teach writing. When I told them I was moving here, my friends predicted that I'd go crazy, that after thirty-five years in New York City life in a small southern town would be the end of me – and not just any small southern town, but Milledgeville, Georgia, the former home of Flannery O'Connor and Central State Hospital, once the biggest psychiatric facility in the country, the place where "they" sent you if they wanted to get rid of you. Watch out, people down here used to joke, or they'll send you to Milledgeville. Everyone knew what that meant.

I guess I didn't watch out.

* * *

NOVEMBER.

A cloudy, breezy day – the breeze strong enough to raise whitecaps on the lake. The sky gray, the water a shabby brown, the trunks of the trees lining the shore blackened by last night's rain, everything a variation on a theme of grays and browns. The muted colors complement my mood, the season having laid out my emotional palette for me – umbers raw and burnt, a dab of ochre, smoke black and bone white.

For my canvas I have my notebook, the cardboard kind used by generations of school kids, with faux black-and-white marble covers, $1.99 at K-Mart. My writing desk: a twelve-foot Vermont Packboat: folding caned seats, mahogany gunwales, lightweight Kevlar hull (deep blue), bronze oarlocks, spruce oars. When not in use it hangs from the ceiling

of the basement, where I keep my studio, mounted with a pulley system.

And though my desk rows beautifully, most of the time I'm happy to just drift along, as I'm doing now – not just physically, on the water, but mentally, in my thoughts. The Japanese have a word for it: zuihitsu*. Literally it means "follow the brush," let the mind flow freely, as it sees fit, from thought to thought with no agenda. Though it pertains to a genre of Japanese literature consisting of loosely connected musings,* zuihitsu *can apply as well to other forms of creation, to poetry, painting, or music. In this case the term is doubly apt, for as my rowboat drifts so do my musings. If she didn't have a name already, I'd call her* Zuihitsu. *But she's got a name:* Audrey.

All of which is by way of explaining that I write these notes with little respect for order, logic, or causal relationships – not out of carelessness or laziness, but because a person adrift in a rowboat on a lake can hardly be expected to do otherwise.

* * *

I TRADED NEW YORK CITY FOR A LAKE AND GOT A GOOD DEAL.

The best things about living here are silence and solitude; the worst things are the same. Sometimes it gets so quiet it's spooky. Not long ago, while working, I was disturbed by the sound of what I took to be rap music, a low steady bass note throbbing somewhere. Since my neighbors here are mostly older retired people I figured it had to be coming from a boat. But there were no boats passing. My years in New York have made me paranoid about noise. Thirty-five years of car alarms, truck-backing signals, and ghetto blasters waking you up after midnight can do that to you. Hoping to locate the source of the sound, I went outside and heard nothing. But as soon as I went back to my desk it started again.

What the hell, I thought.

Then I realized it was my own pulse throbbing in my ears.

That's how quiet it gets here.

I'm not complaining. The silence is good for writing, a welcomed collaborator, the clear lens through which I look into the past. Looking through it now, I see the Building, the yellow stucco shack that was my father's laboratory, where he built his inventions.

United States Patent 2,964,641, DEVICE FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF ENGRAVED DOCUMENTS. "Apparatus for identification of engravings, said engraving comprising a surface bearing a plurality of spaced, approximately parallel lines of a particular unique configuration and of substantial width, separated by spaces of different reflectance from said lines, said apparatus comprising a complimentary surface bearing lines corresponding in configuration to the spaces of said first surface but of greater width, means for optically superimposing said two surfaces to produce a uniform optical effect over the combined surfaces when the two sets of lines are complimentary and positionally matched, shifter means for shifting said surfaces with respect to each other in a first direction substantially perpendicular to at least some of said lines to produce a variation in the combined optical effect at a particular frequency determined by the distance between said lines and the speed of said shifting, photoelectric means responsive to said variations in optical effect to produce electrical signals at said particular frequency of occurrence corresponding to said variations, circuit means responsive to said signals, and tuned to said frequency to produce a control signal at a predetermined amplitude of said signal frequency." Also known as "The Dollar Bill Changing Machine." Filed April 26, 1957.

IV.
The Building
Bethel, Connecticut, 1970

ON THE WAY HOME FROM THE TEACHER'S COTTAGE THAT day you stopped at the Building, the converted barn structure that was your father's laboratory. During WWII it had been a black market farm and bookie joint. Nesting boxes for chickens, industrial incubators, and piles of dusty old-fashioned telephones had filled its abandoned rooms. The man your father hired to renovate it, an Italo-Frenchman named Serge, did a shitty job. Within months the new floors rotted. Gaping holes appeared where chair legs and people's shoes broke through it. The roof leaked. Snakes, rodents, birds, and other forms of wildlife built nests between the wall joists. You could see daylight through the cracks in the stucco. Your father had trouble insuring the place, it was in such bad shape.

This was where your father conceived, designed, and built his inventions, his Color Coders, his Thickness Gauges, his Rotary Motors and Mercury Switches, his Shoe Sole and Blue Jean Machine. He didn't mind the leaky roof, the rotten floors, the spider webs. He liked sharing his workspace with all kinds of creatures, the lowlier the better.

One day, the president of a big manufacturing firm drove up from New York in his Cadillac to talk with your father about an idea for an invention. At the time a five-foot black snake was living in the vestibule, so your father made the executive and his three-piece suit climb through a side window. Later that day, the businessman watched in horror as your doting Saint Francis of a father fed the snake a whole loaf of Wonder Bread.

Your father worked from dawn till dusk. He'd rise in the morning gloom, shave in the downstairs bathroom (the one with plum-colored fixtures), make and eat his breakfast of two soft-boiled eggs with toast and tea, then walk down the hill to the Building, where he'd work until eight-thirty, when the post office opened. If the weather was good he'd pedal his rusty Raleigh there and back, then work on until noon, when he'd walk back up to the house for a lunch of leftovers or canned soup.

Occasionally, feeling the urge for humanity, he'd walk into town and sit on a stool at the Doughboy diner, joining truck drivers and factory workers there. But despite his protests *(Don't spend your life among machines, Peter, my boy. Annoying though they can be, you're better off with people. At least with people you can kick them and get a response.),* he preferred his solitude and his inventions.

If he had other errands to run your father would typically run them in the afternoon, setting off by car to Danbury or Newtown to see the tool and die man, the sheet metal worker, the welding expert, the anodization man. Sometimes you'd go with him and watch, with uneasy fascination, him interacting with these grimy artisans in their loud, cavernous, dingy lairs. The other men were taller than your papa, who stood five foot seven, their faces tough and leathery, eyes bloodshot, skin dark with grunge. Compared to them your father looked timid and slight, as out of place amid the clamor and grime of their work places as a rose in a coalscuttle.

Your father always smiled when he worked, his face a mask of blissful concentration. Walking up the driveway to the house, you'd see him through the window as you passed by, at his workbench or typing away at his typewriter, grinning from ear to ear. Other times, when a solder joint wouldn't take or when he stripped the thread of an obstinate screw, his oaths would resound off the Building's crumbling walls. His flamboyant curses and Promethean farts were legendary among the neighborhood kids, whom he would hire occasionally to sort screws and other salvageable parts from obsolete inventions, and who did so as much to hear them as to earn twenty-five cents per hour.

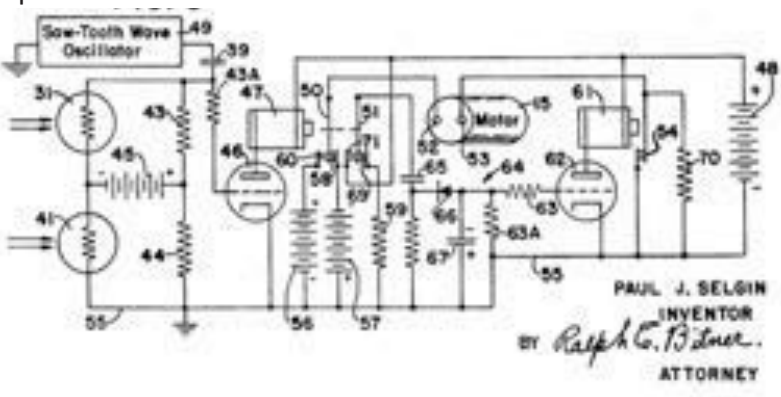
YOUR PAPA WAS a genius. He spoke six languages fluently and had a PhD from Harvard, so you'd been given to believe. He belonged to a society of geniuses called Mensa. Occasionally the society held gatherings. Once he took you and George to one, a picnic in Westchester. During it an argument broke out between two geniuses. They were debating whether or not a can of baked beans placed unopened on the barbeque grill would explode. As your brother, your father, and you looked on, the two geniuses advanced their competing theories, supported by principles of molecular structure, gas and fluid dynamics, and particle physics. Their colorful debate might have continued forever had it not been interrupted by a considerable explosion. The two geniuses along with a dozen bystanders spent the next half-hour picking hot beans out of their hair and clothes.

Idiots, said your father under his breath.

He held over fifty patents, mostly for machines that measured and analyzed things. Among them was one for a machine that could distinguish a real dollar bill from a counterfeit one, making it possible to get change for coin-operated vending machines. Called the Nomoscope, it should have made your papa a very wealthy man, but for reasons obscure to you having something to do with a shady patent attorney, your father (as he was wont to joke at dinner parties) *never got a nickel from it*.

The patents were illustrated with drawings like this one:

4.



YOU LOVED TO visit your father in the Building. You couldn't wait to jump off the bus after school and run down the long dirt driveway, under the drooping branches of the weeping willow trees lining it. You would enter through the main door and – provided no snakes were living there – cross the vestibule and knock softly on the inner door. To your father's *Is that you, Peter, my boy? Come in, come in!* you would enter, forgetting to shut the inner door behind you.

Close the door, your father would say, and you'd close it.

The Building had five rooms, including the empty vestibule that was home to occasional serpents, the bathroom (with a toilet that didn't work), the study where your papa kept his shelves of books and a trundle bed that he'd sleep in sometimes after especially bad fights with your mother.

Then there was the main room, where he did his inventing. It held the drill press, a table-mounted sander, a grinding wheel, the bending machine, and two lathes, both big as mules. Here was the long bench where your papa soldered and tested his circuits, and the table where he sketched out his designs and typed on his typewriter. Thumbtacked to the wall above the tool bins was a crude

4 Should this drawing not speak for itself, the following explication attends the patent application: "Referring now to FIG. 3, the control circuit includes transducers 31 and 41 connected in opposition by resistors 43 and 44 and supplied with current from a source of direct current power 35 which may be a battery. The transducer ends of resistors 43 and 44 are connected respectively to the control electrode, in series with resistor 43A, and cathode of a vacuum tube triode 46. It is obvious that one or more transistors may be used in place of the triode. The control electrode of triode 46 is coupled to a saw-tooth generator 49 by means of series capacitor 39. The saw-tooth wave modulates whatever signal is received from the transducers 31, 41, and even when no signal is received from the transducers, the anode-cathode current is modulated in accordance with a saw-tooth wave. The anode of triode 46 is connected in series with a relay winding 47 and a direct current source of potential 48. The relay winding operates two armatures 50 and 51, each of which in turn operates two pairs of contacts. Armature 50 is connected to one terminal 52 of motor 15 while the other terminal 53 is connected through another pair of contacts 54 to a ground or common conductor 55. Conductor 55 is also connected to the terminals of two sources of potential 57 and 57. The contacts on armature 50 are arranged so that, when the relay winding 47 does not pass current, the motor 15 is connected through one pair of contacts 50 to battery 57. If the relay is actuated, contacts 58 are broken and a second pair of contacts 60 is closed, thereby sending current from the second source of electric power 50 to motor 15 to cause it to turn in the opposite direction. In this manner the direction of the motor is controlled to turn so that portion 22 may be lowered, or when the contacts are operated to turn in the reverse direction, to raise portion 22 and move it away from the object being measured."

sketch by your papa of a man laid out on an operating table, with surgeons cleaning up in the background, a cut-away view of his belly revealing a wrench left inside it. The caption in your father's handwriting said:

NO OPERATION IS COMPLETE
UNTIL ALL THE TOOLS AND PARTS
HAVE BEEN PUT AWAY

Then there was the back room, where your father kept the band saw and a blue machine on splayed legs for cutting tubes and shafts that galumphed like a lame camel. Sheets and chunks of every sort of metal were kept there in wooden bins, with other bins holding spare and used parts.

Under banks of long fluorescent bulbs buzzing and wavering in their death throes you would walk to where your father stood working, wearing his pilled moth-eaten cardigan and stained khaki trousers (winter) or shorts (summer). Past rows of tiny drawers brimming with screws, bolts, nuts, washers, tubes, lenses, photocells, toggle switches, relays ("tick-tick things," you called them), solenoids, potentiometers, rheostats, transformers, resistors, capacitors ("capacitators"), and rectifiers, you would make your way, carefully avoiding the holes in the floor. On the table next to your father's typewriter a portable radio played a mixture of classical music and static.

The Building had its own special smell, a blend of solder smoke, scorched metal, mildew, electrical shorts, farts, and orange peels. Your father liked to eat oranges when he worked. He kept a straw basket of them by his typewriter. He'd toss the peels into a gray metal wastepaper basket, along with gobs of pulp that he would spit into his palm. A perfume of oranges rose from the wastebasket.

You'd watch him type with two fingers on his Royal typewriter, or soldering a circuit, or turning a part on the lathe. The lathe was your favorite. You loved watching him manipulate its plethora of bright chrome dials with one hand, like an engineer manning the controls of a locomotive, while smoothing the fingers of his other

hand around the spinning chuck, its knuckles black with grime. From the spinning chuck bright turnings of aluminum, copper, and brass spiraled to the rotted floor. Afterward you'd sweep the turnings up with the dustpan, pocketing the longest and brightest specimens for a collection you kept in a wooden box.

Among boxy instruments on his workbench was one with a round screen called an oscilloscope. As it shed its green light over his thin gray hair, his sloping forehead, his wrinkled brow, his aquiline nose, your father would gaze at the glowing screen and you would gaze at him, wondering what he made of it, amazed that your father (or anyone) could extract meaning from a dancing thread of light.

The Building was your father's sanctuary, the place where he sought refuge among his ideas and instruments. It was your refuge, too, a shrine, the place where you went to worship your papa and experience the awe and mystery of his works. Under its buzzing and flickering fluorescent lights, between the holes in its rotting floor, in a pall of solder smoke and radio static, the universe was conceived, engineered, tested, and approved.

IN THE BUILDING'S back room you had your own workbench, with your own (broken) oscilloscope, your own soldering gun, your own plastic drawers of assorted parts. There you gave birth to your own invention, an electric motor you built from scratch, almost. You fit brushes and stators to an old rotor that you found, turned the aluminum casing for it on the lathe, fixed a bearing to the shaft, mounted the result on a bracket, and attached a toggle switch to it. You soldered the two wires, one red and one blue, from the coil to the toggle switch, then added (for the heck of it) two diodes, a small transformer, and a yellow capacitor chosen for its looks alone. You attached an electrical cord to the transformer and plugged the result into a wall outlet.

Before it caught on fire the capacitor blushed and gave off a bluish gray puff of pungent smoke, garnishing failure with splendor. Still you were damned if your motor didn't look as if it should

have worked, if it didn't display all the superficial properties of a perfectly good motor. In fact what you had invented was a sculpture of a motor, a postmodern motor. An artist's motor.

YOUR VISITS TO the Building ended usually at dusk, when your mother would telephone from the house to say dinner was ready. Before leaving, you'd empty all the wastebaskets and turn off the lights and the furnace.

With the six o'clock siren howling in the distance, you and your father walked up the hill to the modest Cape Cod with a brick-accented front and dormer windows from which the striped awnings had long been removed. Summer heat, crickets and peepers. Or December dusk, the air crackling cold, the sun about to sink behind a hill.

Halfway up you and your father stop for a "pissing contest," both of you standing side by side, unzipping at the driveway's edge, aiming father-and-son streams into the Queen Anne's Lace, pokeberries, goldenrod, and milkweed. Your papa's thick, ruddy, uncircumcised dick resembled the Polish sausages that your mother boiled with potatoes and cabbage. Your own dick scarcely rated notice.

While pissing, your father would recite a favorite limerick:

There once was a man from Madras
Whose balls were made of brass
In frosty weather they clanged together
And sparks flew out of his ass

Your papa's urine never failed to outperform yours in every category: thickness, altitude, distance, endurance, its glittering golden arch reminding you, as it rose and fell into the weeds, of the brass turnings that spun from his lathe. Watching it twist and turn in the twilight, you'd say to yourself: *When I can pee that far, I'll be a man.*

BY THE TIME you got to the Building that day it was already dusk. The lights still burned inside. You knocked on the inner door. To

your father's *Come in, Peter my boy,* you let yourself in, remembering to shut the door behind you. Your father sat at his typewriter, typing. *Well, well, so good to see you, Peter boy,* he said, and went on typing with two fingers, smiling. Maybe he asked you about your first day at school. You may even have said something about visiting the new teacher in his cottage, though it's unlikely. However affectionate and welcoming, your father never pretended to be that interested in you. He listened to you the way he listened to his radio, appreciating the background noise even though he didn't give a fig what music was playing.

Anyway, you'd forget what you talked or didn't talk about.

But you wouldn't forget how, when you were small, on hot summer days your papa would take you and George to a muddy swimming hole under a railroad trestle near the edge of town, how once there he would enter the water as he always did, ever so slowly, inch by gruesome inch, making wincing sounds as if he were stepping into a vat of boiling oil. Meanwhile the fathers of other kids your age ran and jumped into the water.

How you had longed for your papa to jump like the others. *Jump, Papa, Jump!* you would plead. But he wouldn't. *I can't,* he'd say. *I'm too old.*

Those three words – *I'm too old* – how they tolled in you like a tarnished bell. *Too old Too old Too old* … At moments like that your disappointment knew no bounds. And it was true. Your papa was old, born in 1912, the same year the *Titanic* sank.

But it wasn't old age that kept your father from jumping into bodies of water anymore than it prevented him from throwing footballs or playing catch, things your father would no sooner have done than he would have swum the Bosporus or climbed Mount Everest. It wasn't age that made your papa old. It was his unwillingness to do anything that failed to engage him, that didn't pertain to his pursuits and interests. It was egocentricity, not age, that made your father so old.

So you concluded that day after visiting the new teacher for the first time.

As you stood there watching your father type, seeing him smile in concentration, it occurred to you that something else had changed for you that day. You realized, not for the first time but with a novel sense of bitter disappointment, that your papa, the human god who'd invented the world for you, was a remote, absentminded old man.

I HAVE A THREE-AND-A-HALF YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, AUDREY. *She lives with her mother in New Jersey. I see her a half-dozen times a year, as often as my academic schedule allows.*

I never meant to become a father; I sure didn't plan to become one at fifty-three, let alone a long-distance father. Life has its own agendas.

The first and only other time I came close to fatherhood I was twenty years old. I'd gotten my high school sweetheart pregnant. Though I'd moved to New York to study art, on visits home Laura and I kept seeing each other. She was a shy, quiet girl, and we spent most of our time together in pursuit of means to avoid talking to each other.

During one such visit, I impregnated her.

Summer, 1977. Together with a group of other Pratt students, I sublet a Soho loft. One of the students had two kittens, Sacco and Vanzetti. Soho was much grittier back then. No boutiques, no Balthazar, its cobblestoned industrial streets noisy with trucks and strewn with graffiti.

The professor from whom we sublet left behind cans of purple, pink, and gray latex paint and a few large sheets of paper. I carried these up to the rooftop, where I spread the sheets out, their corners held down by bricks. With a set of lettering stencils, a roll of masking tape, and a very rough plan, I went to work.

Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns were my heroes. The paintings I did that day, surrounded by ventilators and tarpaper, owed everything to them.

[NOTE: Pages 60 – 406 of *The Inventors*
have been omitted to reduce file size]

Afterword
George Selgin

"I'D LIKE YOU TO WRITE AN AFTERWORD FOR *THE INVENTORS*."

You want me to do *what*?

"Write an afterword. You know, like an introduction, but at the end of the book."

I know what an afterword is. But why are you asking me? Who cares what I have to say about your book? Why not get someone famous to write it? No one is going to read your book because your brother says something nice about it. You might as well ask mom to write something. Seriously. Ask your publisher.

"Actually, she's the one who suggested having you do it."

Then you have a crazy publisher.

"Actually, she seems very reasonable. And she knows what she's doing."

Let's hope so. But suppose I do write it. What do you expect me to say? If you think I'm going to tell everyone that it's all true, you can forget it. Remember how you asked me if I minded your including that crap about the fountain pen in your book of short stories? The one that got the whatchyamacallit prize? What was I supposed to do, tell you not to publish the damn thing so the world wouldn't think I was a big jerk? So I said go ahead, but how about writing something nice about me to make up for it? And you said you would. Remember? Well instead you've gone and repeated that same bullshit story again! So if you're thinking you can get me to swear it's all true you've got another…

"You don't have to say that the book is true. You can say whatever you want."

Do you really mean that?

"I do."

Okay, Peter. In that case, I'll do it. But I hope you know what you're doing.

* * *

Let me set the record straight. Back in the summer of '78, I wasn't getting a degree from Auburn University. I was only there to take a few summer classes. And I lived in an apartment, not a "dorm." Finally, although my brother visited me, I did not send him packing for stealing a fountain pen from my "collection."

First of all, I don't like fountain pens. They leak. And the nibs scratch the paper. Anyway, I never used them. And I certainly never collected them. When Peter and I were just twenty-one, I was in no position to collect anything. I had no money. My apartment in Auburn was barely big enough for the palmetto bugs I had to share it with. I lived on peanut butter sandwiches and, when I was feeling health-conscious, on raw broccoli dipped in Gulden's mustard. (Like Wagner's music, it's better than it sounds.) Although I was into bike racing – spent my weekends that summer training or racing with Alabama's road-racing champ – I couldn't afford new tubular tires and had to patch and resew my flats. In short, if I had one of anything, I considered myself lucky. If Peter stole any sort of pen from me, it was almost certainly the only decent pen that I owned.

Would Peter have been capable of stealing his twin brother's only pen? You bet! If anything, he was even poorer than me, and he couldn't go a minute without scribbling something in his big journal. But if he did, I don't remember. Nor do I remember having an argument with him, or telling him to get lost. I have a lousy memory, so it's possible these things all happened. But I'm sure there was no fountain pen.

I'm also pretty certain that I never called Peter a "libertine." How come? Because even in 1978 I knew that "libertine" wasn't a

word one used to describe a pen thief. So I wouldn't have called Peter a libertine. If I called him anything, chances are I called him an asshole. I called him that all the time. I still call him that sometimes.

So much for the fountain-pen story. But that's just the tip of the iceberg—the George of *The Inventors* differs from the one I happen to be familiar with in lots of other ways. I'm telling you so not because you should care what I was or wasn't like but because this is one subject of *The Inventors* concerning which I can claim to be something of an authority. The George I recall was not especially fond of hot fudge sundaes (at Friendly's, he preferred the mint chocolate-chip ice cream, two scoops, best enjoyed while Peter and the other suckers were cramming for some test). He never earned a master's degree, from Duke or from anywhere else. Nor did he ever rig up a Bunsen burner to make it spew water, though he certainly would have done that had it been possible. His father never made him vomit, in a Chinese restaurant or anywhere else (though his mother did, once, by insisting that he finish his broccoli). And his sadistic ex-Navy SEAL scuba-diving instructor forced him to breathe, not from a valve-less tank – which was impossible – but from a regulator-less tank—which was possible, but only by breathing water along with one's air. Finally, the George I know did not lose his vir –

…Well, you get the idea. My brother, if not exactly a liar, can't be taken at his word.

Does this sort of thing make *The Inventors* phony? Supposing it did, so what? Plenty of famous memoirists have taken great liberties with the truth. And the most self-avowedly candid ones have tended to take the biggest liberties of all. Look at St. Augustine. Or Rousseau.

But *The Inventors* isn't phony in the sense of pretending to be anything other than what it is. Peter never claims that it's entirely candid or accurate. On the contrary, he warns his readers again and again against assuming that he is merely telling the truth. His book's title is itself a warning. It is a book about inventors whose

inventions consist of myths they've spun about themselves. It is, most obviously, a book about two inventors: our father and our eighth-grade English teacher. But it is mostly about a third inventor, Peter himself, and his own creations, whose patent specification you are holding.

Since he asked me to write this afterword, Peter has also been pestering me to tell him what I think of *The Inventors*. I have not answered him, but now that I've said as much as I have about the book, I'm prepared to do so. *The Inventors* is at times beautiful and at others exasperating. It has brought back to me wonderful memories and also very sad ones. It has made me want to fling parts of it across the room and to read others again and again. It is to me, in short, everything that my brother himself is to me.

Do I like *The Inventors*? Of course not. I love it.

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My sisters Ann and Clare.

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Lidia Yuknavitch, for graciously providing an introduction.

The memory of my friend and swimming buddy Oliver Sacks.

And my brother George, who, as always, gets the last word.

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NEWS RELEASE

The Inventors: A Memoir
by Peter Selgin
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PETER SELGIN

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"Destined to become a modern classic…" —*Library Journal.* Peter Selgin's memoir *The Inventors*, introduction by Lidia Yuknavitch, released by Hawthorne Books April 1, 2016

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Contact: 503-327-8849 *rhughes@hawthornebooks.com*

"Peter Selgin is a born writer, capable of taking any subject and exploring it from a new angle, with wit, grace, and erudition." —OLIVER SACKS

In the Fall of 1970, at the start of eighth grade, Peter Selgin fell in love with the young teacher who'd arrived from Oxford wearing Frye boots, with long blond hair, and a passion for his students that was as intense as it was rebellious. The son of an emotionally remote inventor, Peter was also a twin competing for the attention and affection of his parents. He had a burning need to feel special.

The new teacher supplied that need. Together they spent hours in the teacher's carriage house, discussing books, playing chess, drinking tea, and wrestling. They were inseparable, until the teacher "resigned" from his job and left. Over the next ten years Peter and the teacher corresponded copiously and met occasionally, their last meeting ending in disaster. Only after the teacher died did Peter learn that he'd done all he could to evade his past, identifying himself first as an orphaned Rhodes Scholar, and later as a Native American.

As for Peter's father, the genius with the English accent who invented the first dollar-bill changing machine, he was the child of Italian Jews—something else Peter discovered only after his death. Paul Selgin and the teacher were both self-inventors, creatures of their own mythology, inscrutable men whose denials and deceptions betrayed the trust of the boy who looked up to them.

The Inventors is the story of a man's search for his father and a boy's passionate relationship with his teacher, of how these two enigmas shaped that boy's journey into manhood, filling him with a sense of his own unique destiny. It is a story of promises kept and broken as the author uncovers the truth—about both men, and about himself. For like them—like all of us—Peter Selgin, too, is his own inventor.

"This story is about what we make and how we make it. Selves, lives, love stories, life stories, death stories. It is also the story of how creation and destruction are always the other side of each other. And like the lyric language so gorgeously invented in this book that it nearly killed me, its meanings are endlessly in us. Writers live within language, and so in some ways, you might say we are at the epicenter."—**Lidia Yuknavitch** from the **Introduction**

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Hawthorne Books
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PRAISE FOR *THE INVENTORS:*

Peter Selgin's *The Inventors* is a remarkable study in remembering, in empathy, and most of all in reckoning."
—KYLE MINOR *Praying Drunk*

In *The Inventors*, Peter Selgin unrolls the blueprint of his life, investigating how two men—his father and a charismatic middle school teacher—helped create the man he is today. Lyrical, honest and (dare I say?) inventive, *The Inventors* is a deeply compelling meditation on how we make and remake ourselves throughout our lives—choice by choice, action by action, word by glorious, slippery word.—GAYLE BRANDEIS *The Book of Dead Birds*

I have never read anything like *The Inventors*, Peter Selgin's incomparable, brilliant, and achingly human memoir. With this deceptively simple story of the author's relationships with two self-invented figures—his father, and an influential teacher—and with his own younger self—Selgin has produced a deep core sample of the human condition. Like William Blake, he finds a whole world in a few grains of sand. He has shown, in language remarkably beautiful and accessible, how we are invented, by the people who profess to love and care for us, and by our complicit selves. I was profoundly moved reading this book, by its deep intelligence, its constant sweet, knowing humor, and the recognition in it of myself and everyone I have ever loved.—PETER NICHOLS *The Rocks and A Voyage for Madmen*

The Inventors is a philosophical memoir that grapples with some of the questions regarding how we invent ourselves and how we in turn are invented by others, particularly our mentors. Thanks to Selgin's autobiographical candor and the vivid details of his telling, these puzzles of identity seem as fresh, engaging, and befuddling as they were when they first bubbled to the surface of our thinking. A smart, tender, compelling book.—BILLY COLLINS *Aimless Love*

Peter Selgin writes brilliantly about our mindfulness and forgetting – the necessary inventions and reinventions that help us live. The lies of his father and his eighth grade teacher inevitably enter into this intricate portrait of inner and outer selves. As he inhabits their action, talk, and thought, he teaches and fathers himself. In language most rare for its transparency, Mr. Selgin reminds his readers of the difference between artifice and the genuine. In these remarkable pages, he has become one of the truest of our writers.—CAROL FROST *Honeycomb*

Peter Selgin's *The Inventors* is brilliant, brave and compelling and inventive all at once. This is an intimately intimate rendering not just of Selgin's coming of age, but indeed his rebirth into a new life of cognitive thought, of making sense of a perplexing world, of inventing out of blood and abstract ideas and hidden histories who, exactly, he is. This is an intelligent and moving book, a gorgeous book, an important book.—BRET LOTT *Dead Low Tide*

This story is about what we make and how we make it. Selves, lives, love stories, life stories, death stories. It is also the story of how creation and destruction are always the other side of each other. And like the lyric language so gorgeously invented in this book that it nearly killed me, its meanings are endlessly in us. Writers live within language, and so in some ways, you might say we are at the epicenter.—LIDIA YUKNAVITCH *The Chronology of Water*

Peter Selgin's intricately woven memoir, *The Inventors*, offers a unique, engaging, and occasionally startling examination of how childhood influences bend and shape us into being. Selgin's candor and intimacy bring to vivid life the Zen koan of how we become the people we become and how we somehow never really know who we are.
—DINTY W. MOORE *Between Panic & Desire*

Only a writer as gifted and insightful as Peter Selgin could have produced this deeply compelling story of two brilliant but extraordinarily deceitful men and the complicated relationships he shared with them. A superb work of memory that unfolds like a great suspense novel.—SIGRID NUNEZ *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*

A reflective investigation of the self, memory, and invention.—*Kirkus*

"Destined to be a modern classic."
—Derek Sanderson, *Library Journal*

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Peter Selgin's The Inventors

by ALEXIS PAIGE • July 28, 2016 No Comments

I'm a sucker for literature that pursues an unanswerable question, all the better if that pursuit takes some idiosyncratic course, as with Peter Selgin's new memoir, ***The Inventors***. Recently published by Hawthorne Books, and a finalist for the Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize, the Graywolf Press Prize for Nonfiction, and the AWP Award Series for Creative Nonfiction, the book charts Selgin's formation of self, or perhaps, selves. This smart, quirky, and insightful memoir explores the author's formative years by way of the two most seminal men in his life, his "inventors"—his father, a bona fide inventor; and his 8th grade English teacher, an inventor of pedigree. Eccentric, magnetic, and grandiose, these men—and their "inventions" or fictions about their lives—cast a towering shadow over Selgin's own existential search for identity, which lasts well into adulthood. After his father's death, the author learns his paternal family was not Catholic as he had been led to believe, but Jewish. Similarly, the writer learns that the teacher with whom he shared an emotionally intimate friendship at 13 (a mutual "seduction," Selgin calls the relationship at one point) fabricated an identity as a Rhodes Scholar, an adoptee, and later, a Native American. These lies, or fictions, are difficult for the narrator to reconcile because they are mixed with both objective truth (if such a thing exists), and perhaps more importantly, emotional truth. Selgin writes, "You can't have the truth without lies. Or you can—it may be there—but you won't see it, it won't stand out." The book is in part a catalogue of Selgin's findings as he attempts to unravel the mysteries of his inventors' lives (and thereby his own), and it is also an investigation into the slippery nature of truth itself. Pushing beyond that classic memoir question, *Who Am I?*, the writer's various narrative selves—boy and man; first-person and second-person—ruminate on the very nature of selfhood, along with its attendant doubts, deceptions, and complexities.

In the Prologue, Selgin announces that the book is written to his younger self: "We're made of the past. What we remember, or think we remember, or choose to remember, defines us. Like my father and my teacher, each of us, in different ways and to various degrees, constructs a myth about ourselves that we embrace in part to deny contradictory, unpleasant, or inconvenient truths. We inhabit fictional narratives that we come to think of as 'our lives.' From memories sifted, sorted, selected, or synthesized—consciously or unconsciously—we assemble the stories that tell us who we are. In that sense, we're all inventors." In addition to its overt pursuits, the memoir skirts a meta-argument: If the self is a kind of invention made from constructed myth, so too is the memoir an invention made from the versions of myth that the memoirist chooses to spotlight. After all, a memoir is not a journalistic record of what happened, but rather a subjective account of what the self remembers or deems important, what one has "sifted, sorted, selected, or synthesized."

Selgin navigates such heady ideas with a playful, even inventive, sense of structure. The chapter titles employ patent application language as an extended metaphor: Exemplary Claims, Description of the Preferred

Embodiment, The Prior Art, and so forth. Tucked into the chapters are patent figure drawings of his father's inventions, along with arcane footnotes and captions that describe antennae, ray tubes, electric motors, colorimeters, and reflectometers, to name just a few. The approach to setting, chronology, and even point-of-view is accordingly associative, which means that the reader follows Selgin's narrated consciousness as he leaps through decades and states, and as he moves between first-person and second-person narrators, both versions of the self. Such navigation of time calls to mind Sven Birkerts' admonition about the flattening effect of strict chronology in his craft book ***The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again****:* "There is in fact no faster way to smother the core meaning of life, its elusive threads and connections, than with the heavy blanket of narrated event. Even the juiciest scandals and revelations topple before the drone of, 'And then…and then…'". Selgin's temporal and structural choices highlight the book's meaningful design and create a vibrant, textured narrative.

In addition to its architecture, *The Inventors'* approach to textual material is a rich layering of authorial modes that include sweeping reverie, crisp snapshots of memory, philosophical musing, epistemological ephemera, and a mix of second and first-person narration. Selgin moves between these modes with grace. The anchoring scene of the first chapter begins with the author delivering his father's eulogy: "As most of you here probably know, my papa was an iconoclast. He had too many other things on his mind to worry about protocols or conventions." The 'you' of direct address here then slides seamlessly into a 'you' of Selgin's own consciousness. The author narrates the post-memorial gathering scene completely in second-person, which is an interesting choice of narrative distance, especially given the upending secret revealed by one memorial-goer: "Your father was Jewish, she says at last, firmly, smiling and shaking her head like a tolerant schoolmarm coping with an especially slow pupil. On both sides of his family, she says. They were *prominent* Jews." The next section of the chapter, set apart on its own page, contains just two italicized paragraphs—written in first-person from the ostensible present: "*He was as much my twin as my brother, maybe more so. I can't mourn him without feeling as though I'm embracing a solipsism, like I'm mourning myself.*" And so goes the journey of the memoir, in which the narrator attempts to reconcile his father's and teacher's fictions and motivations as a way of confronting his own: "It would take years of therapy for you to ascribe these and other symptoms to the pursuit of gratification by vanity known as narcissistic disorder and to trace its origins back to the day you wheedled a kiss from your kindergarten teacher in exchange for a crayon drawing of the Empire State Building (or was it the *Queen Mary?*), a fateful transaction that over time evolved into a mode of survival."

In addition to the craftsmanship of the memoir, I admired the writer's idiosyncratic mind. Equal parts poet-philosopher, professor, raconteur, and iconoclast himself, Selgin's narrators are fascinating company. I read eagerly for the company of the brooding insomniac who wonders "Can we ever really know anyone? Can we even know ourselves?"; or for the company of the bored child, which Selgin declares "the most troubling" of dispositions; or the egocentric father for whom even his daughter's first rainbow comes back around to him: "I thought from now on whenever she sees a rainbow Audrey will remember this trip and think of her daddy." Ultimately, the memoir yields no easy answers about that nagging question of whether we can really know anyone, and by implication, ourselves. But the book bears witness to the worthiness of the pursuit. Confronting our fictive or inventor natures, Selgin suggests, is the path to discovering ourselves.

—

Alexis Paige's work appears in multiple journals and anthologies, including *New Madrid Journal*, *Passages North*, *Fourth Genre*, *The Rumpus*, *Pithead Chapel*, and on *Brevity*, where she is an assistant editor. Winner of the 2013 New Millennium Writings Nonfiction Prize, she also received two recent Pushcart Prize nominations, and features on Freshly Pressed and Longform. Twice a top-ten finalist of *Glamour* magazine's essay contest, Paige holds an MA in poetry from San Francisco State University and an MFA in nonfiction from the University of Southern Maine. Her first book, a collection of lyric essays, *Not a Place on Any Map,* won the 2016 Vine Leaves Press Vignette Collection Award and will be published in December. You can find her online at alexispaigewrites.com

Comments

Book Review

The Inventors

Nonfiction

By Peter Selgin

Reviewed By Heather Sharfeddin

Hawthorne Books (2016)
416 pages
$18.95

Buy this book

If I mix a little fiction with my nonfiction, a little lie with the truth, it's by way of making the truth even truer.

–Peter Selgin, *The Inventors*

I want to call this book, *The Inventors* by Peter Selgin, The Book of Home Runs. To write a memoir is—on the surface—to undertake a contrasting examination of both the profound and banal of one's life and cobble together a sort of meaning out of it. It is a rare human being who can execute this introspective art with a balance of openness and self-scrutiny that invites readers to participate, with full awareness that they may come away with a different conclusion. Selgin delivers that unqualified openness in his story about his inventor father, whom he knew very little about—despite having spent so much time together—and a teacher with whom he had an unusually close bond—a bond that at times bordered on inappropriate.

I want to call this book The Book of Home Runs for its fascinating use of second-person point-of-view. In an effective and refreshing twist on adult retrospective, Selgin writes not *about* but *to* his younger self, pointing out what the boy wouldn't have grasped in the moment, what his older self has learned, and where his boyish self has simply disappointed him. The perspective might feel harsh if we didn't each engage in similar acts of self-scorn. These second-person passages, of which the book is primarily composed, are voyeuristic and haunting in quality. They give the work a feel that is somehow less memoir-ish—a genre with the potential for myopic self-importance. Instead, we experience the intimacy of another man's private struggle with identity, desire, confusion, and blame as if he is not the one telling us:

> That your own sense of failure was inextricably bound up with your father's made his waning all the more bittersweet to you. If only you could make him see that he hadn't failed you, that of his dozens of inventions, you alone would survive him; that by your failing alone could he truly fail. How urgently you wanted him to know this—and how much more urgently you yourself needed to believe that you hadn't and would not fail.

I want to call *The Inventors* The Book of Home Runs for its brief first-person passages that read like a diary and reveal many things, but perhaps most surprising, how to write a memoir. In Selgin's honest struggle to tell the story, he reveals just how consistently we invent ourselves—either obliterating the past or re-creating it entirely—in order to make sense of ourselves:

> This is what I am trying to write about: how, one way or another, by hook or by crook, often with the help of others, we all invent or reinvent ourselves. My father helped invent me by bringing me into the world, the teacher by bringing me into his cottage and classroom.

I want to call this the Book of Home Runs for its startling compassion toward those who failed the author in ways that shaped who he turned out to be: from his father's sharp criticism and lack of support for Selgin's writing, to his mother's complicity in keeping family secrets, to his teacher's intentional, if not misguided, exploitation of a boy's

perspective of himself and his future. The process of piecing together the details of these people and their lives—who they were, not just to Selgin, but to themselves—unraveling their lies, has made them fragile. And that fragility invites forgiveness and understanding.

"If I mix a little fiction with my nonfiction, a little lie with the truth, it's by way of making the truth even truer." There is an inventor in each of us, creating a narrative of ourselves as we wish to be or how we believe we are. And none of us fails to participate in crafting it. It is here, in the space between the profound and banal, where the lies exist. They are the things missed by youth, difficult to discern, secrets withheld, that make the truth even truer, and the endeavor of memoir worthwhile. Peter Selgin shines a bright, probing light on the invention of self. He has delivered in *The Inventors* one home run after another, each giving us a deeper understanding of ourselves by attempting to understand others.

Heather Sharfeddin is a four-time novelist whose work has earned starred reviews from *Kirkus Reviews* and *Library Journal,* has been honored with an Erick Hoffer award and at the New York and San Francisco Book Festivals, as well as the Pacific Northwest Book Sellers Association. Her fifth novel, *What Keeps You,* will be released in September 2016. She has taught creative writing at Randolph-Macon College, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and Linfield College (presently). Sharfeddin holds an MFA in writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a PhD in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University (Bath, England).

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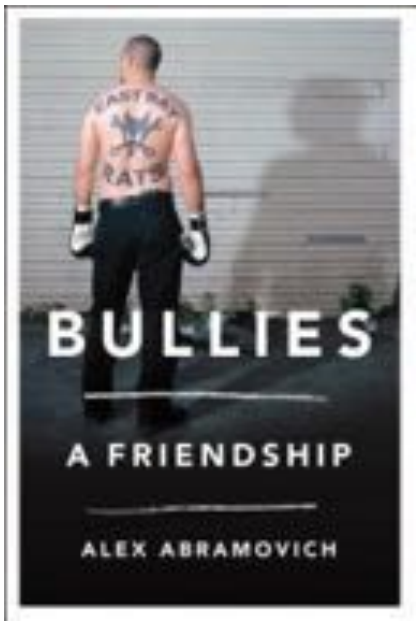
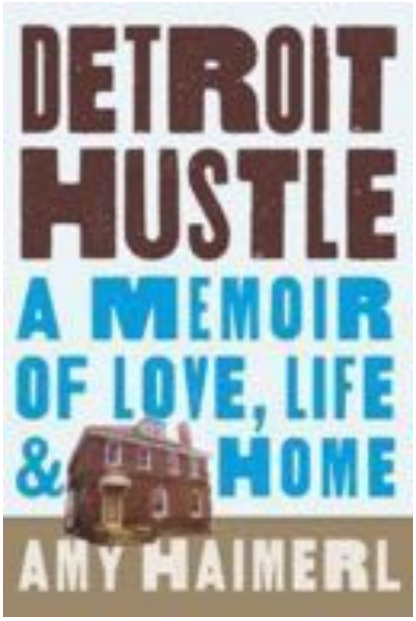
Bullying, Relocating, Observing, Inventing | Memoir

reviews.libraryjournal.com/2016/03/collection-development/memoir-short-takes/bullying-relocating-observing-inventing-memoir/

This month, three of our four memoirs focus on, among other things, iconic U.S. cities: Oakland, Detroit, and Los Angeles (and environs). Peter Selgin's *The Inventors*, which is the outlier in this bunch, is also in its own way very American—a major theme is reinvention. In his quest to find himself, the author explores what it means to remember, thus questioning the very nature of memoir writing. It is a book destined to become a modern classic.



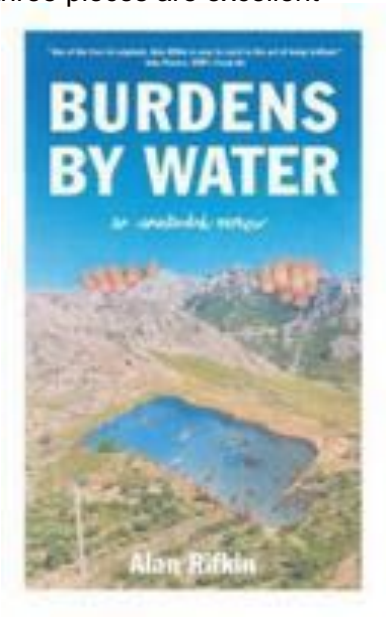
Abramovich, Alex. Bullies: A Friendship. Holt. Mar. 2016. 256p. ISBN 9780805094282. $26; ebk. ISBN 9781429949064. MEMOIR
In some aspects a 21st-century successor to Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels*, this debut memoir by journalist Abramovich provides readers with a wonderful and compact history of Oakland. On a whim, the author gets in touch with a classmate who used to bully him in elementary school. It turns out that his tormentor, Trevor, is now president of an Oakland-based motorcycle club called the East Bay Rats. Through Trevor, Abramovich gets to know members of the club and begins to investigate a city where he will eventually live. An unanswered question in the book is whether Trevor was really the bully Abramovich remembers him as being, or if Abramovich was himself the oppressor. Or, were the boys simply mean to each other? This question is raised early but never returned to, nor answered, and this leaves a (perhaps deliberate) sense of dissatisfaction long after the last page has been read. VERDICT This essential memoir, which could have been twice as long and remained as fascinating, is recommended for general readers.



Haimerl, Amy. Detroit Hustle: A Memoir of Love, Life & Home. Running Pr. May 2016. 256p. ISBN 9780762457359. $24; ebk. ISBN 9780762457441. MEMOIR
After being priced out of Brooklyn, journalist Haimerl and her husband decide to make their home in Detroit. They purchase a house that has to be completely gutted and ends up costing them more time and money than anticipated. In the process, they fall deeply in love with their new city and neighbors, coming to admire the resiliency of both. Haimerl also tells us about her upbringing and previous experience as a homeowner, encounters that have immensely informed the person she has become. Readers further learn many engrossing details about Detroit. Who knew, for example, that the city has canals? VERDICT Pictures of the house in question would have enhanced this book, and, at times, the prose is overwrought. Still, it is surprisingly full of practical advice and always entertaining.

Rifkin, Alan. Burdens by Water: An Unintended Memoir. Brown Paper Pr. 2016. 214p. ISBN 9781941932049. pap. $16.99; ebk. ISBN 9781941932056. MEMOIR
This collection of mostly personal essays by short-story author Rifkin (*Signal Hill*) focuses primarily on his life in and around California's San Fernando Valley. Three pieces in particular stand out. "Pool Man" chronicles, with humor and pathos, the author's adventures trailing after a Southern California pool man. "Consider the Richardsons" compares his own attempt (despite being Jewish) at living a Bible-based Christian marriage with the marriage of an evangelical pastor acquaintance of his. It is a funny and touching essay. Finally, the elegiac "E Luxo So (It's Only Luxury)" details growing up in Encino, CA, in the

wake of his parents' divorce. The rest of the collection is equally engaging, but these three pieces are excellent examples of the craft. VERDICT An original and funny/sad compilation of writings that will appeal to a wide readership.



Selgin, Peter. The Inventors. Hawthorne Bks. & Literary Arts. Apr. 2016. 352p. ISBN 9780989360470. pap. $18.95. MEMOIR
Selgin's (*Life Goes to the Movies*; *Drowning Lessons*) memoir debut focuses on the two men—the author's father and his eighth-grade English teacher—who had the most impact on his life. In telling the story of his relationships with these individuals, he uncovers not only what they hid from him and most other people in their lives, but unravels what people keep hidden from themselves. Short interludes are interspersed throughout; some tell fablelike stories that enhance the larger narrative, but just as often Selgin uses them to delve into the matter of how we narrate our lives, how impossible it really is to remember the past, how blending fiction and nonfiction often leads to a more believable version of the truth. As such, readers might wonder about the veracity of Selgin's story. Are we being told "the truth" or a version of the truth, and is there a difference? VERDICT A remarkable model of the art of the memoir, this book will satisfy all readers. Highly recommended.

THE INVENTORS BY PETER SELGIN

REVIEWED BY ROBERT MORGAN FISHER
May 16th, 2016

The central conceit of Peter Selgin's *The Inventors* is pretty irresistible: A young man (Selgin) turns to two men for guidance as he begins his journey into adulthood; one is an actual inventor (Selgin's father) and the other his eighth-grade teacher—who is also an "inventor" when it comes to disclosing details of his life. Both mentors share an emotional remoteness that young Selgin finds baffling and attractive. Selgin recruits the reluctant teacher as a way to make up for the shortcomings of his father. The events of the book cover about ten years, but they influence and haunt Selgin to this day.

Using brief interstitial chapters set in the present as springboards into each flashback, Selgin gracefully recounts events that happened 40+ years ago. His choice of second-person POV works surprisingly well in this format, creating a sort of self-bifurcation, allowing his adult self to address his younger self without affectation.

Duality has long-fascinated Peter Selgin. He has a twin brother, and his books (*Confessions of a Left-Handed Man*, *Life Goes to the Movies* and*Drowning Lessons*) revel in reflective surfaces and echoes. I like narratives that have a "rhyming effect"—some cloning mechanism to create tension and tone; this can manifest as a story within a story, or as a strong metaphor. The twin dynamic of father/teacher is used here so masterfully, it's as if Selgin has created a new kind of memoir.

Selgin's father was a genuine inventor who was never able to fully capitalize on his genius. Whether through self-sabotage or bad luck, the big score somehow eluded him. *The Inventors* is gorgeously designed with patent application diagrams from his father's inventions throughout. The illustrations are complex—almost indecipherable—and this of course gives the elder Selgin an appropriately cryptic aura. Both Peter's mother and father emigrated from Italy; his mother barely spoke any English and the marriage was rocky to say the least. As layer after layer of personality is peeled away, we learn that Peter's father was in fact Jewish. Paul Selgin turns out to be a man of many secrets. Early on, Peter realizes: "not for the first time but with a novel sense of bitter disappointment, that your papa, the human god who'd invented the world for you, was a remote, absentminded old man."

Hence, the need for supplemental mentorship—a doppelganger dad, if you will.

His teacher is never referred to by name, only as "the teacher." Peter loves the teacher and believes he senses the potential for reciprocity. Though the relationship never becomes physical, their emotional bond is strong. The teacher observes most boundaries, ignores others, and in this way he fills some of the gaping holes left by Peter's father. Peter's pursuit of girls is tempered by just enough homoerotic tension between himself and the teacher to make this a page-turner of the first order. It's a love story, but it's complicated. Selgin's journey spans many years and takes him all the way to the other side of the continent. Along the way there are: assorted love affairs; some time in New York City; a dalliance with acting and music; comic interludes; and many letters—the reprinted correspondence between Peter and his mentors constitute some of the best parts of the book. The author doles out details and discoveries expertly. I couldn't put this memoir down.

As I mentioned, this is also a first-generation immigrant story. World War II and The Holocaust loom in the background (Mussolini once kissed Selgin's mother on the cheek), though each parent's European history is so aggressively suppressed and unspoken it's no wonder young Peter is constantly searching for answers. Everyone in this book—indeed, everyone in America—is undergoing a constant process of reinvention. Encouraged—or at least inspired by—his two male mentors, Selgin dabbles in a variety of artistic pursuits, finally settling on writing and graphic arts. (As a painter he's the real deal; his work has appeared in many publications including *The New Yorker* and has been exhibited in galleries across North America.)

Among the book's more "inventive" touches is an afterword by Peter's twin brother, George. He takes issue—in a wry, ambivalent way—with certain details and verifies others. It's a masterful conclusion to a superb memoir. George writes: "The book's title is itself a warning. It is a book about inventors whose inventions consist of myths they've spun about themselves… But it is mostly about a third inventor, Peter himself, and his own creations, whose patent specification you are holding."

Like Peter, I'll give George the last word. Except to add: I highly recommend *The Inventors*.

Robert Morgan Fisher's fiction has appeared in *The Journal of Microliterature, Intrinsick Mag, Gemini Magazine, The Missouri Review Soundbooth Podcast, 0-Dark-Thirty, The Huffington Post, Psychopomp, The Seattle Review, The Spry Literary Journal, 34th Parallel, Spindrift, Bluerailroad* and many other publications. He has a story in the forthcoming Night Shade/Skyhorse Books Iraq War anthology, *Deserts of Fire* and a story coming out in the 2016 edition of *Red Wheelbarrow*. He's written for TV, radio and film. Robert holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University, where he works as a Book Coach and Writing Specialist. He also develops courses and teaches for Antioch's online I2P Program and runs a weekly writing workshop for veterans with PTSD in conjunction with UCLA. He often writes companion songs to his short stories. Both his music and fiction have won many awards. Robert also voices audiobooks. (www.robertmorganfisher.com) More from this author →

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BY JACOB SINGER | MAY 12, 2016 · 7:08 AM

The Inventors by Peter Selgin

REVIEW

"You could say they invented me."

What is refreshing about literary memoirs like Peter Selgin's is how they transform the reader through writing and sel
Inventors, Selgin charts his path from age thirteen to fifty-seven, focusing on the influence of two significant role moc
unnamed teacher. These men are complex, rich, mysterious, and flawed. Selgin's stories are personal and gut-wrench
foregrounding memory, language, and creativity. "Can words ever do the past justice? But words are about all I have,
device known as memory, that thinks it remembers the past, when really it's inventing it."

Paul Selgin, an Italian immigrant who spoke six languages, earned a PhD from Harvard, was a certified member of th
earned his living as an inventor, holding over fifty patents. He worked in a decrepit barn on the Selgin estate in small-
Paul the barn was a sanctuary that he used to escape the world; for Peter it was a shrine to worship his father the scie

The unnamed teacher is young, rebellious, and intelligent. He moves around the classroom like a tennis player, challe
think deeply, teaching them to "question authority, abhor clichés, shun received wisdom, resist jargon and sentimenta
welcomes Peter to visit him at his small house. There they drink tea and talk about books, art, and politics. These scer
bohemian fantasy. Young Peter has his own personal messiah, like a young Gary Snyder, a perfect blend of benevolen

As a result of these visits to the teacher's house, Peter starts to burn with a desire to read. He borrows books—dipping
waters of literature and philosophy. For example, he takes *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* home and reads ab
down the road. Young Peter makes it through a few pages before his eyes blur. But that's the start—the dawning of his

an artist. The tension between the scientist on the right and the philosopher on the left shakes Peter awake from the n
makes pre-adolescent boys such a nightmare.

Peter Selgin

Selgin the narrator, age fifty-seven, uses little stories to frame his memoir. In one story, a boy asks his guru for a chrys
agrees under the condition that when the butterfly emerges, the boy must resist helping it. Of course the boy can't cor
interfere and as a result the butterfly dies.

One day, while Peter is visiting the teacher's home, the two antagonize each other. There in the privacy of the cabin, tl
to be pleasurable. We are left in the dark as to the exact nature of this interaction. But as the story progresses, it becor
young teacher is not letting nature run its own course according. He encourages a collegiate mentality in all of his pup
Peter, even though they haven't started high school. For both of them, the relationship offers a sense of being exceptic
needed. The pupil feels wanted. That feeling of being recognized as special is pure intoxication. The emotional high of
Peter to the arts, to New York City, and eventually to a Kerouac road trip in search of his old maestro.

"In a word, you wanted to be special [....] the need to be special set you apart from others if not at odds with them."

The desire to be special is important in this book because Peter is a twin. He has a genetic replica who is equally loved
by their parents. It's hard to feel special in this situation. The Selgin brothers, in many ways, mirror one another while
each other. One embraces Ayn Rand. The other becomes a bohemian. One becomes an economist in Georgia's state u
other teaches creative writing. George is the libertarian. Peter is the libertine.

Throughout the book Selgin uses binaries to create meaning. He sets up a clear contrast between his father and his tea
follows adheres to logic while his teacher is infatuated with the mystical and the aesthetic. This binary also describes t
that Paul doesn't love his son. Paul is preoccupied with his work. He talks *to* Peter, while the teacher talks *with* Peter.

The Inventors is a sensitive examination of how friends and family are responsible for inventing a person. Selgin is sn
what makes him unique. He can point to his twin brother. He can point to his father and the teacher. He uses all these
that reader can see how each figure influenced his development. But after finishing this book I'm also left with a deep
invented himself.

***Jacob Singer**'s writing can be found at Electric Literature, The Collagist, and Entropy. He is currently finishing a
inspired by corporate conspiracies, punk rock, and video games. He can be found on Twitter @jacobcsinger.*

KIRKUS
REVIEWS

THE INVENTORS

A Memoir

by Peter Selgin

Pub Date: April 12th, 2016
ISBN: 978-0-9893604-7-0
Publisher: Hawthorne Books

Selgin (*Confessions of a Left-Handed Man: An Artist's Memoir*, 2011, etc.) explores his relationships with two men who "had a profound influence" on him.

As a twin, the author "had to share everything" with his brother, from birthdays and appearance to the love of their parents. They were also competitors and rivals. In this memoir, Selgin examines how their relationship combined with the influence of his father and his eighth-grade teacher to shape his own identity. The author's brother was "the person he looked up to more than…anyone else," his father was an iconoclastic inventor of electronic devices, and his English teacher was someone for whom he developed a long-lasting adolescent crush. Only after the deaths of his father and his teacher did Selgin discover that both had hidden key parts of their lives. At his father's funeral, he was stunned to be asked, "did you know your father was Jewish?" Later, quite by accident, Selgin discovered an obituary of his teacher and was astonished to learn of his Native American background. Family members told the author they either knew or suspected the truth about his father, and the teacher had taught him about art, music, and his dream of a place called "Castalia," "a special community where scholars, teachers, artists, *people who still know how to think and dream*, would come together." Through his writing and other artistic pursuits, Selgin began to share that dream. After his death, the teacher's dream had been brought to life in the form of an American Indian longhouse, while the uses of some of his father's electronic inventions caused him to reinvent his past. "It was strange," writes Selgin, "that the two men who had meant so much to you…both felt the need to break with their pasts and reinvent themselves." Though they buried their own pasts, their influences helped the author invent himself, and thrive, through his search for his own Castalia.

A reflective investigation of the self, memory, and invention.

Best Books 2016 | Honorable Mentions

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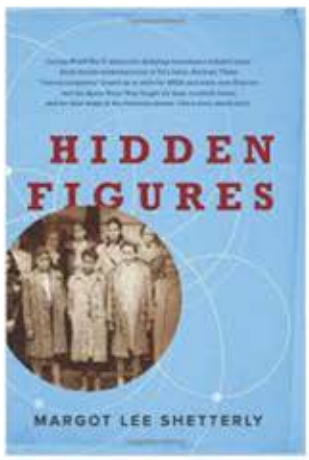

Memoir

Rachael Dreyer (RD), Pennsylvania State Univ. Dept. of Libs., & Derek Sanderson (DS), Mount Saint Mary Coll. Lib., Newburgh, NY

Batalion, Judy. White Walls: A Memoir About Motherhood, Daughterhood, and the Mess in Between. NAL: Penguin. ISBN 9780451473110. pap.
Batalion details her difficult relationship with her mother, a hoarder. She reinvents herself as she embarks on her own adventures in motherhood, and tracks back through her family history, back to her grandparents, who survived the Holocaust. (Memoir, 12/14/15)—RD

Offutt, Chris. My Father, the Pornographer. Atria: S. & S. ISBN 9781501112461.
Offutt explores his father's secret life as an author of pornographic novels and is disturbed by what he finds. Though the author covers a lot of territory, the focus is on fathers and sons and the chasms that can divide them. This remarkable title will enthrall from page one. (Memoir, 11/16/15)—DS

Spiegelman, Nadja. I'm Supposed To Protect You from All This. Riverhead. ISBN 9781594631924.
Spiegelman's multigenerational memoir of her mother Françoise Mouly, and her grandmother, Josée, is a close look at the painful fractures that exist between mothers and daughters. Spiegelman examines how family patterns repeat, how the same stories differ when told by different people, and how memories veer into the territory of "interpretation" rather than "undeniable truth."—RD

Selgin, Peter. The Inventors. Hawthorne Bks. & Literary Arts. 9780989360470. pap.
During the process of uncovering the true stories about the two men—the author's father and his eighth-grade English teacher—who had the most impact on his life, Selgin explores the very nature of the veracity of the stories we tell about our lives. A remarkable model of the art of the memoir. (Memoir, 3/15/16)—DS

Yang, Kao Kalia. The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father. Metropolitan: Holt. 9781627794947.
Yang tells the story of her father, Bee, who grew up in the Laotian mountains during the years when the country was immersed in brutal conflict. Bee is a song poet, and his talents are greatly revered among the Laotian community in Minnesota, but he struggles with refugee resettlement in mainstream America. (Memoir, 2/17/16)—RD

Poetry

Barbara Hoffert

Girmay, Aracelis. The Black Maria. BOA. 104p. ISBN 9781942683025. pap.
Using bold, sharply lyric language, Girmay recalls the larger African diaspora as she commemorates the more than 20,000 people who have died sailing from North Africa to Europe in a bid for a better life: "our passages/ above which, again,/ we are the shipped." As the title poem clarifies, being thus "mis-seen" defines life for people of color. Beautiful, brilliant, and palpably angry. (*LJ* 4/1/16)

Thank You, Teacher

GRATEFUL STUDENTS *Tell the Stories of*
the Teachers Who CHANGED THEIR LIVES

edited by

Holly & Bruce Holbert

SUZANNE HARPER is the author of two young adult novels, *The Secret Life of Sparrow Delaney* and *The Juliet Club*; a middle-grade series, The Unseen World of Poppy Malone; and several nonfiction books, *The Real Spy's Guide to Becoming a Spy*, *33 More Things Every Girl Should Know*, and more. Please visit her website at www.suzanneharper.com or read her blog at www.sharperauthor.wordpress.com.

[It Only Took Me a Moment or Two to Recognize Him]

PETER SELGIN
author and playwright

MR. FESH
sixth grade, Frank M. Berry Elementary, Bethel, Connecticut

NOT LONG AGO I did a reading at a Barnes & Noble bookstore in Danbury, Connecticut, a few miles from the town where I grew up and lived for eighteen years. It was a beautiful autumn day, sunny, breezy, and cool (as the forecasters like to say). On the drive up from the Bronx my companion and I marveled at the fiery displays of colors in the trees along the Saw Mill Parkway. This is my favorite time of year, when the leaves begin to fall, when the sky rains dry flecks of yellow, and the earth wears a bright-colored quilt of red and golden leaves. I wondered, on such a beautiful day, who would want to spend an hour indoors listening to someone read from a book?

To my surprise quite a few people, many of them strangers, and many more familiar. My proud mother invited many of her friends, and there were faces I recognized from my undergraduate year at Western Connecticut State University, and even a few faces of people I'd gone to high school with in Bethel. One friend, Mark, had driven down from Vermont

with his new family, a beautiful wife and two equally beautiful boys, one still at his mother's breast. Mark and I had been in touch but hadn't seen each other in years. Mark looked good — a little huskier, his hair gone completely white, but otherwise unchanged, and with a smile that spoke eloquently of the pleasures of fatherhood and family.

But of all the faces both familiar and unfamiliar, one touched me more deeply than any other. I was speaking to Mark's wife when I looked up and saw a man approaching. He wore a white Windbreaker and a baseball cap — Yankees, I think. He was tall, broad shouldered. It took me only a moment or two to recognize him, despite his being out of the narrow focal range of my nearsighted eyes; and even after I had recognized him, still there was a moment of confusion, since I was unprepared to believe what my eyes told me and what seemed a little too much like a dream. For here was my sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Fesh, come to check on his pupil.

"I know this man," I said out loud as he approached, a smile already spreading across my face.

In forty years he hadn't changed that much. He was still tall, still good-looking (from what I could see under the shadowy visor of the baseball cap). I recognized his deep voice. "Mr. Selgin," he said — the same form of address he had used in sixth grade. I didn't say, "Mr. Fesh!" I didn't have to; my smile spoke for me.

We shook hands, but that wouldn't do: I had to give him a hug.

In sixth grade I had a crush on Mr. Fesh. Not a homosexual crush, since I liked girls in that way, but the crush of a sixth grader ripe for role models. My father, after all, was much older than most fathers I knew, and though he had other virtues and charms and I loved him dearly, I found him lacking

in certain physical respects (he detested all sports and refused to jump into water). And here was this teacher, a man — the first male teacher I'd ever had — handsome, tall (my father was handsome but already gray, half-bald, with a paunch, and not tall), scarcely twenty-four years old. He looked like Paul Newman.

Back in sixth grade Mr. Fesh still had all his hair. He didn't need the baseball cap. He wore spiffy blazers, pale blue and yellow oxford cloth shirts, and sharp striped neckties with silver and gold tie pins. I remember going to the local Caldor department store and searching among the racks for ties and blazers like the ones Mr. Fesh wore, and gleaming tie pins to go with them. I had no reason to wear such garments and no events to wear them to. Still, I prized them because I wanted to be like Mr. Fesh. He wore shiny brown wing tips. I begged my mother for a pair. Wing tips!

Mr. Fesh must have known that I had a crush on him — a teacher's pet crush. I suspect he liked it. I'm a teacher now myself and wouldn't mind thinking that one or two of my students had crushes on me, though I don't imagine that any of them do. They are older undergraduates, and children of a more (with good reason) skeptical generation, and much less inclined to hero-worship their teachers.

Once my mother invited Mr. Fesh and his wife for dinner. What an exciting night! It was like having all four of the Beatles over for supper. I remember little about that evening beyond my excitement. Mr. Fesh drove a spiffy red convertible Mustang: the perfect car for a pubescent boy's role model. I remember watching through the window and seeing it come up the driveway. I remember the feeling that accompanied this spectacle, the sense that anything could happen, that miracles really did exist in this world.

After teaching sixth grade for a year or two, Mr. Fesh became a phys ed instructor. One of his sons had a brief baseball career and played in the major leagues for several seasons until an injury of some sort cut his career short. I imagine that this must have been a huge blow to his father. Mr. Fesh, meanwhile, went on to become a baseball scout. I learned these things over the years through the grapevine.

Now here was Mr. Fesh, alive and looking well. Retired, he told me. I asked him if he planned to stay for the reading. "Nah." He shook his head. "Don't think so. Too boring." I recognized that glint in his eye and his deadpan delivery. "Now *there's* someone I need to say hello to," he said, and I followed his eyes to my eighty-year-old mother. I remembered how he and my mom had flirted with each other, how a few times on school field trips they sat together on the bus until someone warned Mr. Fesh, "You better stop sitting next to that lady; people are starting to talk." It seems my mother and I both had a crush on my sixth-grade teacher.

While reading to my small audience, I saw no sign of Mr. Fesh. Perhaps he had left after all, I thought. But as soon as I'd finished he appeared again, off to the side, giving me the thumbs-up.

"I'm proud of you," he said. Had my dead father come back as a ghost and uttered those same words, I would not have been more pleased.

Over the years I've often wondered if it's all been worth it — the rejection, the struggle, the disappointments and despair and disillusionment that come with a vocation in the arts, if they have served any real purpose, if there's been a meaning to what I've done, or tried to do, with my life for the past thirty years. Most of all I've wondered if the sacrifices (money, sound sleep, security) have been worth it. Yesterday afternoon, when Mr. Fesh gave me the thumbs-up, I had my answer: a resounding yes.

Sometimes, if only for a moment or two, here and there, life really does mean something.

Thanks, Mr. Fesh.

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Peter Selgin
FROM A PARIS NOTEBOOK

Paris, 12 Aout, 199 —

At an outdoor table at a café on the Boulevard Diderot ("Men will never be free until the last king is strangled to death with the entrails of the last priest"). Cane chairs, Gitane smoke, the Gare de Lyon across the street. I'm reminded of something. Twenty-three years ago I slept there, in the station. I took off my shoes and curled up on a luggage cart. I woke up to find myself rolling under girders, a pair of porters laughing as they trundled me. That same morning I begged patrons at café tables like this one for their uneaten croissants.

Jean jacket, cowboy boots, scruffy beard.

My first trip to Europe.

Waiting for Josiane, who wants to take me to some museums.

•

We met at the top of the gorge, where she straddled her *vélo.* I spent three weeks there, at an artist's residency at the base of the eight-hundred foot gorge, living in one of two stone towers guarding the walled village. I had my own yard and a table for my watercolors. My sponsor, an international lawyer, was suddenly called to New York City on an important case. I knew no one in the village. I was completely on my own there.

The next day Josiane drove us to the public pool in Espallion, where the night before for 4F apiece we watched the fireworks display from the candle-lit bridge. When we arrived at the pool I discovered I'd left my *maillot* back at the tower. I raided the lost-and-found box for a substitute, settling on a polka-dotted Speedo that Josiane found *"très drôle."*

•

Tristan and Gregoire, Josiane's grown sons, the products of different failed marriages, met us there. I raced them across the fifty-meter pool, to a dead heat with Gregoire, though Tristan beat us both easily.

"Let's do a hundred!" I said.

Josiane exercised on the lawn. For a woman with two strapping triathlete sons, she's in terrific shape, firm and muscular, with marvelous upthrust breasts.

•

In Bozouls it rained almost every day, a bleak atmosphere that mimicked the colors of the stone houses and walls. Women in dark shawls carried wicker baskets of dried fruit; wiry men in dusty work clothes playing boules; church bells tolling in the damp air; desultory faces glimpsed through stone windows; a man burning twigs in his yard, another splitting wood, a third wielding a pick-axe against a pile of stones … Waiflike children crowding around my café table, saying, "What are you writing? What are you sketching? Write about me. Draw *my* picture!"

And though I enjoyed my solitude, climbing up and down the steep road to one of two cafes on the lip of the gorge, writing and sketching in my journal while sipping coffee or an aperitif and watching the sun go up or down, I was lonesome.

After three weeks all those gray stones depressed me.

I longed for museums and pretty women. I longed for Paris.

•

I've been sitting outdoors, sun-stroked, sipping my *citron pressé,* when from the darkness inside a voice calls to me.

Josiane! She's been sitting there all the time.

"I never sit in the sun," she says. "Never!"

She wears a black dress, with a gold and silver necklace, her hair Henna-dyed a deep purple. We exchange the customary triple-kiss, more customary in the country than here in Paris, where, Josiane tells me,

people are more *fermés*, more closed.

"Paris isn't the city of love they say it is," she warns me. "It is a city of lonely, sullen, arrogant people."

•

In her car we ride to the center of Paris. By the Place de Clichy we park and cross the bridge spanning the cemetery where Truffaut, Berlioz, Stendhal, Soutine, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Baudelaire, Brancusi, Maupassant, Beckett, Jim Morrison, and Jean Seberg are buried.

From there we walk to Montmartre, of Paris' thirteen *collines* the only one of any amplitude, Montparnasse being but a gentle swell, though none of the hills is large enough to prevent the city from looking, from atop the Eiffel Tower, like a pancake.

•

Montmartre: home to bad art and the Sacré Coeur, crowning the hill with its dozen breast-like white domes. For 1.5 F you can enjoy a snack while taking in the view from which the Eiffel Tower, hidden by trees, is conspicuously absent.

Having taken (and failed) Josiane's snap geography quiz, I stroll with her down the twisting cobblestone streets immortalized by Gene Kelly, finding them strangely empty. Tourists, mimes, postcard racks. A mime done up as the Statue of Liberty but in white greasepaint.

We turn corners, swinging past what's said to have been Dali's studio, but is actually a small water tower with very narrow windows. Then down a flight of steep stone stairs up which a man in a suit, smoking a pipe and looking very much like Georges Simenon, ascends.

•

"Petit Musée de Montmartre." Modesty being so rare, we decide to have a look. The fee isn't so modest, 40F per person, nor are the proprietors inclined to underestimate the worth of their holdings, or the public's willingness to make off with them. I'm forced to check a plastic

shopping bag — unhappily, since it holds my notebook, my glasses, and a box of sketching pens.

Muttering something to the effect that I doubt I could fit any of their precious relics in my little bag, I stuff its contents into various pockets.

•

Small though it is, the collection was worth the price of admission, with paintings, sketches, letters and other documents by Utrillo, Andre Utter, Max Jacob, posters by Lautrec and Vlaminck, and a room where the bar at Café de l'Abreuvoir, Utrillo's favorite watering hole, has been reconstituted bottle by bottle, complete with zinc sink and silver absinthe spoons.

Though I don't steal anything, there are things in the little museum I'd like to steal, including several small paintings and watercolors by Redon, Derain, and my favorite, Rouault, whose portrait of two judges consists of a series of slashed lines of thick black ink snaring swatches of dazzling color.

Next to the Roualt, in a sickly diploma frame that does it no justice, a letter from Max Jacob to Maurice Raynal at the bottom of which a figure in blue ink emerges from a ghostly filigree of the most gorgeous handwriting. What I'd give to have handwriting like that! I'd never stop writing. I'd be a graphomaniac.

As we step from one small room into the next, my eyes grow wider, my heart beats faster. Letters, poems, notebook pages and other documents by Apollinaire, Modigliani, van Dongen, and Pascin, old menus from the Dome and the Rotonde, a paint box, a pencil holder, a pocket watch, a pair of silk gloves …

The Valium I swallowed aboard the night train from Toulouse has worn off. I've forgotten all about the woman with whom I'd shared my *wagon-lit*. I've even forgotten all about Josiane, who stands here next to me — not so much about her, as about the prospect of sex with her — a prospect that has scented the air all morning long with a trace of *eau de toilette,* but that fades as I gaze into the sultry haze spreading itself over the slums of Paris that we stand facing together.

Meanwhile Josiane points out yet another architectural wonder that, for all I care, could be the Great Pyramid of Giza or Yankee Stadium. They could build another Eiffel Tower in front of us, for all I care.

All that matters to me at the moment is art: Max Jacob's art, Utrillo's art, Rouault's art, but mostly my own art, whatever form it might take in the near future. For the first time in weeks I feel inspired.

•

I forgot my little plastic bag, the one in which I'd carried my notebook, my glasses, my pen box, walking out of the Petit Musée de Montmartre without it. When I returned for it, the receptionist looked at me over the tops of her bifocals as if I were a rare specimen of insect. "Your *leetle* bag is over there," she said in sniffy, precise English, pointing with her elongated chin to the corner.

"Merci," I said, taking a step toward it.

"You know," she added in French, smiling, "the little bag which you so cleverly remarked is too small to steal anything in this museum. Hmm?"

"Yes, thank you," I said, returning her smile while reaching for it.

"As you no doubt have observed, *monsieur,"* she added while pretending to be preoccupied with something else, something more important, "our museum, small and relatively obscure though it may be, holds many priceless items which might very well fit into your small and, incidentally, rather unprepossessing bag."

"Uh, yes, indeed," I said, and started to leave. By this time the lady had withdrawn from under the counter a lethal looking knife, a *Laguiole* like the ones Josiane collected, with a handle of ox horn, or was it tortoise shell? With a flourish she popped out the serrated blade. It caught the harsh light of the vestibule. I wondered if she intended to slit my insolent American throat with it.

"You see this knife?" she asked, carving a square shape into the air before my eyes. "Two slices — *comme ça — !"* another square, " — and a document worth 100,000 … 200,000 …300,000 francs — more! — *et voilà:* out of the frame it goes and into a small, ugly, plastic bag such as yours."

"You're so right, Madame," I said, and holding my bag tentatively, as if it contained either a priceless relic or a lump of *merde,* I started out of the museum again. But madam wasn't through with me.

"And if you think it hasn't happened, *monsieur,* think again! It has, several times! Only last month a man such as yourself, a foreigner, an American (she spat the word) left here with two — *two!* — small etchings of Vlaminck — *oui, monsieur,* in a plastic bag — one no larger than yours!" She waved the *Laguiole* menacingly at me and my plastic bag that, were it not for that knife, I'd have used to suffocate her. "So you see, monsieur, just how *stupide* was your remark, *oui?"*

Parisians, so critical yet so thin-skinned. The thing to do in cases like this is to humble oneself. Two things Parisians respond well to: insults and groveling. Nothing in-between will suffice.

"Madame," I say, "You are so right. But then I'm just a loutish American tourist. What do I know of art, of museums, of thieves — of plastic bags? Forgive my insolence and ignorance. As long as I live, I shall never attempt to enter a museum of any kind with a small, plastic bag. Certainly not your museum, Madam, which I shall remember — along with you — for the rest of my days."

•

The thing about journals: you have to be honest in them. There's no point lying. Tell one lie in the pages of a journal and everything in it turns to shit.

No place for secrets in a notebook.

Who writes these words? A man-child in Paris, a man who looks at himself in reflective surfaces, who picks his nose, who reads himself to sleep, who suffers insomnia and untold headaches, who prefers wine to beer, who finds men and women equally attractive, but sleeps only with women; who, in a pinch, will use anyone's toothbrush, who eats buttered toast that has fallen on the floor, who hates flossing, who sneezes as loudly as he possibly can, who masturbates frugally, as if someone were keeping track, who likes striped socks, who never balances his checkbook, who hates the thought of growing old, who thinks the whole world should be

a café, or maybe a library, or maybe both — with a lake or ocean nearby (who once swam in a lake with a cafe beside it, literally stripped to his Speedo in the bathroom and came out and dove into the lake with his cappuccino still warm on the table) … whose handwriting is godawful, whose drawing pens tend to leak, who draws like an angel and flirts like the devil, who has trouble believing in anything, who can't stand bare walls, who finds it too warm, who deplores the color "beige," who has turned into his father in spite of everything, whose hair refuses to turn gray, who used to sing, who finds anchovies divine, who takes the Lord's name in vain, who is increasingly nearsighted, who favors one leg, whose fingers are small vis-à-vis his palms, who will never find perfect silence, whose dreams, when he has them, aren't the least bit memorable, who really should buy a decent pair of shoes, who finishes other people's sentences, whom timorous people find arrogant (a perception owing as much to their timorousness as to his arrogance), who fears strictly heterosexual men, especially those near to him in age, who forgets to drink water, who detests forced joy as expressed by the ejaculation *whoopie,* who thinks neckties should be worn by the homeless, who considers diet Coca-Cola a vast conspiracy, who from time to time, still, but more and more rarely as he grows older, laments having given up becoming a movie star …

Then again it's impossible to ever know anyone, really.

•

From Montmartre we descend through a square jammed with tourist stalls of bad art, palette paintings of "quaint" Parisian streets, faux Utrillos, Pissarros and Dufys … Seeing so much bad art makes me famished for the real thing. I especially long to see an original by Louis Vivin, whose paintings I fell in love with when I chanced upon one in a book about naive artists. Like *Le Douanier* Rousseau, Vivin was a former postal clerk who spent his pension years painting. Unlike Rousseau, Vivin worked not from imagination, but from postcards, producing dogmatically literal paintings of Parisian monuments — the Louvre, the Pantheon, Sacré Coeur, Notre Dame — devotional paintings in which nearly every trace of perspective is obliterated while every last brick

and window is accounted for with a child's obsessive earnestness. Vivin's guileless canvasses are permeated with his innocent joy. They conjure a calm structured world wherein humans and buildings exist in perfect order and harmony, a world wherein such things as wars, poverty, and disaster don't exist, and life is a monument to itself. Vivin's paintings are so utterly void of irony or cynicism, looking at them may increase one's appetite for reality. And yet there's nothing realistic about Vivin's paintings, which in their stubborn literalness rub up against surrealism.

And though he stands by every brick and window, Vivin takes joyful liberties with his colors, turning bricks and sidewalks pink, skies yellow, windows blue, roofs ocher, and cobblestones the dusty purple of a storm at sea.

•

We drive past the boutiques of St. Germain, to a district of specialty shops and galleries in the 7th *arrondisement,* in search of *Le Fondation Dina Vierny,* where the *Musee Maillol* is located, and where Josiane — who like all Parisians knows her art — says they have a large collection of primitive and naïve works, including some Vivins. But when we get there the gallery is holding an exhibition on a contemporary sculptor, its permanent holdings in storage. There is, however, a bookshop where I find a monograph of Louis Vivin's work, brimming with color plates and costing a mere 295 francs — a steal.

The book under my arm we repair to a nearby café, where I flip the pages. Josiane approves of Vivin's art, her Vanessa Redgrave smile widening with each color plate. We go through the whole book, arriving at last at a photograph of the artist. With its buffoonish mustache, Vivin's is indeed the face of a former postal official: dull, dim, officious — the kind of face children poke fun at.

"Il n'est pas beau," Josiane observes.

"Au contraire. Il est trés beau." For me, at that moment, Louis Vivin is the handsomest man in the world.

•

I've no idea what Josiane does for a living, among other things,

and know better than to ask. In general the French don't like to talk about work, and Parisians in particular are cagey when it comes to their vocations, especially if the inquiring party is a New Yorker. Unlike New Yorkers, Parisians aren't career-obsessed; given a choice they'd much rather live than work. They don't much care what they do, provided it allows them ample time for lunch and vacations.

•

Our free admission to the *Musee d'Art Moderne* entitles us only to the Dufy and Matisse rooms. "La Fée Électricité," the huge mural Dufy designed for the 1937 *Exposition Internationale*, is there in its entirety. Dufy's paintings always annoy me slightly, with their willful sloppiness and the way the color patches in the background bump into one another in sickly ways. Dufy disdains slickness. That said a lot of his work, certainly "La Fée Électricité" (commissioned by the French equivalent of Con Ed), is illustrative. Whether his work is illustrative or not, Dufy discovered a magical language of line and color that's as elegant and simple as a picnic on the beach, or Chinese calligraphy. His paintings are really sketches, blown-up jottings from the artist's notebook, elevated — through fearlessness and craft — to masterpieces.

•

Matisse's *La Danse de Paris* covers the upper third of a long white wall. A half-dozen bloated gray figures with arms and legs cropped, victims of a grisly murder dredged from the Seine — dance against a background of scumbled blue. Unlike Dufy, Matisse was clearly uninterested in prettiness. Even his most decorative works seldom put one in mind — as Dufy's often do — of wallpaper.

As for *La Danse de Paris,* I've got to say, it works its magic on me, with its subtle blues and grays dancing next to a sly border of sepia-brown. How does an artist arrive at such color harmonies — sepia-brown against gray and blue? Succulent! And all those minute variations in color, that tiny blot of pacific cobalt, for instance, in a restless sea of slate blue. And those dozens of shades of gray — gray, my all-time favorite color, since

it's impossible, since there's no such color, there can *be* no such color, just as there's no such thing as black or white, only the concept of blackness or the absence of light — the absence of seeing — an absence that makes all colors *impossible*. Which is why gray is my favorite color, since it mixes the impossibility of *black* with the impossibility of *white* (all colors of absolute intensity combined absolutely), creating a third impossibility, the ultimate impossibility: G*ray*. And people think gray's a dull color! *La Danse de Paris* is a feast, a smorgasbord in serene blue and impossible gray, colors not happy or sad, that make something like joy out of something like despair.

•

The most interesting sight at the Musée D'Orsay is the building, the former Gare d'Orsay, rendered obsolete as a train station by the construction of the Gare Montparnasse. Parisians have a favorite poster, a historic photograph of a locomotive that has just rammed through an outer wall of the Gare d'Orsay.

The inscription: "Merde."

•

Picasso is a barrel of monkeys — and rhinos and toucans and elephants and bulls and fish and sunny women with assholes where their hearts should be. He made guitars from rusty tin cans and goats out of hat blocks and rope. Hating Picasso is like hating a child. Deplore Picasso and you deplore human nature.

Picasso is Picasso because he's free, and he's free because he's Picasso.

I used to not like Picasso all that much. I thought he was a clever painter who imitated other artists, who stole their ideas and ran with them faster than any of them could run. Then, when he got tired of them, he'd drop them and seek out other amusements.

That's what I used to think. Now I think pretty much the same thing, with this difference: now I consider him a genius, an innovator and not just an imitator. As good a painter as he was (and he was pretty good), he was an even better liberator. Picasso gave permission to Art. Like a

lifeguard performing artificial resuscitation on a drowning victim, he breathed lust and vigor into its deflated, waterlogged lungs. "From now on," he decided, "a painting can be, among other things, ugly." And he unveiled his *Demoiselles.*

Having given paintings permission to be "ugly," Picasso made ugly paintings beautiful. He made ugly paintings so beautiful that for the next half century other artists banged their heads into walls and tied themselves into knots trying to figure out how to make ugly paintings ugly again.

•

Fed up with museums, we cross the boulevard to a café, where, over *salades de Roquefort,* Josiane fills me in on her past loves. As unwilling as they are to discuss work, Parisians are more than happy, eager even, to talk about love. She has quite a history, Josiane, with men and women young and old, including several encounters with people she met on her *vélo,* one a parking lot attendant.

"What next?" I say when we've finished our meal.

"Comme tu veux."

It's her answer to everything. If I said, "Let's cross the city in a hot air balloon," or "Let's get married," Josiane would say, *"Comme tu veux."*

•

We speed past *fleuristes* and *bouquinistes* along the Quai de la Mégisserie, headed for the Cluny baths. Parisian streets defy logic, neither parallel nor perpendicular, but at odd angles, while changing course two or three times, so halfway down a one-way street you find yourself going the wrong way.

By the time we leave the baths it's four thirty. There's a cinema across the street. "Allons," says Josiane, taking my arm.

•

Venus in Fur, the movie, shot in black and white, is about a sadomasochistic relationship. Lingering shots of wax dripping from a lit

candle onto a woman's nipple; a man on all fours with a stiletto heel hovering over the small of his back.

I've never seen the appeal of masochism or sadism. Combining them only doubles my distaste. There's something silly about people playing with pain, as if it were a kid's box of colored crayons.

As for mixing it with pleasure, it's like putting ketchup on a truffle omelet, or playing Mozart's *Requiem* at the wrong speed.

But the movie grips Josiane, who's seen it several times, making me wonder if she's got a thing for nipple clamps and cigarette burns. Am I being initiated? Does she keep whips in her bookcase, with her Robbe-Grillet novels and her collection of *Laguiole* knives, including her favorite with the tri-colored handle — feldspar, azurite, and marble — the colors of the French flag?

Question:What did the sadist say to the masochist? Answer: No.

•

Back in Josiane's Fiat, streaming along the Marne toward her neighborhood and a restaurant antipathetic to tourists. She points to a bridge stained with twilight.

"There is where I cross the river on my *vélo,"* she says. "And there — " she points again, " — is where I took a nasty spill on my *vélo* three years ago and nearly split my skull. And there, by those four big trees, one day on my *vélo* …"

It emerges that Josiane has lived much of her life, grown up, been educated, worked, fallen in love, lost her virginity, been married thrice and spawned two strapping athletic offspring — all on her *vélo.* I'm reminded of a game played with Chinese fortune cookies in which the phrase "in bed" is added to the end of every fortune, but in Josiane's case the words are *on my vélo*.

"And there — " She points yet again, each thrust of her finger stabbing my tired, hungry brain. "That's where I met my third husband, Claude, *on my vélo."*

•

At an Italian bistro in Saint-Maur we eat a pizza named after Romeo and Juliet. The *patron* looks like Louis Vivin. He practices his Italian on me. *"Allora, come ti piace la mia pizza?"* From her purse Josiane unfolds a photocopied *pièce de théâtre* by Peter Handke. Together we translate it into English:

Play the game. Threaten work (?) Don't be the main event. Seek out confrontation, yet have no intentions. Do away with hindsight. Don't keep things to yourself. Be soft yet strong. Be clever. Jump in but despise victory. Don't observe, don't examine, but be alert to the signs, be vigilant. Be shakable. Show your eyes, lead others into profundity, give them their space and consider each in his own image. Make choices only out of enthusiasm. Crash calmly. Above all take your time and take detours. Let yourself be distracted. Take yourself, so to speak, on a vacation. Don't neglect the sound of a single tree, or a single river. Go where you desire and give yourself the sun. Forget your family, give strength to strangers, embrace details. Go where there's no one, ignore destiny, disdain sadness, appease conflict with your smile. Be colorful and be within your rights, such that the sound of leaves turns sweet. Pass through the villages — I'll follow you.

•

Naturally I want to sleep with her, but I don't want to presume. Nor do I want to go back to my one-star hotel, with its coughs and bells.

I'm reminded of something a friend once told me about Parisian women, how their attitude toward sex is infinitely more relaxed than in the U.S., how the average Parisian views sex more-or-less as we Americans view a glass of water. You offer it to anyone who looks thirsty.

•

Like most Parisians Josiane lives far from the city center, in a cramped studio in a stucco building in a less-than-enchanting neighborhood. Clean, though, and quiet, stocked with experimental literature and avant-garde music in glassed-in cases.

I watch her squat in front of an old-fashioned tape recorder, the kind

with two big plastic reels, threading Strauss's Four Last Lieders through its rollers and capstans.

As we lay stretched out on her sofa listening to the fourth lieder I hear the sound of the distant cavalry, followed by a minor earthquake occurring somewhere in a neglected island nation below the equator.

In Josiane's bathroom — as cramped and sparkling as the rest of her home — the world empties out of me: Romeo, Juliet, wine, dreams, doubts, desires, regrets, Dufy, Redon, Vivin, Sacré Coeur, Le Petit Musée de Montmartre, ambitions, promises, Rouault, Picasso, and so forth. Kettledrum hollow, I emerge.

•

With Vivaldi's *Stabat Mater* playing on her anachronistic tape recorder, under her bookshelves sagging with *nouveaux romans,* her hennaed hair showing traces of gray at the roots, her breasts tasting bitterly of perfume, the muscles of her *derrière en poire* so solid the eyes on the moth wings tattooed there scarcely flutter with our thrusts, we make uncomplicated love. While thrusting away I'm thinking *it's impossible, we'll never really know each other. She is darkness personified!*

Afterwards I fall into a deep sleep, waking minutes later to the buzz of an electric saw. It's pitch dark. Some shithead is sawing wood. With an electric saw. At two o'clock in the morning. *On a Sunday!*

"That is Jacques, my neighbor," Josiane explains, yawning. "He is putting a new floor on his terrace."

"Est-il fou?" ("Is he insane?")

"Pourquoi?"

"Does he know what time it is?"

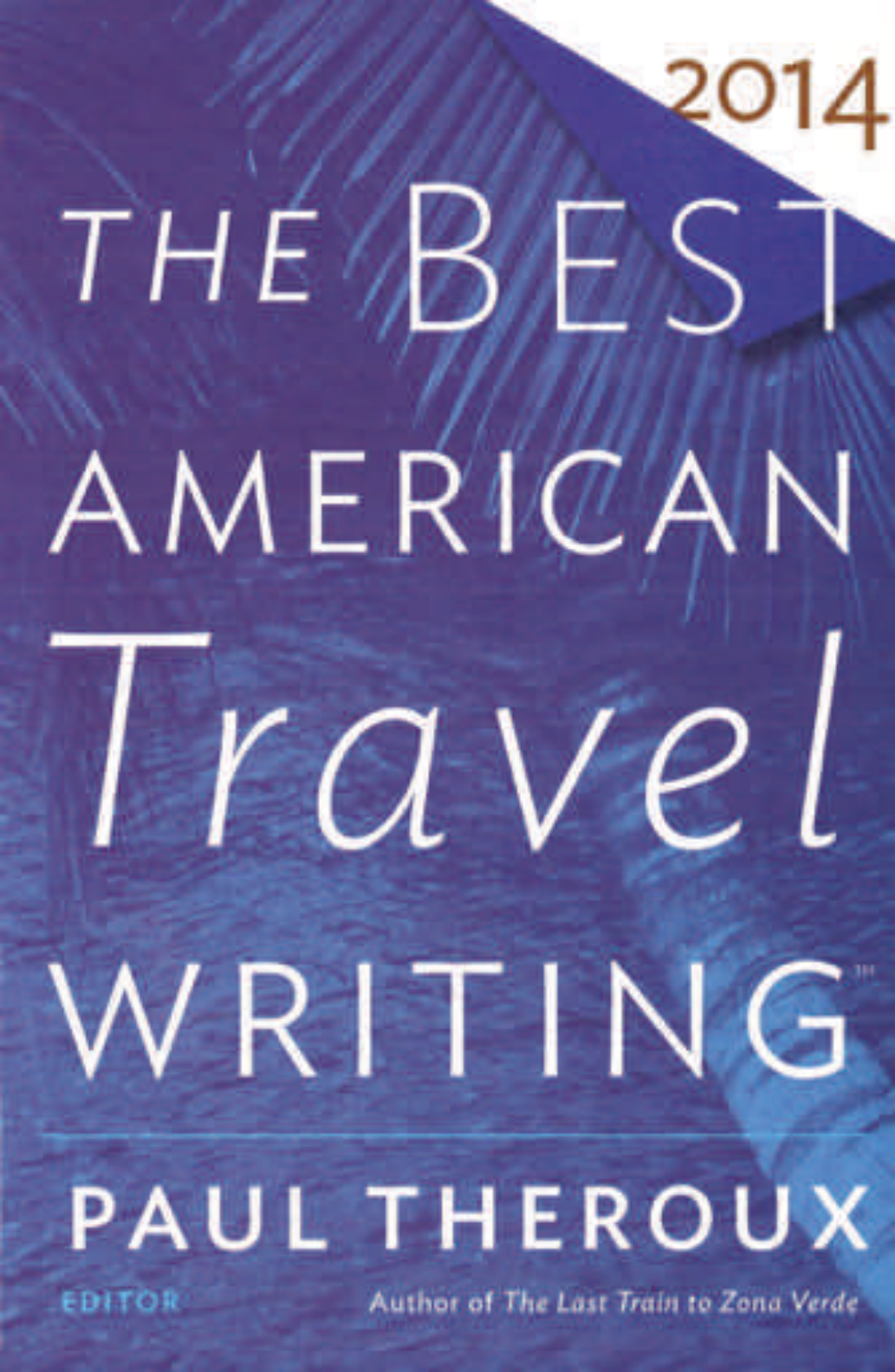
"I am certain that he does."

"It's two o'clock in the morning!"

Josiane laughs. "You are wrong. It is my windows. The blinds — they are *hermetic ("air-meh-teek").* Look!"

She leaps out of bed, flies to her window, pulls open the blinds.

In pours the sunshine of a late Sunday afternoon.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PETER SELGIN

My New York

A Romance in Eight Parts

FROM *The Missouri Review*

> And with the awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground.
>
> —F. Scott Fitzgerald, "My Lost City"

NOT LONG AGO, while lurching through cyberspace, I chanced upon a luncheon menu from Schrafft's, circa 1962. Especially among the city's working women, Schrafft's was once New York City's most popular restaurant chain. The menu is an arresting artifact, one that might have been concocted to certify an era's lost innocence—how else account for Jellied Tomato Bouillon, Browned Lamb Hash with Wax Beans, Deviled Tongue and Swiss Cheese Sandwich, Corn Soufflé, Minute Tapioca Pudding, Fresh Banana Stuffed with Fruit Salad, Green Apple Pie, and Grape-Juice Lemonade? Top center on the menu: "May We Suggest Bacardi Cocktail 70¢."

My eyes misted over. Here was the New York City I once fell hard for, the city of my childhood and young dreams. And though the menu belonged to a vanished time, still, it was real—as the Hotel Paris had been real, as the passenger ships lined up in their berths had been real. As my innocence, my ambitions, my disappointments, my failures, and a host of betrayals—mine, my father's, the city's—all had been real.

I. Love at First Sight

GAS HEATS BEST. They loomed: black, blocky letters on a yellow field painted on the side of a gargantuan corrugated hatbox. An ad for home heating fuel. But to my six-year-old eyes, it might have been God creating Adam in the firmament of the Sistine Chapel.

It was my first trip to New York with my father. His "business trips," he called them, though someday I would learn there was more to them than that. My twin brother, George, and I took turns, each of us going with him every other Friday. The trip took just a little over an hour, but as far as I was concerned, we might have been blasting off to Venus or Mars.

We rode in my father's Simca, an ivory wagon with whitewalls and a split tailgate. I watched him work the gearshift, a thin chrome rod with a pear-shaped knob—an object of fascination that I would secretly commandeer whenever Papa went into the post office or the bank, my vocal cords imitating the engine's winding RPMs, ignorant of such things as clutches. As Papa backed the Simca past the dying birch tree in the turnaround, I'd see my brother and my mother standing there, my mother waving, my twin crying—as I would cry a week later when it would be George's turn. Why our father took us separately I'm not sure. Maybe because we fought so much.

At the end of the driveway we'd take a right onto Wooster Street and head to Danbury, where we drove past the war memorial and the fairgrounds. On Old Route 6 we'd pass by the Dinosaur Gift & Mineral Shoppe with its pink stucco tyrannosaurus, headed toward Brewster. Interstate 684 had yet to be built, so we rode on what would today qualify as "back roads," past apple orchards, nurseries, and reservoirs, then down the Saw Mill River Parkway through exotically named places—Croton Falls, Katonah, Armonk, Chappaqua—tallying bridges and groundhogs.

While driving, my father hummed: "The Blue Danube," a Maurice Chevalier ditty, his cigarette dangling. He drove with an elbow out the window, preferring his arm to the car's turn signal. The Simca's glove compartment burst with road maps, but my father never consulted them. The city's outskirts were a tangle of parkways, thruways, expressways, and turnpikes. That my father

could untangle them amazed me, but then they seemed to belong to him, all those highways, as did everything to do with the city.

We crossed over the Henry Hudson Bridge. At the tollbooth, Papa tossed a nickel into the yellow basket. We glided under the girders of the George Washington Bridge. Here the city began in earnest. We passed the Cloisters and Grant's Tomb. Among drab shapes in the distance I saw patches of bright color, the funnels of passenger ships in their berths. To our left as we drove on, a skyscraper garden flourished, the Empire State Building sprouting like a deco fountain at its center. Amid this profusion of architecture rose the fuel storage tank, the one proclaiming GAS HEATS BEST. This utilitarian structure was no less awe-inspiring to me then than the *Queen Elizabeth* or the Empire State Building, subjects I'd sketch again and again in Mrs. Decker's kindergarten class.

The elevated ended; the Simca descended into a shadowy jungle of bumpy cobblestone streets. Somewhere along Canal Street we parked. Gripping my hand, Papa led me from one industrial surplus store to another, foraging for plastic and other parts for his inventions, his rotary motors, his color coders, his thickness gauges and mercury switches. The sidewalks were crowded, yet somehow to me the people weren't real. They reminded me of the baubles on a Christmas tree, each with its particular charms and quirks but, unlike the buildings, insubstantial. There were no dogs and few children. New York City was a place for grownups.

From Canal Street we walked to Chinatown, where we ducked into shops packed with lacquered trays and jade carvings. Here the streets smelled of fish. In one of those shops, my father bought me a wooden box (I still have it; it sits on top of the bookcase by the desk where I write). In Chinatown the plethora of street signs, their messages transformed into adornments by virtue of being illegible, impressed me even more. The enigmatic characters clung to the air, butterflies caught in a web of utility lines and fire escapes.

Then to Greenwich Village, where we entered boutiques lush with beads and trinkets and suffused with the smell of incense, and where one shop window confronted us with a panoply of chessboards and pieces carved from rare woods and exotic minerals. Already I had begun to see the city as a colossal museum, with objects displayed in various galleries according to periods and

styles. Beyond displaying its holdings, the city had no discernible purpose. It existed for roughly the same reason as the town park on Lake Candlewood or the Danbury State Fair: to amuse the likes of me.

We lunched at Schrafft's, then drove back uptown toward our hotel, stopping on the way at Manganaro's Italian import store, where my father bought a pound of Parmesan cheese—a jagged hunk broken off a great golden wheel. By then the air had dimmed, the better to display the lights of Times Square, where flashing neon signs advertised everything from Pepsi-Cola to Castro Convertibles and a giant man in a fedora exhaled smoke rings from a cigarette into the electrified dusk. Then up West End Avenue to the Hotel Paris.

Of all parts of the city, that hotel was my favorite, a wedding-cake-shaped fortress of garnet-colored bricks topped by a crenellated water tower, with a flagpole reaching even farther toward the sky. I recall a lobby of pink marble walls with a mirrored dining room adjacent and a caged, old-fashioned elevator attended by a colored lady (I use the term in keeping with the times), whose beehive of fire-engine-red hair was as imposing as she was diminutive. She let me man the controls, a courtesy for which I will never forget her. You had to pull back on the lever just so, or the elevator and the floors wouldn't line up properly. She put her brown hand on top of mine, her warm grip guiding me. At each floor the doors opened to different hallway carpeting, arabesques of blazing bright color that, in their inscrutable intricacies, mimicked the metropolis outdoors.

Like all the rooms in the Hotel Paris, ours was small. It stank of the last occupant's cigarettes, which was okay by me. I accepted the odor as part of the city—my father's city, it came to seem to me, as if he had laid every brick and cobblestone and erected every skyscraper. As he unpacked his suitcase on the bed, I watched, engrossed. A suit jacket, a pair of socks, two pairs of underwear, a can of athlete's-foot powder, his safety razor and battered shaving brush, a shoehorn, and a necktie.

The necktie fascinated me most. Though I'd seen it often before, hanging in his closet back home, here it took on a new aspect. With its yellow paisley drops against a maroon background, it was no longer just my papa's necktie; it was his New York City tie. At that moment, that necktie became the city for me, as the stale

cigarette smell in that hotel room became the city, and the gaudy hallway carpeting, and the red-haired elevator operator, and the hunk of Parmesan cheese, and the passenger ships in their berths, and the GAS HEATS BEST sign, and the groundhogs digging holes in the lawns along the Saw Mill River Parkway. It was all my New York back then, courtesy of my father, who had invented it just for me.

II. Puppy Love

At 15, my friend Chris Rowland and I used to visit his neighbor Clara. A spry, matronly woman in her 80s, she lived across the street from the Rowlands in a white shingled cottage by the brook. Chris would bring a casserole his mother had made. Clara would thank him and put it away. Then we'd sit in her parlor, Clara in a thronelike wicker chair, eating cookies with cider while she sipped tea from a china cup. We thought it was tea.

New York City was Clara's favorite subject. She still kept her apartment there. She spoke of how, in her younger days, she and a friend had opened a teashop in Chelsea, and of the Broadway actors and actresses who had patronized it. "Oh, we had quite a time of it, quite a time," said Clara, fanning herself with a Japanese fan.

One day Clara gave us the keys to her apartment. Chris's father drove us to the station in Brewster. Through the green-tinted window—to the rhythmic clacking of train wheels—we watched the familiar world of houses, church steeples, and trees morph into a landscape of buildings, viaducts, and bridges. Then we plunged underground. For a while everything turned black. We stepped out of the train car to find ourselves in a grimy marble cathedral vaulted with sallow stars.

At the newspaper kiosk, Chris bought a box of Good & Plenty; I got a Bit-O-Honey bar. We both chipped in for the *Daily News* and a folding map of the city. We couldn't decide whether to walk to Clara's place or take the subway. Walking, we would see a lot more, but a subway ride would be thrilling. We took the subway.

It was late September, but the subway platform still hoarded the summer's heat. The station's dim lighting gleamed off the edges of its innumerable tiles. A man in a gray suit leaned against an iron pillar; others stooped impatiently over the tracks. None said

a word. My friend and I obeyed the unwritten law by which New Yorkers pretend to ignore each other. A muffled roar and a fusty breeze heralded the subway train's arrival. The roar grew deafening as it squealed to a stop and its doors slid open.

We careened under the city, each of us clinging to a strap as the subterranean world rushed by, a murky blur punctuated by lustrous stations whose waiting passengers could only watch in envy as we roared past on express tracks: 34th Street . . . 28th Street . . . 23rd Street . . . At the place called Union Square, we jumped a set of iron teeth that stretched to fill the gap between subway and platform. Then up we bounded through a maze of latticed stairways and catwalks into a world of blinding sunshine.

To judge by our map, Clara's apartment was five blocks east on 18th Street. We passed a Chock full o'Nuts and a corner fruit stand. We carried our suitcases and walked fast, as if our arrival were not already accomplished—as if by walking any slower we'd dispel the magic of this dream, like those dreams in which you will yourself to fly. Now and then we faced each other to share a grin that said we'd gotten away with something, or were about to.

Clara's apartment was on the top floor of a tenement. We bounded up the three flights. An elaborate series of keys was required for entry. The apartment smelled of mothballs and musk. Should we open a window? Was that allowed? The walls were covered with framed photographs, theatrical posters, and quaint watercolors of Parisian street scenes. A bronze Laocoön graced the fireplace mantel. Even up there with the windows closed, we heard the traffic below, the impatient horns of trucks and taxis. While Chris unpacked, I studied the photographs, mostly of Clara and a friend, presumably the one with whom she had run the teashop. In one they both wore fur coats; in another they showed off identical plumed hats. It had never dawned on either of us that Clara might be lesbian. "Oh, I've had many, *many* beaux," she'd said to us more than once while sipping from her china cup. Even seeing the photographs, the thought didn't occur to me, as it didn't occur to me that someday I would live in the city, that I would engage my ambitions, inflame my desires, commit various acts of ignominy and treachery, and experience a multitude of triumphs, disappointments, sins, failures, and betrayals there.

By noon Chris and I were back out in the street, burdened no longer by our luggage, carrying only the folding map and an eager-

ness to see everything. Uptown or down? We went down. To the tip of the Battery we walked, passing the still-unfinished towers of the World Trade Center. We stood by a railing watching seagulls wheel over the decks of a ferryboat taking tourists to the Statue of Liberty. From there we walked uptown through the Chinatown I first came to know with my father; its cagey streets seemed less magical without him guiding me through them. Then up to Little Italy, with its green-and-red pennants and flags, past the iron-fronted buildings of the Bowery to the East Village, where, at the crowded counter of a Ukrainian café, we slurped twin bowls of blood-red borscht. As we were leaving, I gave a quarter to a panhandler.

"Don't spend it all in one place," I said, earning a disapproving look from Chris.

Midtown. Rockefeller Center. Radio City. Central Park. The Met. The names arrested me with their authority. At the Guggenheim we balked at the price of admission: $3.50 to penetrate a colossal Carvel ice-cream cone. To hell with it! In the district known as Harlem, the streets were in every sense browner, its buildings slung low to accommodate a sky brought to its knees by dense, ponderous clouds. We walked faster, the gusts flapping the lapels of our Windbreakers, passing a building shaped like the parabolas we'd learned to draw in algebra class. At every other block, a sudden whirlwind whipped grit into our eyes and made us grip our jackets at our throats and hunch like old men.

We'd started across town, hungry for Broadway and humanity, eager to arrive at the colossal pinball machine known as Times Square, when the rain caught us. We carried no umbrellas. We'd bought extra tokens, but there were no subways in sight. Taxicabs were prohibitively expensive. Headlong and purblind, we plunged into the monsoon. By the time a subway entrance arose out of the tempest, we were soaked. We clutched our knees, laughing and coughing as we caught our breath. The subway zoomed us to Times Square, where we emerged into a sea of black umbrellas backlit by blurred neon signs. At an establishment called Nedick's we ordered two "frankfurters" apiece and large cups of orange drink and ate while watching people hurry by in the rain. Even soaking wet, New York was a great place, a wonderful, lewd, sexy, forbidden place. Those trips with my papa had been mere flirtations, as chaste as my grandmother's kisses. Now I was a man, and the city was mine to embrace less innocently.

By the time we left Nedick's, the rain had softened to a drizzle. We passed under a succession of marquees featuring slasher and porn films and peepshows for 25 cents, a Coney Island boardwalk of X-rated sex. Had Chris, whose parents were of New England Puritan stock, not been there to shame me, I'd have ducked into one of those seedy theaters. I'd have paid a quarter for a peepshow—or two. Or three. Two women in leopardskin miniskirts and high heels emerged from the shadows to offer us a good time. I showed interest; my friend didn't. I had started a conversation with them when, saying "We're already having a good time, thank you," Chris took my arm and kept us walking.

We got "home" after dark. What a strange feeling, having those apartment keys. "The keys to the city!" one of us joked as the door to Clara's apartment swung open. The musty smell was still there. So was the Laocoön. It wasn't even half past seven, but we were both beat. Though the rain had stopped, still, the city seemed less inviting by night, consisting only of bars and other forbidden and overpriced venues.

Instead we brewed a pot of tea and sat there, in Clara's living room, talking in hushed, tired voices to the murmurs of traffic until our eyelids grew heavy and we slouched to bed, proud of ourselves for having passed, to our own satisfaction, the city's audition. It was the first of many such trials, but I didn't know that then.

III. Romance

The rat was as big as a squirrel. It twitched in a trap next to the walk-in fridge. My boss, a retired New York City cop, kept his old service revolver in his office. He took aim, told me to stand back, and blew the thing to furry pink bits, which afterward I scooped into a metal dustpan and carried to the Dumpster.

It was my first job in New York. I'd hoped to be a bartender or a cook, but the owner of the Rozinante Tavern had different plans for me, so I spent most of my time there in the basement, peeling potatoes and cementing cracks in the concrete floor.

It wasn't long before I got a better job just two blocks south, in the oldest building in Soho, a former brothel with shuttered windows and a pitched roof. To work at the Broome Street Bar

you had to be an artist: a painter, writer, architect, dancer, photographer—it didn't matter what kind. I told the owners that I was a Pratt student, but that failed to satisfy them. I had to show them some sketches before they hired me as a dishwasher.

The bar's owners were two diametrically opposed brothers named Kenn (two *n*'s) and Bob. Short, bowlegged, cigar-smoking Kenn wore blue jeans, cowboy shirts, and belts with enormous buckles. He saw himself as the rough-and-ready type. Bob, on the other hand, was a slender, soft-spoken, effete man with pale skin. Their love of artists was the one thing the two brothers shared. While Kenn held forth with the patrons upstairs, Bob spent most of his time at a desk he'd arranged by the prep kitchen, keying numbers into an adding machine and chain-smoking Parliaments. He'd take four puffs of a cigarette before snuffing it out, having read somewhere that the first four puffs contained less nicotine. The floor under his desk squirmed with partially smoked cigarettes.

The bar had an open kitchen, with the dishwasher's station facing one end of the bar. I liked washing dishes. I liked the hot, soapy water on my hands and the sense that I was doing something useful. Dishwashing is honorable work, I told myself as the busboys dumped their greasy loads and I flirted with any decent-looking woman who sat on the last stool at the bar.

The other workers in the kitchen slung omelets and burgers, sliced sandwiches, and cracked jokes. Jimmy, the salad chef, was an architect. Francis, the prep cook, wrote show tunes. Joe Hinkle was writing a novel. The waitresses were mostly actresses and dancers. The griddle chef, a guy in his 40s named Bentley, a painter in the manner of Kandinsky, was the funniest and most cynical of the bunch, with a mop of sandy hair that covered his eyes and that he would toss back while flipping his burgers. Somehow, despite his talking a mile a minute in a flat, nasal voice with which he cut to the quick anyone he disliked, the ash from Bentley's cigarette never fell onto his grill.

The bar was a magnet for artists. John and Yoko were patrons; so were Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Among the regulars was a sculptor named Bob Bolles. He had a job there, doing what I'm not sure: something to do with plumbing or the beer taps. Mostly he hung out at the bar. Bolles's artistic claim to fame was on permanent (so we thought then) display at the "motorcycle

triangle," an open space at the intersection of Broome and Watts, where bikers parked their crotch rockets and where, without permission from municipal authorities, Bolles's jagged iron creations sprouted like rusty weeds, providing windblown papers and coffee cups with crannies to wedge themselves into and neighborhood children with objects to skin knees on. A short guy with an Edgar Allan Poe forehead, Bolles wore hoop earrings and red bandannas and was as much of a fixture in Soho as its loading docks, its bay doors, its freight elevators, as the trucks that barreled over cobblestones to and from the Holland Tunnel. When Bolles died of AIDS in the '80s, the sculptures fell into ruin. Eventually, under the auspices of a zealous borough parks commissioner, the "dangerous, dilapidated, rusting, falling-apart litter magnets" were carted off to a storage facility on Randall's Island, making way for a public green space called Sunshine Park—pleas to rename it after the sculptor having fallen on deaf ears.

Looming over the motorcycle triangle, across the expanse of a windowless building, the words *I Am the Best Artist* were spray-painted and signed by "René." This early example of guerrilla art was, as far as I know, that artist's only creation, but for me it did the trick. To be the best artist—that was the main thing. It was why I had come to the city: to practice my own art but also to breathe in the atmosphere of artists, to size up and learn from the competition.

What sort of artist I wanted to be, I wasn't sure. I had a grandiosity of purpose but no clear vision to go with it. I knew only that I wanted to touch and impress others with my work so they would someday say of me, "He's the best artist."

It was an imperative, an obligation—as inevitable as that GAS HEATS BEST sign I'd first seem with my papa as a child. To impress myself on the city as it had impressed itself on me, that was what I wanted, what I yearned for.

Meanwhile, I washed dishes.

IV. Promiscuity

The Pratt dorm was in a high-rise on Willoughby Avenue, lording it over a neighborhood of tenements and gnarly trees. From there I took a share with a retired church organist named Fletcher on

Washington Avenue—or was it Clinton? After that came the sublet on DeKalb and another off Flatbush, down the street from Junior's, where, for the price of a cup of coffee, I'd fill my belly with specimens from the sour-pickle dispenser. From there I took a one-year sublet in the East Village, on Seventh Street, where the avenues are alphabetized and the women wore orthopedic shoes and drab scarves around their heads. Next came the loft on Broome Street, the summer the lights went out throughout the city. By candlelight at the corner tavern they dispensed free lukewarm beer and half-melted ice cream. Then back to Brooklyn, a fifth-floor walkup two blocks south of the Heights, one of those jobs with a clawfoot tub squatting in the kitchen and cracked, sticky linoleum. Followed by another share, this one in Stuyvesant Town, where they didn't permit air conditioners (fans only) in the casement windows and where, during the holidays, they strung colored lights around the lampposts. Was this before or after I lived with that crazy woman on Cornelia Street, the one who nicknamed me "Leonardo" and vowed to make a star out of me? Through her I auditioned for the singing waiter job on Third Avenue and the talent manager in Hell's Kitchen—the one who, wearing a velvet robe in his living room, by means of an exercise called "The Boy on the Mountaintop," tried to get me over his knees. After the crazy lady threw my things out the window, I moved into the office of the literary agent for whom I'd been working and who, for a cut in my $100 a week salary, let me sleep on his sofa. After that, for a while I left the city, returning to housesit for a lady whose dog mauled me. Then the railroad flat in the area adjoining Soho north of East Houston that my songwriting partner (I was writing songs then) and I dubbed "So What." The greasy exhaust fumes from the diner downstairs made my partner sick, so he left the city and me. That was when I broke my leg and moved into the Gramercy Hotel. There, lying prone in bed, I could reach out and touch both walls while listening to bottles breaking in the air shaft. Then the Greek woman who taught me typography offered to share her Astoria apartment, a shag-carpeted, plastic-slipcovered efficiency over a garage a few blocks from Ditmars Boulevard, where the cafés featured excessive chrome and glistening mounds of baklava. After Ourania and I split, I moved to Sunnyside, to a one-bedroom near Calvary Cemetery, in a neighborhood of dismal pubs with shamrocks on their awnings. Shortly after this I met, proposed to, and moved into a

two-bedroom with Tara. The apartment had French doors. I'd step out of the bathroom or the kitchen and see Tara there, through the grid of glass panes, bent over her watercolor block, smoking. Tara's smoking put the kibosh on our engagement, so I told myself, when in truth I'd been ambivalent from the start. For a while I hung on in Queens until, with a journalist named Steven, I went in on a rental on 1st Avenue, off 14th. It was a one-bedroom; we put up a makeshift wall. We spent a lot of time on the roof there, Steven and I, drinking a brand of cheap red wine called Gato Negro and having aggressive philosophical conversations. I stayed there until Paulette, my new girlfriend, and I got tired of squeezing into my captain's bed. She and I rented a floor-through in a brownstone on 101st near West End. In its living room, in the presence of two witnesses, a gay Episcopal priest married us. Six months later we bought our own place, a foreclosure on 94th and Columbus in an art deco building with a sunken living room and built-in sconces. Though on the ground floor and dark, it had a nice view of the dogwood tree in the courtyard. I set up my studio in the master bedroom and decked the walls with paintings of passenger ships and the Empire State Building at night. In spite of the rap deejay living downstairs, we were happy there until one morning I woke up from a dream in which, instead of a dogwood tree, our window faced the wide, gray-green expanse of the Hudson River. That same morning I boarded a train from Grand Central to the Bronx. At a place called Spuyten Duyvil I got off. Nothing but weeds, trees, water. Water! How I'd missed it! We lived on an island but rarely saw the stuff. Overhead loomed the blue arc of the Henry Hudson Bridge—the same bridge my father and I had crossed into Manhattan in his Simca. Six months later, my wife and I bought a co-op there. We called it home for the next 12 years, until we divorced. I was 50 years old.

V. Dissolution

The dreams of my youth, where had they gone? At the midcentury mark, one is entitled to such inquiries. I'd struggled, worked hard, produced, yet there was the nagging sense that I'd wasted myself, that I'd poured my essence into the city only to see it washed away like so much scum down its storm grates and sewage drains. An-

other part of me wondered, was it my own damn fault? In abandoning the city (and as any New Yorker will tell you, when you say "the city" you most assuredly do not mean the outer boroughs), had I forsaken my dreams? Had I been as fickle with them as with apartments and women? Had my quest for artistic glory been nothing but one long flirtation—as feeble and hopeless as the flirtations I had engaged in from my dishwashing station at the Broome Street Bar? Had my romance with New York, New York, been no more than a prolonged, fruitless act of mutual seduction?

The city was a vast repository of passageways and doors, any one of which might lead me to my destiny. To choose one door was to slam all the others shut. I remember one day, back when I was still in my 30s, coming home from one of a series of assignations with a woman who lived in a basement apartment on the Lower East Side. As I walked, the streets seemed to stretch out ahead of me like a cartoon stretched on Silly Putty, growing longer and narrower. Four-thirty in the afternoon. Ruddy, low-pitched sunlight spilled over the tops of buildings that frowned down at me, their cornices furrowed like brows. It might have been my imagination, but the doors of all the buildings seemed to have big padlocks on them and red-and-yellow signs shouting KEEP OUT and SECURITY ZONE. The gates were down on the bodegas. I had to resist the urge to run—a flight toward, or away from, innocence? The woman's name was Greta. Her lobby buzzer didn't work. To gain entry I had to phone from the corner or stand there on the sidewalk, hoping she'd see me through the bars of her window. We'd met at a loft party, a gallery opening, a play or poetry reading, somewhere where bad wine and cheese cubes were served. With a pocket full of toothpicks I'd left with her for her place in a taxicab. Her pet cockatoo squawked in its gilded cage. A pachinko machine hung by a mandala poster over her bed. All this is grasping at the past. There was no Greta, or there were dozens of Gretas, each as insubstantial as photographs in someone else's album, one for every address where I'd lived and for every woman I had loved and ought to have been faithful to. But I was never faithful. I was too circumspect, too terrified of anything binding, to be faithful. By choosing not to choose, I expunged all choices.

There were times when, on a busy street corner, I'd stand there, frozen, unable to make up my mind which way to cross, other pedestrians jostling me, casting me annoyed looks, cursing me under their breaths though still loud enough for me to hear. I'd learned my way around the city only to find myself directionless there. This lack of impetus led to awkward situations, like the time when the English actor intercepted me on the corner of Eighth and University. He was with the Old Vic, he said, in town to do a production of *Macbeth*. He looked like Richard Basehart, so I believed him. I had no hair; I'd shaved it off down to the skull. This attracted homosexual men. Macbeth wondered where "a bloke from out of town could get a good drink." I was still living in Brooklyn at the time and said so. This didn't dissuade him. We went to Chumley's and from there to his place, the borrowed "flat" of some other actor. Having mixed us each a screwdriver, Richard Basehart lay on the floor fondling himself while reciting apt passages of one of Henry Miller's more explicit books. He didn't seem to notice or care as I stepped over him and out the door.

Another time, during a blizzard that fell on my 23rd birthday, a former priest who'd taken me to dinner for my birthday invited me to spend the night with him, which I did, gladly, having always resented those midnight subway expeditions back to whichever miserable borough I happened to be living in at the time. When the ex-priest took me in his mouth, I pretended to be elsewhere, with someone else, enjoying the dim ministrations of an altogether different set of tongue and lips. In the morning my host was beside himself with shame. Me, I couldn't have cared less. What did it matter? Why should I have cared?

Back then I was subject to a recurrent dream, a nightmare that parachuted me into the combat zone amid its vaporous lights and alleyways. Always in the dream I'd end up in a movie theater, one of those sordid theaters near Times Square, attached to an undeployed regiment of hunched men in Burberry coats, and where the naked bodies projected on the screen were always teasingly out of focus, looking more like Cézanne's peaches than like figures engaged in carnal Olympics. However, the soundtrack was always clear: a moan is a moan is a moan. As if by my own tumescence, I'd be lifted out of my seat and led toward a red sign glowing over the door to the men's room, behind which ultimate depravities lay in wait, tinted with ultraviolet light, perfumed with stale urine. Debased by my own dreams.

VI. Falling Out

The City of New York had become my illicit lover—a woman of the night whose sordid charms I could not resist but to whom I could never entirely give myself. I thought of my papa and of his "business trips." Decades passed before I finally accepted that he'd kept a mistress in the city, maybe more than one, though a single name, Berenice (*Beh-reh-nee-chay*) stood out for me, having surfaced time and again in my parents' frequent fights, so those four syllables still send their chill up my spine. According to my mother, I once nearly drowned in the Hotel Paris swimming pool, my treacherous papa having left me there to attend to his courtesan upstairs. I refused to believe it. Anyway I never saw this woman, this *Berenice,* who to this day exists for me on roughly the same plane as Cleopatra or Attila the Hun. My father, too, was unfaithful. The city was his lure, his temptress, his domestic and moral undoing. For her sake he betrayed his own family. Though when all was said and done, my father chose us.

But then—as scorned mistresses will—the city avenged itself.

I remember one of the last times Papa visited me there, a year or so before the first of a series of strokes felled him. Paulette and I were still living on the Upper West Side, in the 94th Street deco apartment. My father and I lunched at a diner, where he ordered a bowl of vegetable soup. When I asked him how it was, he looked down at the soupspoon trembling in his fist and said, in a voice heavy with sorrow, "Not so hot." He had come to the city to see me but also to gain an audience with the literary agent to whom he had sent his latest opus, a book titled *Beyond Pragmatism,* by which he hoped to advance William James's psychological theories into the 21st century—a hope against hope for this obdurate eccentric inventor who rarely read books published after the Hague Peace Conference and whose own manifestoes were riddled with hyphenated *to-day*s and plastered with Ko-Rec-Type. The agent had not returned his calls. Having paid for our disappointing lunch, my father repaired to a telephone booth across the street, where, for the 10th time that day, he tried to reach her, only to lose a quarter to the out-of-service phone. With uncharacteristic fury he slammed the receiver down. A few blocks uptown we found another phone booth, this one occupied by a young African American man, prompting my father, until then the least bigoted person I'd known, to combine one garden-variety epithet with one racial slur. "Papa, take it easy," I said (or something to that effect). "What's the *matter?*" But I knew perfectly well. It was no longer my father's city, the one he'd invented for me, his son. It had become an unfamiliar, hostile place. As I led us away from that phone booth, in my father's murky pupils I read an accusation of betrayal, as if I'd let him down, and not the city or his agent.

Now here I was, a few years later, with my papa dead and I, his son, suffering from his ailments, his insomnia and indigestion, not to mention a hefty slice of his egocentricity and more than a few of his eccentricities, feeling no less betrayed by the city that had been our mistress. By then Paulette and I had completed our migration to the Bronx. Though our window faced the northern tip of Manhattan, and though Grand Central Terminal was but a 22-minute train ride away, we'd turned our backs on the real city. In the shallows across the turbid waters we watched a snowy egret—a feathered vase—do its slow-motion dance for fish. We kept a pair of binoculars handy. Like having one foot in the country, we told ourselves and the friends we had ditched downtown. They assumed that the move had been voluntary, but I knew better: I knew that the city had already forsaken me, that I had failed to live up to its promises. Not that we never enjoyed ourselves, my wife and I. We took regular trips to Europe, ate good meals, threw parties packed with Manhattanites who risked nosebleeds and blown eardrums to venture north of 14th Street. But an undercurrent of distress ran through my contentment. It was this undercurrent that often woke me in the middle of the night. I felt bloated with regrets, thinking we should never have left Manhattan, that we might as well have buried ourselves alive. I tried to reassure myself. I told myself I'd wanted light, air, sunshine, fewer car alarms and idling, poisonous-fume-spewing buses. If I never saw Upper Broadway—that ragtag tunnel of produce stands and baby strollers—again, it would be too soon. Besides, the city wasn't the city anymore. It had been co-opted by the sitcom crowd. The popularity of television shows like *Seinfeld* was commensurate with its cultural decline. How I missed seedy Times Square! How I longed for the days before the peep-shows succumbed to Walt Disney! Such had been my logic, my excuse, for abandoning the city and the dreams of my youth, a move that would prompt me, on those sleepless nights, to stumble

into the bathroom and demand of my no-longer-quite-so-young reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror, *What have you done to my dreams, fucker?*

From the bedroom my wife asks, "Peter, what are you doing?"

I'm a poor underdog, / But tonight I will bark . . . etc. "Brooding," I respond.

"For God's sake, come back to bed!"

Then I say to myself, Wait, it's not over. There's still time, you're still young, you can still do it. You know the meaning and worthiness of art, that it makes life bearable by translating experience, letting us see universals and particularities in a kind of flickering way, that every artist holds the potential to delight and heal others by touching them with something genuine and of deliberate beauty. New York hasn't forsaken you, I assure my reflection in the mirror. That's your sense of gloom talking. And you haven't forsaken it. You just needed some peace and quiet in which to create.

Here was hope springing eternal; here was my childhood innocence shining its bright, dimwitted light again—the same innocence that 44 years prior had turned an ad slogan on the side of a fuel storage tank into a divine revelation. Despite my grown-up sense of gloom, I was still a child, still besotted, still as prone to bad judgment in hope as ever, still as wide-eyed with curiosity, expectation, and optimism as a six-year-old. Still as eager and willing as ever to march headlong into the arms of the enemy, *Berenice,* my father's ex-mistress. As if by conquering her I might atone for his sins.

VII. Ashes & Echoes

I'd meant to spend that September at a writers' retreat but came home early to attend a gala at Lincoln Center (and to pick up some warmer clothes; I hadn't realized how cold it gets in the Adirondacks). That morning I tried on my tuxedo to discover it no longer fit. I was about to head downtown to rent one when the telephone rang. It was the woman who had invited me to the gala, calling to say it had been called off. I asked her why.

"Have you got a TV?" she said.

Like half of the country, I spent the next five hours sitting with my hand to my lips in front of a TV. The city that I'd loved, resented, felt challenged and betrayed by, whose slushy sidewalks and ovenlike summer subways I had cursed—this place where I had been loved, mugged, produced, embarrassed, paid, exhibited, that had made me proud and angry and excited and bitter and tired and joyous and hungry and regretful, that had been the setting of so many youthful enthusiasms, where I'd walked arm in arm with and courted and made love with women, where I had suffered, celebrated, laughed, cried, whose myriad streets I could navigate blindfolded or by smell, whose subway turnstiles I'd jumped, whose taxi drivers and waiters and shoeblacks I'd tipped, whose cafés and galleries and atriums I'd haunted, whose streets I'd jaywalked, whose muffins and bagels I had ingested by the score, whose store windows had sampled my evolving reflection, whose landlords had charged me rent, whose employers had paid my wages, whose supermarkets and delis had supplied me with milk and pickled herring, whose water supply had kept me hydrated and hygienic, whose sewage system had eliminated four decades' worth of my excretions, whose thrift stores and flea markets had provided me with furniture and clothing, and whose populace had endowed me with friends, lovers, acquaintances, clients, and occasional enemies—that this setting that had graced a hundred charming *New Yorker* covers could be changed so suddenly into a tragic place, a grim war memorial, a Pearl Harbor, a Waterloo, the Alamo, a place to feel reflective and sad, made me wonder: What would future six-year-olds make of that blazing skyline? Would they look upon it with wonder and joy as I once had? Would they see a city of dreams? Or would they see only the memory of a single disastrous day, twin columns of air where a pair of skyscrapers had once stood?

Was I feeling sorry for the city or for myself? Was there a difference?

Sometimes it takes a disaster to put us in touch with our innocence, to remind us of just how romantic our delusions have been. Seeing her ravaged made me fall in love with the city all over again, made me embrace her with fierce, protective pride. Even the city's past calamities—the Black Tom explosion, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, the Fraunces Tavern bombing, the Kew Gardens train crash, tragedies quaint by comparison, were caught in my embrace, as were the rumble of the El, tuberculosis windows, horse walks, Horn & Hardart, those stately clocks along

Fifth Avenue, the sunken treasures under the swirling waters of Hell Gate. In a fervor of indignation, I reclaimed my city, the one I'd inherited from my father. Nothing—not even an army of terrorists—would take her from me again.

VIII. Separation & Divorce & Reconciliation

In the end it wasn't terrorists or my own sense of failure that took me from New York, but a tenure-track position at a good university.

It's been four years since I left the city. And though New York has never entirely left my thoughts, this is the first occasion I've really had to look back. I live in an A-frame on a lake in central Georgia. Two paintings hang on the wall behind the desk where I write. The top painting is an interior of a subway car rendered in muted grays and browns, with passengers asleep or reading books or gripping subway straps, as my friend Chris and I did when we were 15. The painting underneath it is of the Empire State Building at night, its rows of windows represented by daubs of yellow paint, a full moon burning alongside its glowing blimp tower. From that painting I only have to turn my head a few degrees clockwise to see the lake through the slats of the venetian blinds of the doors that open out to my deck, with the weather-beaten dock from which I swim reaching out over it. As places go, none could seem farther from New York.

From my dock I count 200 strokes to the other side of the inlet and as many coming back. These days, that and a three-three university teaching load is all the ambition I need. Thanks to the lake, I have plenty of water to supply it. Between stretches of work at my computer I swim sometimes as often as three times a day. With every stroke I push the past farther away, and with it my memories of New York City.

Who am I kidding? I'll carry the city with me forever. It's in my bones, my flesh, my DNA, my genes. It's the egg that my father fertilized and that gave birth to me. With every stroke I swim deeper and deeper into the teeming metropolis of my dreams.

BOB SHACOCHIS

Sun King

FROM *Outside*

WE EACH HAVE OUR DREAMS and if they are meant to mean anything at all you hold tight and don't let them go. You can dream of love or money or fame or something much more grand than a fish, but if a fish swims into your imagination and never swims out it will grow into an obsession and the obsession might drag you anywhere, up to the metaphysical heights or down into an ass-busting nightmare, and the quest for my dream fish—South America's dorado—seems to run in both directions.

Of course the dream is never just about a fish but about a place as well, an unknown landscape and its habitat of active wonders, populated by creatures looming around the primal edges of our civilized selves. A place like the ancestral homeland of the Guaraní Indians at the headwaters of the Río Paraná, near where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay come together. In the Guaraní language, *pirá* means "fish," and this fish, the legendary dorado, is called *pirajú,* the affix meaning "yellow." In my dreams the *pirajú* skyrockets out of its watery underworld, a piece of shrapnel from a submerged sun, like a shank of gold an archaeologist might find in the tomb of an Incan king.

After years of unrequited dorado lust, last spring I seized the dream by the gills and finally took off for the Southern Hemisphere. I would be hooking up with a guide known worldwide as the king of dorado, Noel Pollak, the best person wired into the fish and its latitudes, the guarantor of the dream and your insertion into its depths. Six months earlier we had schemed to meet in Bolivia at a Pollak-discovered location that had become renowned

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PETER SELGIN

The Strange Case of Arthur Silz

In the loft bathroom of my lakeside home in Georgia hangs a painting my father did many years ago. It's a small painting done in a narrow range of earth tones—sepia, umber, terra cotta, sienna (raw and burnt), bistre, brown madder, and caput mortuum. The subject is a group of heads sculpted from clay, arrayed on the shelf of a battered cabinet. With their set lips and vacant eyes, the heads remind me of the Easter Island statues and of the fate of all who looked directly into the eyes of Medusa, the winged Gorgon with venomous snakes for hair, whose gaze turned them instantly into stone. Dead center on the painting, just under the jaw of the second head to the left, there's a small triangular black hole where the canvas has been pierced. It's through this hole that I entered the story of Arthur Silz.

The painting once hung in my father's laboratory, or the Building, as we called it—the rotting, snake and mouse infested stucco shack at the base of the driveway,

where my papa conceived and built the prototypes for his inventions, his Mercury Switch, his Color Coder, his Induced Quadrature Field Motor, his Neutralized Cathode-Ray Deflection Tube, his Null Type Comparison Reflectometer . . . . When not inventing things, Papa wrote books, philosophical and etymological tracts and science fiction novels. He was also a more-than-competent painter. His paintings filled the Building, mostly scenes from his travels—markets, piazzas, and landscapes—painted postcards.

When I asked my father about the clay-head painting, I was twelve or thirteen years old. He explained that it was one of the first paintings he ever did, in the late 1940s, when he lived in New York City, in a Brooklyn Heights apartment where the Promenade is today. In fact his building was demolished to make way for that pedestrian walkway, with its splendid view of Manhattan, and the new expressway running underneath it.

He did the painting in the studio of a Greenwich Village artist from whom he took lessons on weekends, a German artist named Silz. Tall, red-headed, with a heavy accent, distinct pale blue eyes, and a fiery temper to match his flaming hair, Silz had a pet saying, a mantra that guided him through his existence: "It is something I must do." He was married to a quietly devoted woman. They had an infant daughter. Occasionally Silz hired models to pose in the nude for him and his students. One model was a young "fraülein" named Helga. Pretty, with blond curls and a cherubic face, she couldn't have been much older than eighteen. Silz was in his thirties. One Sunday afternoon, after a painting lesson, with Helga dressed and gone, Silz asked my father, who was cleaning his brushes, "Tell me, what do you think of Helga?" To which my father replied, "She's a very nice girl," or something to that effect, prompting Silz to declare, "I'm going to marry her." Questioned by my father as to the wisdom of this proposal, Silz replied, "It is something I must do."

That was the story behind the painting that currently hangs in my bathroom, except for a footnote my father threw in as an afterthought, speaking to me from behind the spinning lathe or while typing with two fingers on his black Royal portable: how, years later, while hiking alone on a painting trip in the mountains of Mexico, his former painting teacher met with a sensationally violent end. He was stoned to death by indigenous locals who mistook him for the devil. My father had read about it in a newspaper.

Needless to say, this footnote stuck with me. It's not the sort of thing you forget, after all. Still, over time I did forget about it, until after my father died. Of his many paintings I'd inherited only a handful, the others having been given

away or lost when the Building burned down a dozen years before he died. I remembered the painting of the clay heads and wondered if it had been among the casualties.

I phoned my mother, who swore she'd seen it hanging in Eve Bigelow's house. Eve and her husband had been friends of our family's, regular guests at my flamboyant mother's lavish dinner parties. I phoned Eve, who was by then a widow.

Indeed, she had the painting. "Would you consider trading it for one of mine?" I asked (I, too, am a painter).

"Of course," Eve said. "If I can find it. Why don't you come over and help me to look for it?"

It took a while, but we found the painting. It was in the Bigelow garage, poking out from behind a stack of storm windows. The edge of a window had pierced the canvas.

"I'm sorry," Eve said.

I didn't care about the hole. I was thrilled to have the painting.

At the time, I was still living in Manhattan. I hung the painting in the vestibule of the Upper West Side apartment I'd bought with my wife. I had meant to patch the hole but never got around to it. Every so often, seeing it, I would recall the tale of the German painter and his supposed violent death on a Mexican mountaintop. Such an incredible story! Had my father not told it to me, I would have never believed it.

One day I tried to verify it. The Internet had come of age. Something that sensational had to have left a footprint in cyberspace. I googled *Siltz*, *artist*, *murdered*, *Mexico*, *mountain*. Nothing. I tried other search terms. Still nothing. Hours later, convinced that my papa had either dreamed the whole thing up or been pulling my leg, I gave up.

Ten years went by. In those ten years I'd gotten divorced, had a child, left New York, and moved to Georgia, to an A-frame on a lake. Since I happened to be looking at it while on the phone, I mentioned the painting of the clay heads and the story my father had told me to Clare, one of my two half-sisters (my father had three wives).

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?" I asked Clare.

"The crazy German?" said Clare. Yes, she'd heard the story. She went on to tell me how her mother, who'd been friends with Silz's widow, took her and her sister

to the widow's apartment one day for lunch. "There were paintings all over the walls," Clare said. "It was in the spring of 1956. I know, since we'd just learned that your mom [the woman our father left Clare's mother for] was pregnant with you." The German artist's name, Clare told me, was Arthur Silz. Then she spelled it for me. *S-i-l-z.*

Armed with the correct spelling, I did another online search and found the newspaper article, which appeared in the September 15, 1956 issue of the *Village Voice*. Headlined Village Painter Is Murdered in Mexico, it begins:

> *September 8, San Cristobal, Mexico*. Six Indians of the Chamula tribe are in jail in this isolated Mexican town, implicated in the murder of a Greenwich Village artist. The cause of the murder could simply be stated as the ignorance and superstition which is still deep-seated among the remote villages of this mountainous state of Chiapas.

The *Voice* article goes on to explain how Silz, who had rented the same house in San Cristóbal de las Casas every summer for several years, having declared his intention to spend all his time painting and not leave town even for the local fiesta, took leave of his studio one day to hike Uitepéc, the highest mountain in the valley. From its summit he noticed the peak of an even higher mountain, Cerro Tzontehuitz—the highest in Chiapas—and, the reporter infers, made up his mind then and there to climb it. According to the article, Silz, who neither spoke nor understood a word of Spanish or the local Indian dialect, was unaware that Tzontehuitz was one of the most dangerous mountains in Chiapas. Besides the desolate, steep paths threading through areas of dense jungle and skirting abysmal canyons, it was inhabited by superstitious tribespeople untouched, the article states, by Western civilization.

Silz was forty years old when he died. He left behind his wife and their nine-year-old daughter. Apparently he hadn't run off with Helga after all.

My obsession with Arthur Silz's story coincided with a period in my life when I had wandered into a desolate wilderness of my own. Divorced, having left New York City after thirty-seven years for the boondocks of central Georgia, my own young daughter living far from me with her mother—whom I'd met and got pregnant soon after my divorce, and from whom I'd since become estranged—I felt isolated, at odds with my radically new life, despite having, consciously or not, chosen that life for myself.

My sense of isolation was dramatically heightened by my having recently been

put on paid administrative leave by the university where I teach while it investigated charges of misconduct that had been brought against me by a student. The investigation took an agonizing sixty days, during which I was not allowed to teach or set foot on campus, nor could I concentrate enough to write, or even to read. That left me with exercise. And though I swam several miles a day in my lake, at night, night after night, I'd waken at one or two in the morning, unable to go back to sleep, infused with a blend of insomnia, anxiety, anger, fear, regret, and sadness—mostly sadness—until one morning, around three o'clock, I found myself sitting in the bathroom of my loft, gazing at my father's painting of the clay heads from my vantage point on the commode, staring deep into that little triangular hole in its center. On the counter beside me, a quartet of prescription vials stood arrayed: Ambien, diazepam, Xanax, trazodone, and some other prescription, a sedative or an antianxiety drug with sedative effects, more than fifty pills altogether, enough, I thought, to do the trick if swallowed with a sufficient quantity of gin—preferred by me to vodka.

But just then the little black hole at the center of my father's painting commanded my attention. I felt myself falling into it, tumbling through the rabbit hole in that canvas and into the lurid story behind it. Suddenly, I was Arthur Silz trekking that sun-dazzled, jungle-strewn trail up that mountain, negotiating treacherously steep, narrow paths, bushwhacking through rainforest, broaching isolated, primitive populations, in search of—what? What drove Arthur Silz to his terrible fate? What had he been looking for? Who was he?

I had to know. "It is," I told myself, "something I must do."

When my father studied with him in the late forties, Silz was a painter of repute, with work in the collections of the Metropolitan and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. He taught classes at the Arts Student League—where he himself had studied—and workshops in Provincetown. He was something of a reactionary; when abstract expressionism was taking the art world by storm, Silz continued to do figurative work, portraits and landscapes of quaint stone cottages and anachronistic fishing boats in harbors, paintings distinguished by their earthy palettes and heavy brushstrokes, like my father's painting of the clay heads, which clearly displays Silz's influence.

Among images of Silz's work available online, I found a portrait of the artist standing before his easel, necktie raffishly loose and askew under his painter's smock. He stands against a dull ochre background, eyes squinting, strong bony jaw and flaring nostrils turned upward, eyebrows raised, brow furrowed, lips

pursed, red hair—which looks more brown than red in the painting—shooting up from a sloped forehead. The head in Silz's self-portrait bears an uncanny resemblance to the second clay head from the left in my father's painting, the one with the triangular hole under its jaw. With its jaundiced pallor and mask-like squinted eyes, there's something both admonitory and cadaverous about his expression, as if he were assessing his talents from beyond the grave. I can imagine Silz applying the same judgmental squint to the products of his avant-garde contemporaries, to a Rothko or a Kline or a Pollock. How their vast, splattered, streaked, and stained canvases must have vexed Silz, who still believed in the painter as observer and a painting as a window wherein the painter's goods are displayed like cakes in a bake shop.

Like Van Gogh—whom he surely admired—in his portrait before the easel, Arthur Silz wears his tunic loosely buttoned. Like Van Gogh, Silz set himself against the tide of current artistic fashion. Like Van Gogh, he went south for inspiration, seeking his equivalent of Vincent's "high yellow note"—not in fields of rippling wheat or poppies or sunflowers under the blinding Provencal sun, but in the jungle-clad mountains of southernmost Mexico.

The *Village Voice* article goes on to piece together the story of Silz's murder. Thorough though it is, the article merely whetted my curiosity about Silz and his circumstances.

Effectively under house arrest in my lakeside lockup, I spent the next several weeks researching, determined to fill in that hole in my father's painting by uncovering more pieces of Silz's story, as well as the stories of other men connected with it, stories that in their sensationalism rival the most convoluted jungle fiction, *Savage Mutiny* meets *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

In the days preceding Silz's imprudent excursion, two fellow German expatriates tried to talk him out of going. One of those German expats was a man named Wolfgang Cordan.

Born Heinrich Wolfgang Horn in Berlin in 1909, Cordan was an author, translator, anthropologist, and ethnologist. He was also gay, which may be one reason why he left Germany in 1933, the year of Hitler's appointment as chancellor. He fled first to Paris, where, under his penname, he wrote and published *L'Alemagne Sans Masque* (*Germany Unmasked*), a booklet condemning the Nazis for which André Gide wrote the preface. From Paris he moved to Amsterdam, where he edited a leftist journal. He also wrote and published an essay on surrealism that earned him a place in the Dutch avant-garde.

During the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, Cordan joined the resistance. Having learned that a group of Jewish children living in an orphanage had been marked for transport to a concentration camp, he and another resistance member kidnapped and secreted them to a hiding place. (For his part in that deed a commemorative grove of apple trees in Israel bares Wolfgang Cordan's name.) Another time, Cordan and a friend were riding their bicycles together, and as they rounded a corner, Cordan recognized a Gestapo informant. With a pistol he was carrying, Cordan shot the *spitzel* dead in front of an apartment house. Though he and his friend evaded capture, that night Cordan watched as Gestapo officers rounded up a dozen of the apartment house's occupants. They were lined up against a wall and shot.

After the war, Cordan journeyed through central and southern Europe and northern Africa, taking photographs and settling briefly in Italy, then in southwest Germany, where he served as a newspaper editor before relocating to Havana. Following a trip to Madrid—during which the landing gear of his airplane failed, forcing it to crash-land on its belly—he left Cuba for Mexico.

It was while hiking the jungles of Mexico that Cordan became immersed in the study of Mayan ruins, especially their hieroglyphs, for which he developed a unique, controversial system of interpretation that formed the basis of his doctoral dissertation *Systema di Mérida* (*The Merida System*). Among Cordan's many interpretations was what his contemporaries characterized as an "extremely loose" translation of the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of mytho-historical narratives of the K'iche' kingdom in Guatemala's western highlands.

The same year he published his translation of the *Popol Vuh*, Wolfgang Cordan took a professorship at the University of Merida in the Yucatan. Meanwhile he continued to explore the jungles of Mexico and Guatemala, uncovering archeological treasures. Among Cordan's findings was an Olmec carving dating between 1,150 and 900 BC. The size of a bank vault door, the carving depicts a man of characteristic Olmec features—thick legs, no neck, small feet, wearing a tall headdress with banded decorations, a round earplug with a curved tassel, sharp claws or talons on his feet, and a breechcloth tied with a square knot. Except for his arms and legs, he is portrayed in profile, carrying a knife or a baton in one hand, and a bundle of what is probably maize in the other. Though it was first discovered in the 1920s, because of its remote location only a handful of people knew where the Olmec sculpture was, and even fewer saw it (among them another German expatriate, "B. Traven," the elusive author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*). Without disclosing its location, in 1964, to great fanfare, Cordan published his photograph of the Olmec relief.

Two years later—ten years after Arthur Silz was murdered—Wolfgang Cordan also died mysteriously in the jungle. He was fifty-seven years old.

The following words from *Secret of the Forest: On the Track of Maya Temples*, his memoir published two years before his death—words that might have served as his epitaph—suggest that Cordan died a contented man:

> The world-weary European who, heartsick and weary of civilization, escapes to and dies in the jungle, whose corpse is sheathed by the jungle's twilight shadows, dies intoxicated with freedom.

In the opening pages of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow reflects on the primitive urges that drive men to confront the darkness at their innermost depths by way of the "mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungle, in the hearts of wild men." Having bewitched him with its primeval depths, before driving him mad, the jungle inflamed Kurtz with a sense of omnipotence, anointing him supreme ruler of his own abominable empire, a Dominion of Darkness. In abandoning civilization, Kurtz morphed into a primeval god. Through Marlow, Conrad warns us of "the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate" experienced by those who, like Kurtz, succumb to their inner darkness.

My own confrontation with inner darkness wasn't my first. I'd been there before, many times, as a matter of fact, starting in my mid-twenties, when, in despair over an injury that cost me the use of my left hand—I'm left-handed—along with a coincidental broken leg, I hobbled on crutches to the end of a rotting New York City pier, where I stood overlooking the dark East River, luminescent ice floes drifting by and the lights of Brooklyn blazing across the frigid water.

I didn't kill myself, but I thought about it—as I would think about it, off and on, now and then, with increasing regularity, for the next thirty years, until the dark thoughts became so much a part of me I hardly noticed them. When, in my forties, a therapist I'd been seeing asked me, "Do you ever think of suicide?" the question took me by surprise, since by then the more appropriate question would have been, "Do you ever *not* think of it?" I realized then that there was something very wrong with me, that the darkness I'd been taking for granted was a dangerous condition—no less dangerous than any potentially fatal disease, or an incursion up an unknown mountain inhabited by suspicious, primitive people.

My therapist referred me to a psychiatrist, who put me on drugs. Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, nortriptyline, trazodone—we tried all of them with various degrees

of success and failure. But something more than chemical was going on. I was drawn to my darkness, unable to resist the tidal tug of suicidal thoughts, drawn to them like matter into a black hole—like the black hole in my father's painting that drew me so deeply into Arthur Silz's suicidal excursion.

Exploring jungles is a risky business. As well as the psychological hazards dramatized in *Heart of Darkness*, one has to fear the many physical dangers and diseases presented by the environment. When the jungle is in Central America in the first half of the twentieth century, to the list of dangers one must add suspicious and often hostile indigenous locals, marauding bandits, hard-hearted revolutionaries, and the competing interests of other explorers, some of whom would stoop to anything, including murder, to protect their findings or claim others'.

It was doubtlessly with these things in mind that Wolfgang Cordan tried to dissuade Arthur Silz from hiking alone up into the mountains of Chiapas. How the two men met isn't known, nor is the precise nature of their friendship entirely clear, though clearly they were friends. Apart from their Germanic roots and a shared love of the Mexican wilderness, both men were strong willed, brave, fiercely independent, bound to their adventurousness by a sense of duty and destiny. Though Cordan was gay, and Silz remained married to his wife in New York, in all likelihood both men were more wed to their sense of adventure than to other people. Like most explorers, they were most likely loners. And like most explorers—like Kurtz and his pursuer Marlow—within the ruin-encrusted jungles, among other things they explored themselves, their own inscrutable, dark depths.

I imagine them hiking the mountains together or sitting on the verandah of one of their lodgings, sharing a bottle of tequila or schnapps while trading stories, the artist and the anthropologist. I see Cordan spreading out his latest photographs and Silz his latest sketches, each of them offering their appraisals, comparing notes, nodding, affirming each other's talents, brothers in arms—one armed with a camera, the other with a sketchbook. In their own way they may well have loved each other. As Cordan wrote to another friend, "When deep contact [is made] between men of about the same age and of equal spiritual development, a lightning flash occurs that breaks down all barriers and fuses their natures."

That Silz and Cordan had hiked the nearby mountains together is without question. Evidence suggests that on one of their hikes, they made an important archeological discovery. What they discovered isn't known. What is known is that on or around August 17—ten days before he was murdered—Silz wrote to several of his friends, including Professor José Weber, a schoolteacher in San Cristóbal,

about their discovery, saying that he and Cordan had been warned by "a rival explorer" working in the same area not to exploit it, to stay away from the site, that in venturing anywhere near it, they would put themselves in grave danger. All this was recounted by Dr. Weber in a letter he wrote to Silz's sister, a Mrs. Hilda Silz Royce then of Hillsdale, California. Weber sent a copy of the letter to the US Embassy in Mexico City.

Who was this "rival explorer?" No one living knows. Weber died in 1982. Neither Silz's letter nor the one Weber wrote to his sister survived. If the US Embassy in Mexico still has a copy, it is buried deep within its archives.

Nor is it entirely clear that Silz viewed the "warning" as a threat. What is certain is that Silz understood that in undertaking what—in the same letter to Weber—he referred to as his "mission" into the mountains, he would be putting himself in jeopardy, that on top of the risks that he had already been made aware of, he faced this other danger as well.

Wolfgang Cordan knew it too. Which is why, a day or two before Silz set off on his journey, Cordan, having failed to talk him out of it, arrived at Silz's lodgings with a pistol.

"Take this with you at least," I imagine Cordan saying, yanking a Luger or a Mauser from the waistband of his jungle-hiking shorts. Having lowered the pistol onto the veranda table, next to the bottle of tequila or schnapps, he stands there, looking down with a mixture of derision and admiration at his artist friend, who remains seated, his arms folded across his chest, eyeing the weapon with distaste, as if it were something dead dug up from the ground.

"Take it," Cordan insists.

Silz shakes his head.

"Why not?"

"Because—I am a peaceful man!"

"Take the pistol, or you'll be a dead peaceful man."

As Cordan must have realized by then, there was no arguing with his fellow German, from whose lips he had no doubt heard the words "It is something I must do" many times.

And so, alone at three or four in the morning of Friday, August 17, carrying a map, a knapsack, water, some food, and his sketching equipment, Arthur Silz left San Cristóbal de Las Casas for his three-day hiking trip.

Wolfgang Cordan had more than sufficient cause to fear for his friend, the hazards of jungle forays having been brought home to him seven years earlier, in 1949, when fellow explorer Carlos Frey, whose son Cordan would ultimately

adopt, met with his own mysterious death in the jungles of southern Mexico. In his memoir Cordan tells the story.

Born Charles Frey, Carlos was an American who, in 1942, at eighteen, fled his country for Mexico to avoid the draft, only to find himself no less eligible for military service there. What began as an escape turned into an adventure, one that took Frey through the country's most remote areas mainly by foot and boat. In the Usumacinta River valley by the Guatemalan border, Frey met and married a native Indian girl, and established himself as a pig farmer, albeit not a very successful one. While pig farming he learned that occasionally the local Maya visited a secret city supposedly hidden deep within the forest. Frey had heard rumors that within the city was a temple, and within the temple a golden statue that the Maya worshipped. Frey yearned to see that statue.

Frey cut a most unusual figure. A Caucasian gringo, a combination of suntan and filth rendered him as dark as the natives. He seldom bathed and rarely cut his hair or shaved. He apparently stank. As one of his Lacandón friends told him—Lacandóns being notorious for either speaking the truth directly or saying nothing at all—"The river is handy, Don Carlos. Why don't you see to yourself a bit? We are not savages."

It took some doing, but eventually Frey convinced an Indian friend to take him to the secret city. Indeed, the city existed, in the mountains about a hundred miles south of Palenque at what is now the archeological site of Bonampak. And there was a statue: about a foot and a half tall, though that it was made of gold is highly doubtful—jade is more likely. In any case, soon after Frey laid eyes on it, the statue disappeared. On his own Frey returned to steal it. Hard-up for cash, he took it to Mexico City where he quickly found a buyer.

By then, though Frey's friends couldn't have doubted that he had stolen their statue, they seemed willing to forgive him. Nor did they seem to mind him bringing photographers to their place of worship, or the occasional scholar. But then, early in 1949, Frey returned once more to the ruins, this time leading an army of Mexican archeologists and officials—along with doctors, journalists, scholars, photographers, engineers, draftsmen, engravers, and a detachment of soldiers to protect them all—he may have gone too far.

News of the newly discovered temple had spread around the world, causing a sensation. Overnight, the name Bonampak—a corrupt Mayan translation of "Painted Walls"—attached itself to hastily constructed hotels, souvenir items, even a popular rum drink. With expeditions arriving weekly from everywhere, the peace and spirituality of the jungle were soon decimated.

As jungles will, this one took its revenge. When he met his end, Frey had been

leading three members of an expedition—a photographer named Morales, a draughtsman named Gomez, and a mestizo guide—to a supply camp to fetch a generator. Instead of hiking through the swamps to the camp, Frey had opted to take a shortcut via the river in a dugout canoe. Morales alone retuned to the site. According to him, they'd been paddling and portaging for some time, going against the current, arguing as to whether or not they should turn back. They were paddling against some rapids when suddenly the canoe turned crossways in the current and capsized. The upturned canoe was discovered days later by several Lacandón. Soon afterward, Frey's body was found lodged under a tree that had fallen into the river. Gomez's body was located close by. Two days later, the mestizo guide's drowned body was found.

A capsized canoe seemed a likely explanation for one death, perhaps two, but not all three deaths. One possible conclusion: the same Lacandón who found the three men murdered one or more of them. Another explanation is that, in his fear of the river voyage and his anger over their refusal to turn back, Morales either killed the others, or let them drown.

Ten years after Frey died, in 1959, Cordan would have even more reason to be wary of "rivals." Carrying through on threats, a gang of *pistoleros* broke into his San Cristóbal house. As he tells it in *Secrets of the Forest*:

> Carlitos [Frey's adopted son] and I escaped, miraculously. Professor Weber hid us in his school, in the same city, for twenty-four hours, and then prepared our flight. My collections were broken, my archives destroyed, and my hunting weapons stolen. And this was no consequence of a political feud, but the envy of a local archeologist using methods to do away with competition.

Confronting a midlife crisis, a middle-aged artist abandons the jungles of New York City, along with his wife and young daughter, for the jungles of southYork City, along with his wife and young daughter, for the jungles of southernmost Mexico. A hunter armed with a knapsack, a canteen, some food items, and a sketchbook, driven by forces he scarcely comprehends, sets out in pursuit of that most elusive of quarries: himself.

The student who brought the charges against me was a male student. Exactly why he brought the charges I'm not sure, though he made it clear that he was angry with me. I know he struggled with criticism and that he felt ostracized by others in our program. Since he was my advisee—and since I liked him and admired his gifts—for a time I took him under my wing, putting extra energy into his papers, even having him over to my place several times to boat, swim, and even for supper. But over time my solicitousness cooled. I grew weary of his

sudden, mercurial mood-swings from egotism to brooding self-doubt. More and more I found his presence intimidating, menacing even. I increased the distance between us. I stopped having him over. I did my job, but nothing more. It never occurred to me that he might see my distancing myself as an act of betrayal. Indeed, I *had* betrayed him—worse, I'd done so not aggressively or with malicious intent, but apathetically, heedlessly. Was that what made him go after me? I'll never know for sure.

The charges that he brought were as follows: over the summer break, in July, at a private party, I engaged in "inappropriate behavior" by skinny-dipping in a swimming pool. The pool party was to celebrate the new yoga studio that the pool's owner had recently opened in town. It was a very hot afternoon, 104 degrees at four o'clock. Having chatted among some guests indoors, a New Age crowd by and large, mostly adults with a sprinkling of graduated seniors and one graduate student, I ventured out to the pool. There, three guests sunned themselves at a table, while three others tossed a red inflatable ball around in the pool. I went to fetch my bathing suit from the back of my car to find it wasn't there; I'd left it at home, a twenty-minute drive.

I asked if anyone had a spare swimsuit I might borrow.

"What do you need a bathing suit for?" one of the sunbather's said. "Skinny-dip!"

The suggestion was reiterated by several of the other sunbathers. I remember saying to myself, "Yeah, why the hell not?" Another part of me—the part that grasped that with respect to public nudity the protocols of central Georgia differ markedly from those of St. Tropez or Paradise Beach—hesitated. A tug of war ensued: at one end, my sense of modesty, at the other, an equally opposite fear of being considered a prude. Meanwhile the sun scorched, the water beckoned.

I asked if anyone would mind. Shrugs and assurances.

And so I skinny-dipped. I went to the far end of the pool and, as discretely as possible, undressed under a towel and stepped into the shallow end, where I stayed just long enough to cool myself off. Then I got out and, just as discretely, dressed.

My student hadn't been at the party. He heard about my skinny-dipping from the female grad student who had been there, who told him about it in passing, having found it amusing. She had no idea that in doing so she would cause me so much grief. Nor did it cross my mind as I climbed naked out of that pool that I had just done something incredibly foolish that would jeopardize my job and

result in a sixty-day misconduct investigation—a torment that would deliver me to the brink of suicide in the loft bathroom of my lakeside A-frame.

Why did I do it? It wasn't just the heat or that I'd forgotten my bathing suit. Maybe I wanted to be young and carefree and innocent again, to show off my aging yet well-preserved swimmer's body, to prove to myself that, though no longer young, I was not yet old. Maybe I wanted to tempt fate, to do something risky, to loosen, if not free myself entirely from, the shackles of a tenured faculty position, to challenge the secure life I'd opted into, with its monotonous benefits and tedious meetings. Maybe I wasn't thinking at all.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera writes: "Anyone whose goal is 'something higher' must expect someday to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? No, vertigo is something other than fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us that tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves."

Was it my own vertigo that pulled me naked into that swimming pool, my own "desire to fall," the urge to abandon my defensive hold on existence, to plunge from stifling safety and security into the cool depths of the unknown?

That naked dip in an outdoor pool: was it my climb up Tzontehuitz?

The more I delved into Arthur Silz's story, the more convinced I grew that something beyond sightseeing or secret archeological discoveries had sent him hiking alone up into those mountains, that he had been driven there by more than curiosity or his sense of adventure.

Though my father's testimony suggested a fiery, stubborn, impulsive nature, according to the *Village Voice* reporter, Silz had been a man of pacific disposition. Perhaps he was all of those things—or, to use today's terms, *bipolar*, or *borderline personality*, classifications not uncommon among artists. Or is this another instance of me conflating my story with his?

At any rate, the more I learned about him, the more I identified with Silz, convinced that his fateful hike was every bit as much a confrontation with himself, with his own quirky nature, as with that mountain. Some sail off to find themselves, others climb mountains, still others venture off into the darkest, deepest jungles. To find themselves, first they need to get lost. They have to leave behind everything they think they know.

As for me, did I really want to die on a commode in Georgia? Was I really willing to abandon my five-year-old daughter—as Silz abandoned his? Oh, I hear you say as I said to myself, "Silz didn't *intend* to die." That's debatable. At the very

least he meant to confront his demons, to ambush them on that Mexican mountain.

As things turned out, the natives did it for him.

The *Voice* article continues:

> While still within the valley he took the wrong trail and started in the direction of a town called Chenalo, rather than on the correct path leading straight to Pantelo. The Thursday evening before, however, while talking to his friend, he had said that if he did not appear for six days after leaving, search parties were to be sent out for him.

By the following Friday, Silz had still not returned, and this same friend—Cordan or Dr. Weber; the article doesn't specify—arranged for a search party of eighty Indians to comb the region where Silz had disappeared. Later that day, the party returned a message saying that a murder had been committed in Mukén, a little-visited settlement on the slopes of Tzontehuitz. The article continues:

> That evening a posse of 80 arrived at Mukén at midnight and arrested five of the six men named as implicated. The sixth, who had left the day before on business, was arrested some hours later. The men, brought to jail in San Cristobal early Sunday morning, confessed their guilt and told where the body had been buried. Another posse, returning to Mukén, recovered Silz's body from where it had been buried, wrapped in his poncho, on the edge of a deep canyon.

From the confessions of the arrested men, the *Voice* reporter pieced together the story of Silz's murder. Though Silz was a strong, experienced hiker, apparently he wasn't prepared for the steep, narrow, rocky, at times ambiguous trail—if it could be called one—that climbed Tzontehuitz. The map he'd brought proved worthless. When not filtered through a canopy of vegetation, the sun broiled him. He realized he hadn't brought enough water.

Lost, disoriented, and fatigued, in the middle of the afternoon, Silz found himself at the end of a trail facing the edge of a sheer canyon. To one side he noticed the thatched huts of a small village. Stumbling with exhaustion, he made his way toward them. As he did, a group of female villagers who'd been working outdoors, cooking and washing clothes and tending sheep, ran off screaming. Exhausted, at a loss for what else to do, Silz found a nearby tree and sat there, on a stone in its shade.

It wasn't long before the village men arrived back to discover—to their amazement—this tall, pale-eyed, red-haired man sitting on that stone, his face ruddy and glowing from a mixture of sweat and sunburn, his lips and tongue parched, his eyes wide with bewilderment and fright. In their native language they questioned him. Who are you? Where did you come from? What are you doing here? Not understanding a word, his mouth too dry in any case to speak, Silz could respond only by shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head.

One of the men sent for a man who spoke Spanish. In Spanish this man repeated the same questions. Who are you? Where do you come from? Again Arthur Silz smiled, shook his head, gestured, but could not answer. It must have been at this point that the women, who had gathered to watch from a remove, became truly frightened, their fears fortified by an ancient Mayan legend wherein death emerged in the form of a "white devil" from the underworld, sometimes disguised as a goat, to cast a spell over the countryside, killing crops and cattle.

"He is the devil!" one of the women offered. "See how bent over he was coming up over the hill? Just like a goat!"

"No," said another. "He's not the devil. He's an angel. Look how light his skin is!"

"I tell you he's the devil, the white devil! Look at his red hair—and those pale eyes!"

One thing the villagers could all agree on: whoever this strange man was, he had to have come from another world. And since—as the *Village Voice* article goes on to say—according to their beliefs, only spirits, good or bad, were incapable of speech, he must be either an angel or the devil.

To make sense of what happened next, it helps to know something about these villagers. At the time of Arthur Silz's unplanned visit, the Chamulas were a tribe of about sixteen thousand living in rural settlements throughout the highlands of San Cristóbal. They spoke the Tzotzil language. They were subsistence farmers, living mostly on corn, beans, and other vegetables. Though they used fertilizer, irrigation was unknown to them. Their main tool was a long, pointy stick. The fieldwork was organized by family, with men and women taking equal part, and each person's share dependent upon his or her relationship to the family. Despite these primitive conditions, they formed active relations with Indian and non-Indian centers outside of their communities, bringing produce and other products of their labors to the markets there. When not harvesting their own fields, they were in constant demand as laborers at nearby coffee farms. They lived pliably under two systems: the Indian system, with its pre-conquistador organization, and the national, capitalistic system of their European conquerors.

All this is set forth in *Juan the Chamula*, by Mexican anthropologist Ricardo Poza, who proceeds to itemize the characteristics of a typical Chamulan. They include:

A strong constitution, enabling him to work in the fields.
A sense of collective unity limited to the ethnic group.
An active distrust of anyone who is not Indian.
A love of cane liquor, consumed to honor the living, the dead, and the gods.
A readiness to fight when drunk.
A fear of reprisals by the living and the spirits of the dead.
A strong ethical sense.
Deep religious convictions.

With these qualities in mind, let's return to the *Voice* story:

> In the end the frightened women prevailed. With a combination of sticks, stones, and machetes, the tribesmen, acting as one, attacked him. Silz tried to run, tripped, fell, and was probably killed instantly. After burying Silz's mutilated corpse in a nearby shallow grave, the men burned his knapsack and belongings.

Misconduct investigations—especially those conducted by human resources departments at universities—are cryptic affairs. To protect accusers and accused alike, all parties are sworn to silence. As a further protective measure, often the suspect is isolated, subjected to what is euphemistically referred to as "paid administrative leave," told to do no work, and in some cases barred from campus. Though protective in theory, in practice these measures have a punitive effect on the suspect, who—far from being presumed innocent—is made to feel like a pariah and a menace. Making things worse is the fact that the accused is advised to speak with no one about the investigation lest it be "contaminated." Apart from hiring a lawyer—who will cost lots of money and who will likewise be kept in the dark—the suspect has no one to turn to other than the investigators, who exist—or seem to—for no greater purpose than to establish guilt, a process that may take days, weeks, or months: no one can say for sure. Meanwhile the accused molders away in their exile, growing increasingly despondent as each day slashes its black mark across what had been a perfectly good reputation.

By week six I began to lose my mind. Though I'm sure the good people at my Human Resources department had no malicious intent, and that the investigation they carried out was ultimately both thorough and fair, the process was a

form of torture. One night I found myself quite literally writhing on my carpeted bedroom floor, wondering whether and how I could endure more.

What kept me going were constant phone calls from friends and family, some lasting for hours. When not talking on the phone, or swimming, or sleeping or trying to sleep, I was at my computer, learning about Arthur Silz.

When it comes to grasping—or trying to grasp—Arthur Silz's story, the saying "the devil is in the details" has never been truer. What, exactly, drove Silz's executioners to their pointy sticks and stones? What, ultimately, made them murder him?

I can only speculate. Or let someone else—ideally a skilled Mexican poet who lived much of her life in Chiapas—speculate for me.

Born in 1925 in Mexico City to wealthy, well-educated parents of European stock, Rosario Castellanos was still in her twenties when her parents died, leaving her to fend for herself. By then her family, stripped of its wealth by the revolution, had relocated to a ranch in Chiapas. Castellanos went on not only to become one of Mexico's leading poets, but a diplomat—serving as Mexico's ambassador to Israel—a professor, and a fiction writer, her memories of Chiapas supplying the background for many of her stories. Much of Castellanos's writing is imbued with an intense, ironic melancholy, and when she died freakishly at forty-nine by electrocuting herself with a hair dryer, many suspected that her death was not an accident.

Among the stories that make up her 1960 collection *Cuidad Real* (*City of Kings*) is a powerful allegorical tale titled "La Tregua" (translated by Robert Rudder as "The Truce"), which describes a gruesome encounter between a lost tourist and the inhabitants of a rural Mayan hamlet in Chiapas. Written within a few years of Arthur Silz's murder, the story is clearly based on that experience, which occurred while the author was living in San Cristóbal de las Casas, and about which she no doubt heard many accounts and rumors.

Narrated in the third person from the viewpoint of one of the village women, "The Truce" opens:

> Rominko Pérez Taquibequet, of the village of Mukenjá, carried two pails of fresh water. A woman like all the others of her tribe, an ageless stone, she walked rigidly, silently, balancing the weight of her load. As she climbed the arroyo with each swing of her legs her fingers ached; the blood pounded at her temples. Fatigue and delirium shaded her eyes. It was two in the afternoon.
>
> At a bend in the road, without a sound to announce his presence, a man

appeared. His boots were splattered with mud, his shirt dirty, torn to shreds; his beard showed several weeks' growth.

Rominko stopped in front of him, stunned by surprise.

Convinced that the stranger, who cannot communicate, is a *pukuj* or "evil spirit," and aware that those who set eyes upon a pukuj are known to go mad, the terrified woman prostrates herself at the stranger's feet, weeping and wailing, confessing her frailties and begging forgiveness. Equally terrified, not understanding a word she says, in what may be interpreted as a symbolic gesture denoting the violence loosed upon indigenous people by Europeans when faced with radical cultural incomprehension, the stranger pushes Rominko away. Rominko screams, alerting the village men, who have been off somewhere distilling cane liquor—an illegal act that in the past has brought terrible punishment by the Ladino authorities, who've been known to burn perpetrators alive in their huts for this crime. Given this and the stranger's violent gesture, it's not surprising that he is seen as a threat.

In the story's ultimate scene, the villagers unleash their collective fury on the stranger, murdering him in a scapegoating ritual in the hope that it might relieve, temporarily, their bad luck. In destroying the devil, they hope to appease the gods and save their community.

The men looked around for what they could find readily at hand for the attack: cudgels, stones, machetes. One woman, with a smoking incensory, made several turns around the fallen man, tracing out a magic circle from which he could no longer escape.

Then they unleashed their fury. Cudgel that pounds, stone that crushes skull, machete that severs limbs. The women shouted from behind the walls of the huts, inciting the men to finish off their criminal work.

When it was all over, dogs came to lick the gore. Later the vultures arrived. The frenzy was prolonged artificially by drunkenness. All night dismal screams echoed through the hills.

Ironically, in relaying the story through her narrator, Castellanos, a wealthy *Ladina* of mixed European ancestry, refers to the stranger as a "*caxlán*," the Mayan word for a light-skinned foreigner derived from the Spanish word for "Castilian," which, it so happens, is "castellanos." At least one critic takes issue with the narrator's (and by extension Castellanos's) reducing Rominko to a generalized archetype, the timeless *indio*, "an ageless stone," while alternating freely between the Maya words for "foreigner" (caxlán) and "devil" (pukuj) to permit—if

not enforce—the impression that, while the narrator can distinguish between the devil and a tourist, the story's Maya protagonists cannot.

Though it brings us as close to the historical event as we're likely to get, Castellanos's fictional retelling still leaves plenty of room for speculation. For instance: how probable was it that a hiker of Silz's experience, familiar as he was with the terrain, was so unprepared for this three-day hike not to have enough water with him to last at least that long? Accepting that he'd run out of water, how likely is it that his mouth was so dry he couldn't speak at all—enough, at least, to assure the suspicious locals that he wasn't "incapable of speech"? How probable is it that, confronted with this unarmed, seated, and obviously weakened specimen of man or devil, the village men would see fit to murder him then and there, in front of their women, in cold blood? Had Silz been the aggressor? Did he "push" them to murder? If so it doesn't jibe with the "peaceful" man refusing Wolfgang Cordan's pistol. Had his killers been furtively distilling *pozol* (cane-sugar liquor), as implied by Castellanos's story? Were they afraid he would tell on them?

And just how likely was it that, as the *Village Voice* reporter claims, Silz's decision to hike Tzontehuitz had been a last-minute change of plan? Isn't the more likely explanation that he had planned to go there all along? And why would he have said otherwise, except to keep his true destination a secret?

To account for their motives, the *Village Voice* reporter had only the testimonies of the arrested men—men who, though the report doesn't say (and no subsequent articles exist to tell us) were probably either acquitted of their crime, or they received relatively light sentences, given the cultural factors involved and the likely wish to maintain the delicate balance that existed—then as now—between the need for so-called "civilized" society to protect its citizens and to respect, or tolerate, the autonomy of isolated indigenous groups with their own distinct codes and cultures. Given those conditions, it would have been a simple matter for that mysterious "rival explorer" to bribe a group of indigent locals into carrying out a murder on his behalf, especially that of a man as foolhardy as Silz, who not only made it possible, but perhaps invited it.

As for the "significant" archeological discovery that he and Wolfgang Cordan made in the jungle, it remains a mystery. Cordan doesn't seem to have spoken of it again, nor does he allude to it in any of his several books. His own suspicious death ten years later while on an archeological expedition in Guatemala, followed by the death of his Locandón guide and best friend six months later, guarantee that the mystery will never be solved.

Puzzling and tragic though it was, according to the *Village Voice*, Arthur Silz's death could be seen as, if not necessary, logical. The *Voice* article ends on a conciliatory note: "Putting oneself in the place of both Mr. Silz, who knew little about the region, and of the terrified Indians, one can understand the tragedy."

Arthur Silz's murder has since been almost entirely forgotten, along with the artist himself and his paintings. Sensational though it was, it's unreasonable to expect the memory of a single murder in Chiapas to have survived, given that place's bloody history, one that dates back to the annihilation of the Aztecs—who weren't exactly averse to violence themselves—by the conquistadors, and beyond. Even if Silz hadn't been pelted to death on that mountain, the years between then and now would in all likelihood have erased his memory. The men who murdered him merely started the job that time would finish.

Or Arthur Silz *had* been lost to time, until I found him, hidden in a painting of some clay heads my father did long ago, the one that hangs in the bathroom of my A-frame on a lake in Georgia—a painting that, like Pandora's jar, when opened released its flood of evil.

Along with the evil, though, as Hesiod tells us, the last thing that comes out of Pandora's jar is always hope.

For me things have improved. I survived my university's zealous HR inquest. The investigation turned up no findings against me. It appears that skinny-dipping, though hardly sanctioned by them, falls somewhere beyond my university's code of conduct, so I broke no rules. My administrative leave has ended. I've gone back to teaching. I'm working, sleeping, and eating better. Though not entirely eradicated, my sense of isolation isn't nearly as strong as it was, nor am I feeling the least bit suicidal.

For the time being, anyway, I've escaped my dark jungle.

Today the municipality of Chamula, the place nearest the village into which, one day in September of 1956, a parched, sunburned, disoriented, and frightened Arthur Silz stumbled, is a bustling tourist destination. The locals wear bright costumes. There's a thriving market for vegetables, rugs, baskets, and other items from the weavers' cooperative next door to the church. The village boasts an ethnographic museum and a handicraft shop. It is best visited with a guide who can advise on local customs and the propriety of taking photographs.

From Chamula, I'm given to understand, tour buses depart regularly to within two miles of the ancient ruins and murals of Bonampak. "Take water and insect repellant," a tourist website advises. "Wear non-skid shoes; hydrate constantly."

Noise

Peter Selgin

I hear things. Not just the normal things that everyone hears, but noises strictly in my head, available to no one but me. For the past ten years I've suffered from bilateral tinnitus, sometimes called ringing in the ears, or hissing or buzzing—though in my case those words don't do it justice. Imagine a silver needle of noise threading its way endlessly through your skull, or water coursing under pressure through a pipe between your ears. No one knows for sure what exactly causes tinnitus, something to do with damaged microscopic hair cells in the inner ear. The disease is associated with irritability, fatigue, stress, depression, and a host of other anxiety disorders. It's been known to drive people to suicide.

Luckily, my tinnitus isn't that bad. Anyway I've learned to live with it. Call it a legacy of my days in New York, that supremely noisy city where I lived for thirty-seven years, realm of honking horns, rumbling buses, banging trucks, blaring radios, whooping car alarms, and noisy neighbors. The city traumatized me with its noises, chasing me from borough to borough, each with its unique mélange of unwanted sounds, from Holland Tunnel traffic jams to three a.m. garbage trucks to the symphony of street cleaners sweeping the Henry Hudson Bridge at dawn.

Of all the places I lived, none was noisier than the Upper West Side, at the corner of 94th and Columbus, where my then-wife and I lived in a second-floor rear two-bedroom foreclosure in a deco building. The apartment had built-in wall sconces, a raised dining alcove, and a sunken living room. We painted it warm colors and filled it with flea market antiques. With each arrival of spring the courtyard dogwood tree bloomed gloriously.

But except for an hour or two in the afternoons the place was as dark as a coal miner's lungs. And it was noisy, terribly noisy. Since

we faced the courtyard, traffic wasn't a problem. The problem was the building next door, one of those dilapidated brick high-rises commissioned by the Housing Authority under the Wagner administration. An alley divided it from the window of our second bedroom, the studio where I earned my living as an illustrator specializing in caricatures, doing thousands of portraits a year, mostly for corporate clients. There I kept my drafting table and shelves of pens and inks and pencils, along with a stereo unit on which I played opera and classical music. There, between cups of espresso, I delved deep into azure grottoes of blissful creative concentration, my idyllic life.

Or it would have been, if not for that building, and one particular resident who played sweet corny songs at top volume all day long, day after day. Concentration shot, bliss destroyed, idyll interrupted.

Noise is sound where you don't want it. Whether it's car alarms or a Mozart requiem doesn't matter. If you don't care to hear it, it's noise.

I tried closing my window, turning on the A.C. fan, raising the volume on my music. Still I heard it, the thump-thump of bass notes, the plaintive voices wailing trite lyrics.

I phoned the local precinct.

"We don't consider noise complaints between seven a.m. and midnight to be valid."

"Really? Does that mean I can play 'Ride of the Valkyries' full tilt at a stroke to midnight and no one can do a damn thing about it?"

"That's right," the duty officer said.

"Am I to understand that there's no longer such a thing as disturbing the peace?"

"There is—after midnight."

"That cuts it," I announced to my wife after hanging up. "We're moving."

Instead I pulled on my jacket and cowboy boots (back then I wore cowboy boots) and, in a fever of righteous indignation, against my wife's protests ("Don't be an idiot! You'll get yourself killed!") marched outdoors.

Security at the building next door wasn't tight. You just had to wait till someone walked in or out to grab the front door before it closed. Once in the lobby, though, I had no idea what buzzer to press. I went around the side of the building and stood there in the alley, gazing at the culprit's window, through which Stevie Wonder sang, "I just called to say I love you." An air conditioner took up half the window. Behind a rusty theft grate the other half was cracked open a few inches, the room behind it in darkness.

"Hey!" I yelled. "You playing that loud music in there!" The cowboy boots added an inch to my average height and made me feel tougher than I was, which was not at all. I was still naïve enough then to believe that being right protected you.

I took a quarter from my pocket, reached through the security grate, and rapped, hard, on the glass. By now you've discerned that I am not the world's easiest going person. I'm a perfectionist. One reason why I'm an artist is to achieve—if not perfection—some sense of control over things. But the world isn't a blank canvas or a page subject to editing. One has to work with imperfect surfaces.

It took a minute of rapping for the music to stop. The silhouette of a head appeared in the window's lower half, black against paler darkness. A quivering voice said something I could barely make out, the words were so raspy.

I said, "Do you have any idea how loud your music is?"

"I'm sorry," the voice said.

"You're disturbing the whole damn neighborhood."

"I'm sorry. I'll turn it down."

"Please do."

Sometimes there's heaven so quickly. I made my way home, cowboy heels sounding confidently against the pavement. When she saw me, my wife shook her head. I smiled, fired up another pot of espresso and went back to my drafting table. I plunged blissfully back into my work, until the music started again.

"Son of a bitch!" I pulled on my jacket and boots again.

I should have mentioned that it was a lovely October day, just a few clouds in the sky. I didn't need the jacket. Or the boots. Back at the window, I rapped on the glass again.

Again the music stopped. Again the rasped apology. This time I saw more of his face. Crew cut. Thin mustache. Around thirty, thirty-five. Studded earrings gleaming in both ears.

"If you closed the window it would help," I said.

"I can't."

Can't close a window. Was he an idiot? He held something up in the darkness, the silver shaft of a crutch, the bent aluminum kind with hinged wrist cuffs. I let the moment of shame pass, then reached in and shut the window for him. His raspy voice said, "Thanks." I wondered what made his voice sound like that. Did he smoke? Was something wrong with his throat? God knew what else was the matter with him.

I was about to go when he said, "You're the artist, right?"

I turned.

"I seen you working."

I didn't cherish the thought of this person spying on me through my window.

"What sort of art do you do?"

"I'm an illustrator. Portraits, mainly. Caricatures," I said.

"Caricatures, wow! I always wanted to know how to do those."

"It just takes practice," I lied.

"I always wanted to be an artist."

"What's stopping you?"

"Lack of talent."

All this time I barely saw him through the glass, there was so much glare on it. Meanwhile the room remained dark. He asked me my name. I told him.

"Mine's Lenny, as in Leonard. Nice to meet you, Peter."

I smiled. "Same here. Just please keep the music down, okay?"

For the next two days he did, but then it started again. This time, seeing me standing outside his window, Lenny waved me toward the front entrance. "Apartment 1-C," he said.

Christ, I thought, entering the lobby. What the hell am I doing? For all I knew he was a psycho bent on cutting my organs out and refrigerating them in jars. Or he wanted sexual favors. Damn it, I had an illustration to finish! The lobby smelled of cigarettes and ammonia. Someone had jammed of wad of chewing gum into the buzzer panel. I pressed 1-C and was buzzed in.

I was halfway down the dimly lit hallway when the door opened. A small dog barked. The front of a wheelchair and two pajama-clad legs poked out. "Over here," called Lenny as the dog kept barking. "Stop it, Ebony! Ebony, stop!"

The place was tidy. What did I expect? One of those junk-infested rat holes inhabited by shut-ins like the Collyer Brothers? Illuminated, Lenny looked a lot younger, maybe twenty-five. He showed me the living room: sofa, TV, books neat on shelves, mostly hardcover novels. A curio cabinet with a porcelain Christ on a cross. A copy of *Speak, Memory* caught my eye, next to a hardcover of *Victory,* by Joseph Conrad.

"My father likes to read. Before he quit to teach college, he was a high school English teacher. You like to read?"

I nodded. "You?"

Lenny shook his head. "I'd rather listen to music."

"So I gather."

"That or watch movies." He pointed to an antique rocking chair. "When I'm not in my room, I'm here, in my TV chair." He laughed.

A woman's voice called. "Who is it, Lenny?"

"It's our neighbor Peter."

In the kitchen Lenny introduced me to his mother. Petite, dark, pretty. Hispanic accent. "You live in the yellow building?" she said. "That's a nice building."

"Thank you."

"Lenny loves artists. He speaks highly of you."

"Want to see my room?" said Lenny. I followed him down the hallway, past a series of framed photos on the wall, including one of a boy standing with crutches in front of a church, smiling.

Lenny showed me his room. Ceiling-high piles of video and cassette tapes and record albums. Amplifiers and an array of big speakers: noise-making equipment. Where not covered with shelves and bookcases, the walls were plastered with posters of movies and musicians. *Dr. Zhivago. Return of the Jedi. Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan.* The air conditioner thrummed. A smaller TV was on near the bed. Pat Robertson's face filled its screen.

The rest of the room was taken up by an unmade bed, blankets in a jumble. A string of rosary beads hung from the bedpost. I sat uncomfortably on the edge of the bed.

Lenny switched the TV off. "I hate that guy," he said. "I hate all self-proclaimed prophets." He pulled his wheelchair up close, so its wheels came past my knees. He handed me a photograph of himself with his arm around a dark-skinned girl. "That's Marisol, my ex-girlfriend," he said. "She's Dominican. My dad's a stern, macho Puerto Rican. That's why we broke up. Dad said, 'The day you bring a black girl in this house is the day I disown you.' He meant it. My dad's a very angry person. Very intelligent and very angry. Dad used to say to me, 'In this world, you play to win or you don't play at all.' 'There's no room in the world for failures and mediocrities,' he said. It's why I don't draw or play music or anything. I'd never be good enough."

"Maybe not as far as your dad is concerned. What about being good enough for yourself?" I said. "Isn't that just as important—or more?"

Lenny changed the subject. "So, what do you think?" he said, holding the photo out to me again. "Isn't she beautiful?"

I nodded. "Very." I handed the photograph back.

"I have a favor to ask."

Uh-oh, I thought.

"Will you draw her for me? Her birthday's coming up in two weeks. I want to give it to her. I'll pay you for it."

"Lenny, I'm awfully busy."

"Please?" He handed the photograph back to me. "Keep it," he said. "I've got another just like it. In case you get inspired—you can get started."

I nodded and said I had to go.

"Okay, but listen to this song first." He put on a CD. "Listen," he said. As the song played he handed me a sheet of paper with the lyrics, which he'd written down. "It's called 'Love Education,'" he said. "Listen."

So here I am in solo fashion
I sit alone inside my passion …

"Like it?"

"Very nice," I lied.

"Here's the part that always makes me cry. Listen."

So there you were, your heart was broken (oh dear)
Burdened with pain, words left unspoken …

"I really have to go now."

As I rose from the bed Lenny said, "Do you think it's possible to find peace anywhere but with Christ in heaven?"

"Gosh, Lenny, I really wouldn't know."

There was a knock on the door. His mother stuck her head in. "Don't forget your two o'clock appointment today, Lenny," she said.

"I won't, Mom."

I left.

Days later the music was back. The pattern was now set: Lenny would blast his music, I'd visit him for a half hour or so, procure a few music-free days, and the whole thing would repeat like clockwork. I figured my visits were a small price to pay for some peace and quiet. It sure beat having to move.

And Lenny was a nice kid. I grew to like him. He seemed sincere, if sad. And he was obviously very sad. Crippled by cerebral palsy, bullied by a macho father, mollycoddled by a devout Christian mother. His father didn't live at the apartment; the details were fuzzy. I never saw the man.

A few times we watched movies in their living room. Mrs. Valdez would bring in a plate of cookies and glasses of milk. Once she made a batch of Jiffy-Pop. I felt like an uncle or cousin.

Though at first she thought it odd, my wife ultimately approved. At least I hadn't gotten myself stabbed. Once I brought Lenny home. I showed him my studio, my drafting table, my watercolors and mechanical pencils and collection of crow-quill pens. I gave him some pointers on doing caricatures. "Always go for the biggest shapes first," I said. "The shape of the skull is extremely important. Ignore hair and other superficial features. From the skull work your way into the eyes. The eyes are where the essence is located. Get the eyes right, and your subject will come alive."

I demonstrated, doing a portrait of Lenny. Then I had him do one of me, with me giving him pointers as he went. The result wasn't half-bad. I rolled it into a tube and snapped a rubber band around it. I gave him a mechanical pencil, some markers, a kneaded eraser, and a pad of Bristol paper. Then I walked him home.

It went on like that for a few weeks. Then, in November, I landed a big commission: a corporate tombstone for Deloitte & Touche commemorating a billion-dollar bond-merger. The finished product would measure four feet by six and feature forty-two portraits in color, bodies included, the twilit Manhattan skyline stretched out behind them. It was my highest-paying commission to date, but it came with a nasty deadline: seven weeks, during which time I'd not only have to do the drawing, but gather photographs of the subjects who spent most of their time airborne in Lear jets.

I forgot about Lenny. It didn't help that he had stopped playing his music. Maybe he'd gone to the Dominican Republic, to elope with his forbidden sweetheart. I thought about Lenny with Marisol—when I thought of Lenny at all. But mostly I focused on my work. Then, at seven thirty one morning, the phone rang. A woman with an Hispanic accent.

"This is Mrs. Valdez, Lenny's mother. Lenny—who lives next door?"

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Valdez. How are you?"

"I just wanted to let you know everything's all right. Lenny was checked into Columbia Presbyterian Hospital last night. But everything's okay now."

"What happened?"

"He took some pills, but he's all right now. He's under twenty-four-hour supervision. He wanted you to know. He's been talking about you a lot. He really enjoyed your company."

I remembered the caricature of Marisol that I'd done but never gave to him. It sat on my taboret under a pile of sketches and papers. The truth is I had been avoiding Lenny. It wasn't just the commission; I was afraid he'd started to depend on me. I wasn't big on responsibilities.

"If you'd like to visit…" Mrs. Valdez said, and then she gave me the information.

"Can I ask you something?"

She waited.

"Do you have any idea why your son feels so helpless?"

A car alarm went off. As Mrs. Valdez explained about Lenny's break-up with his girlfriend, the hardships he faced owing to his handicap, his constant struggles to adapt to new medications and assistive technologies, I took the phone into the bathroom and shut the door. His mother went on, about the divorce a year ago, his father moving out, her forced to go back to work and leave him alone all day. "My son's been through a lot. It's why he's in therapy. I've been going myself. I try to help him. *Meu querido,* what else can I do?" We both let the question hang. "Please do visit him if you can. He admires you very much. God bless and be with you."

I rode the subway to 168th Street and Broadway. Though it was still the middle of winter it felt like spring. A floral scent filled the air, along with the brine of the Hudson estuary. The low buildings let in a wide swatch of sky. It had been a while since I'd ventured that far uptown. In my backpack, tucked between the pages of a sketchbook, I carried the caricature of Marisol, along with a paperback copy of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet.*

In the waiting area I sat by a window. Nurses on break smoking cigarettes, gossiping. I flipped through *Letters to a Young Poet,* my eyes landing on the phrase *love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain.* The sunlight glared off the page and I felt suddenly tired.

When I looked up one of the nurses was looking at me, pretty, smiling. I smiled back. I'd forgotten where I was and why.

I was reorienting myself when the receptionist called me and directed me to Lenny's room. When I found him Lenny was on the toilet, finishing up, maneuvering from commode to wheelchair. "Sorry," he said. As he rolled close, I saw a few flecks of white in his mustache. The rest of his face was razor-stubbled. Three pimples lit up his forehead. He shook my hand. He had big strong hands with oversized thumbs. I hadn't noticed before how big his thumbs were. His earrings were gone.

"Did you ever watch that movie?" he asked. I remembered him handing me the videocassette. I couldn't remember the title. Anyway I hadn't watched it.

"You should watch it, it's good."

I promised I would.

"This place is like a fishbowl." He nodded toward an orderly standing nearby. "I have no privacy. And the food stinks."

"You were expecting the Grand Hyatt?"

He laughed. I gave him the book and the drawing. With a toothy grin stretching from one studded ear to the other he approved of both. I told him all about my commission. We chatted. Finally I asked, "Why did you do it, Lenny?"

He shrugged. "I wish I could be like everyone else."

"No, you don't."

"I do."

"Well, forget it. You'll never be like everyone else. No one will ever be like everyone else. Everyone's special, Lenny, whether they like it or not."

"Being special hurts."

"Being human hurts."

"It's not the first time," he said. "Last time they kept me here three days. They put me in a rubber room. I know what it's like to be shackled."

"As options go it doesn't strike me as a very good one."

"You really should watch that movie."

Lenny's mother arrived, carrying a Bible, a paper bag with coffee and bagels, and a rolled-up poster of Jon Gibson, Lenny's favorite singer-songwriter, the man responsible for "Love Education". As Lenny sipped the coffee a nurse took his temperature and blood pressure. His mother asked her why they had taken his earrings. "What could he do with them?"

"He'd think of something," the nurse answered.

Lenny's psychiatrist arrived, Dr. Sidney—a handsome, well-put-together type, silver goatee and hair, black turtleneck under a pale suit. Lenny showed him the caricature I did of Marisol. "Isn't it great?"

"We should get him to do Pastor Bob," said Sidney.

"Pastor Bob—that would be great!"

With Lenny's psychiatrist gone, Mrs. Valdez returned. "Mr. Sidney refuses to speak to me," she confided to me. "Can you believe it? His own therapist refuses to speak to me, his mother! As if it's my fault! *Dios mio:* can I help it if he'll always be my baby?"

After leaving the hospital, rather than take the subway I decided to walk downtown. It was a beautiful day, and already a lost cause as far as work was concerned. Via Broadway I made my way through Manhattan Valley to Morningside Heights, past Columbia's gates, bookstores, and jammed cafes. Somewhere around 112th Street I heard music playing, drifting down from one of countless pre-war building windows. I imagined as many Lennys hunkered in dark rooms, blasting their music, wanting the world to feel—or anyway to hear—the songs of their distress. I live in a city amplified by anguish, I thought, by the notion that, as long as other people can hear it, no one need suffer in solitude or in silence.

The last I heard from Lenny was five years ago. He sent me a Facebook friend request, along with a message. By then I'd divorced and moved to Georgia, to the house on a lake where I sit now writing this. Lenny's message said he was doing fine. He had a girlfriend; they were engaged. He made a living as a graphic designer and had done some CD covers. He wanted to know if I was still doing caricatures. I am not.

"It's been a rough winter in New York," Lenny wrote me. "I bet the weather's better in Georgia." Two or three more messages followed. Then—as suddenly as they started—the messages stopped.

The city noises that once drove me to despair are gone now, replaced by birds, wind, and waves slapping the pylons of my dock. The few man-made sounds belong mainly to seasonal jet skis and powerboats. I've made my peace with them.

The rest—as Hamlet said—is silence.

Well, not quite. Not long ago I was writing here at my desk when I heard what sounded like rap music. My neighbors are all retired. I thought: Who the heck's playing *rap* music? Searching for a boat, I looked through the big triangular window facing the lake. The water smooth as glass. I peeled back the curtains of the window facing the street, expecting a passing car. Again nothing. I went out on the deck. Huh, I thought, and went in and sat down to write again. The noise returned, the same percussive beat, just as loud.

Dammit, I thought, and went through the whole rigmarole again with the same negative results.

Then I realized: It wasn't rap music. It was my own pulse pounding in my ears.

Those two sounds—my tinnitus threading its one-note, high-pitched melody through my skull, and the drumbeat of my pulse—serve to remind me that I once lived in a noisy city, and how that city is now in my blood, a part of my brain.

I'm reminded too of Lenny, and of how little I understood life on that day when we first met. Since then I've learned that the main lesson life teaches us is how to lose things. Our suffering is all we really own, and it, too, shall pass. All the sounds we hear and make while on this earth are nothing next to the silence that preceded them—and that is sure to follow them.

Barber

Peter Selgin

Today I'm going to get a haircut. I just decided. There's no barbershop in sight. I don't even know of any barbershops in this neighborhood. The urge to get a haircut has come upon me suddenly, like an early afternoon sun shower. I don't know this part of the city well, yet already I feel a heavy sense of comfort, a balanced feeling scented with Lilac Vegetal and talcum powder as I drift along in search of a barber pole, one of those red, white, and blue cylinders that whirl 'round and 'round, hypnotizing people into having their ears lowered, as if getting a haircut is the most patriotic thing a person can do, up there with voting, giving blood, and joining the Marines.

As a boy, I dreaded getting my hair cut. I dreaded the mechanical white chair, the barber's sneaky, small-toothed smile, the snipping sound his scissors made next to my ears, as bad as the whine of a mosquito, though not as bad as the buzz of dog-clippers, as we used to call them.

I remember the barbershop. There were two in my hometown, Patsy's and Chris's. My mother took me to Chris's, though to me he wasn't Chris, he was Floyd, the barber on *The Andy Griffith Show*: a short, slope-shouldered, seedy little man with an Adolph Hitler mustache and salt-and-pepper hair combed straight back in tight little curls. And though I liked *The Andy Griffith Show,* I hated Floyd the barber. His hands were too small; so were his teeth. They were the hands and teeth of a mole. He and the barber who cut my hair had the same lecherous smile. I imagined him doing nasty things to kids in the mysterious room hidden behind a stained blue curtain (where he kept dirty magazines in a drawer, I guessed).

As with all suspicious persons, you couldn't say where Floyd was from, exactly, somewhere far away, like Bulgaria or Romania—one of those places ending in 'ia'. It wouldn't have surprised me to find out he was a taxidermist on the side, or a cannibal, and that the refrigerator he kept in his back room was packed with things floating in jars. He oozed bad breath and spoke in a thin, raspy voice that was equivalent to the sound the files labeled "bastard" made when my father used them to scrape burrs off metal in his laboratory: a voice dripping perversion and espionage.

On the little table of his barbershop, Floyd's real life equivalent kept a spread of old comic books for his customers to look at, yellow with age. Most had to do with war: flamethrowers, tanks, and U-boats with commandants gritting their teeth while peering through periscopes. The floor was linoleum tiled, with alternating beige and green squares resembling headcheese and creamed spinach. I'd sit in the chrome and vinyl chair thumbing the same comic I'd thumbed a hundred times before, watching the same tanks blowing up and flamethrowers spouting and U-boats firing torpedoes at allied cargo ships, feeling queasy as though I were in the dentist's waiting room, kicking the backs of my P.F. Flyers (guaranteed to make me run faster and jump higher) into the chrome chair legs, hearing the *snip-snip* of Floyd's scissors, watching the miniature tumbleweed-like tufts of dead hair tumble down to the cheese and spinach tiles from the scalp of the old man whose place I'd soon be taking. I would note the pattern of hair falling on the floor, how much fell on green vs. beige tiles, seeing faces, ships, cars, trains, and States of the Union in the proliferating blobs before Floyd kicked them out of place with his wing-tips.

Click-snip. Snip-snip. Zwick-zwick-zwick.

Most of Floyd's customers didn't seem to have enough hair to bother cutting, old men with more hair sprouting from their ears than from their skulls. Fathers brought sons in baseball and Boy Scout caps, as if ashamed to have let their hair grow beyond three-quarters of an inch. I'd always go with my mother, who'd abandon me to Floyd and his sharp little teeth and bad breath while she went across the street to Tony's Supermarket. How I dreaded the moment when the customer in front of me would stand up from the big white complicated chair, hand Floyd two dollars, and wait while he rang it up with a *zinnng!* on the big silver cash register whose drawer always stuck. Then Floyd would return to the chair (one of three in the shop, but the only one he ever used), pump it all the way down, snap the seat with a flick of his towel, and look at me with a lecherous smile over his half-moon glasses. Please, not yet, I'd say to myself, looking around, hoping by some miracle there would be someone ahead of me, someone who had been hiding there all that time, dreading the barber as much as I did.

I get up and go sit in the chair, and Floyd pumps it back up again. Then he flaps out the striped smock, filling it with air, ridding it of the last customer's dead hair, and lets it come billowing down on me gentle and soft like a parachute. He tucks it in with tissue behind my neck. I feel his fingers tucking, tickling, giving my neck an inadvertent massage. He glides a skinny black comb through my frizzy brown hair, not saying a word, not asking how I "want it," tugging out the stiff hairs as if to let them know who's boss, seeing how long and reprobate they have grown, sighing and going tut-tut-tut with his tongue against his tiny teeth as if to say, 'Well now, it should never have come to this.' He yanks my hair so hard with his comb my head jerks from side to side. It's all I can do not to cry "ouch," but I don't; I refuse to show him my pain. I stare dead ahead into the cracked mirror, which Floyd has tried to fix with masking tape, past gleaming green and gold bottles and the tall blue jar of Barbicide with combs floating like pickles there. My eyes well with tears.

Suddenly, with a neat flick of his wrist, from the breast pocket of Floyd's white jacket the scissors emerge and *snippety-snip-snip* he starts cutting, sending gouges of frizzy brown hair to the floor like envoys from atop my head, tufts thick as Brillo pads, *swick-switcka-swick,* rolling down the front of the striped smock onto the tiles: my hair, once, no longer. When a half-dozen clumps have fallen, Floyd's heretofore sealed lips part and he starts talking, as if to find his tongue he had to snip through so much hair that blocked his way. Then his bad breath oozes all over me. Don't ask me what he says; I have no idea; I'm not listening. I'm too busy being horror-stricken by what's happening to the top of my head, counting the frizzy gobs that like downed birds shot from the sky, my arms pinned under the striped smock, wanting to catch them, to take them to my lips and kiss them goodbye.

Talk-talk, snip-snip, talk-talk.

After a while I can't bear any more. I close my eyes, squeeze them shut, wait for the torture to end, opening them only when he holds the mirror behind my head. No matter how much I hate what the mirror says, I nod, since there's nothing Floyd can do but cut off more hair, right? He can't put it back, can he now? Besides, I just want to get out of here. The barbershop is a ghoulish place, the place where I go to have my hair amputated by a foul-breathed Romanian spy-pervert.

But Floyd isn't finished. It's the old fakeroo! He flaps out the parachute smock then puts it back on again with a fresh tissue. It will never end. He will go on cutting my hair forever, for the rest of my life.

But after a few more *zwickety-zwicks* Floyd takes the smock off again. He sweeps the back of my neck with a big brush dipped in talcum powder (which I have to admit feels good). Then he wets his fingers with cold fluid from a tall green bottle and drags them against the side of my head, leaving it slick and shiny and smelling of lemons, ocean air, pine trees, limes and vinegar—which I confess also feels good. A few more last-minute *zwick-zwicks*. With a decisive snap of his towel and a squeeze of my shoulder, that's it, I'm done. Floyd's finished.

I hand him the two crumpled one-dollar bills my mother gave me and that I've been holding the whole time. She meets me at the door. It's all over. I can breathe again. For another month or so.

Ahead of me, down the block, a barber's pole swirls, blending red blood, blue skies, and white surrender, drawing me to it like a ship in a stormy sea to a lighthouse. I stand before the plate glass, watching the barber at work, a man no older than me, but his hair is gray and so he'll do. Maybe it's nostalgia, or I'm just getting old, but for some reason today I long to sit in one of those big white complicated chairs with flat filigreed iron plates for the soles of my shoes. I long for the phalanx of colored bottles lined up before a cracked mirror mended with masking tape.

A tinkle of doorbells announces my entry, the same bells I heard as a kid, only I'm an adult now, motioned by the barber toward his chair. No sooner do I sit than I'm thrown back to a time when the scariest thing in the world was going to the barber. I feel the barber's firm yet supple fingers adjusting the tissue around my neck, tucking the smock, giving my shoulder a paternal squeeze before getting down to business. The same fingers touch my head lightly here and there, making minuscule adjustments, coaxing me ever so gently, precisely. The barber knows just how much pressure to apply, doesn't need to ask, doesn't need to say a word. I can sit and daydream, nod toward sleep without ever actually arriving there, exist for a half hour or so in that blissful state between dreams and reality, the gentle *swick-swick* of scissors forming a minimalist percussive soundtrack to my reveries.

These days I love the barber. He is my father, my white-frocked priest, my secular father confessor, a thin black comb and a pair of swift scissors his crosier and thurible. I trust him with something as fragile as my soul: my scalp. In his hands I'm a kid again, an innocent kid wearing P.F. Flyers ("run faster; jump higher"), a boy among all boys whose worst sin is that of having let his hair grow out too long.

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PETER SELGIN

SWIMMING WITH OLIVER

1.

After a swim, that's when I miss him most. In November, when the water temperature is in the sixties, when I've toweled off and put on my bathrobe and started up the leaf-strewn lawn from the dock to my house, that's when I think: I have to phone Oliver and tell him what a glorious swim I just had. I'd often call him on weekday mornings after a swim.

Then I remember. I can't phone Oliver. Oliver's dead.

2.

We met in the winter of 1986, at Simon & Schuster, his publisher, soon after *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* came out. I was still living in New York back then and had been assigned to interview him for a magazine. The office was at Rockefeller Center. On the street corner a vendor was selling hot chocolate from a cart. Having somehow intuited my subject's love of hot chocolate, I bought two cups and rode the elevator with them in a paper bag.

They'd set us up in a conference room. I found him there, a big shy Santa in a white physician's coat with a lush salt-and-pepper beard. He sat there with his knees spread apart, gripping them with his big hands, leaning forward into my questions.

"Would you say all people exist on a continuum of pathologies?"

"Ahm . . . yes, I suppose you could say that."

"When you talk to people, are you constantly aware of their tics?"

"If you're wondering if you're being diagnosed, the answer is no."

Having drained the liquid part of his hot chocolate, twirling a finger over the sediment at the bottom of his cup, with his characteristic stutter, he said, "I'm—I'm—I'm . . . tempted to—to—to . . ."

"Go for it!" I urged.

In tandem we licked hot chocolate sediment from our fingers.

3.

Ten years later, I read "Water Babies," his essay in the *New Yorker* about his passion for swimming. Myself a swimmer, I thought: how fun it would be to swim with Dr. Sacks. I dashed off a letter—third item down on my bucket list of things to do before I died: "Swim with Oliver Sacks."

His reply came a few days later, handwritten in green Flair on cream stationery with a cephalopod logo. The writing was barely legible. He'd be delighted to swim with me.

4.

In the gloom of morning he calls from his car phone. "Olivah heah. Meet me on the Kappock Street ramp in five minutes?" With my gym bag holding my Speedo, goggles, cap, and towel, I hurry out of my Bronx apartment building, up the steep hill, and under the highway overpass slathered with graffiti. The sun has just broken over building tops.

He stands smiling next to his pulled-over Lexus.

"I'm pathologically early," he says.

5.

Mozart on the car stereo. Oliver sipping from a water bottle, discussing his book-in-progress, about his childhood embrace of metals, chemicals, and minerals. We take the Saw Mill River Parkway toward Connecticut.

Does this man know, has he any idea, what it means for me to sit with him in his car like this, guiding him toward my favorite lake for a swim? I remember those daydreams I had when I was a kid of the Beatles coming over for dinner.

6.

The lake is on the former summer estate of a robber baron, now a state park. At its center: a small island with the remains of a decorative stone lighthouse. Swimming is prohibited. We have to scramble up some rocks and bushwhack our way to the swimming hole. If the ranger comes by in his truck, we'll be hidden from view.

We undress and put on our Speedos. Since our first meeting Oliver's trimmed down. A swimmer's body: top-heavy, barrel-chested, and covered with gray fur, like a bear.

We swim twice to the stone lighthouse and back. Afterward we lie on a smooth rock, sunning ourselves. Bird songs. The wind whispering through tree branches.

"A beautiful day," I remark.

"We live on a very nice planet," says Oliver. "It will be a pity if we destroy it."

7.

We drove to my parents' house. By then my father had suffered the first of a series of strokes that left him unable to recognize people and things, including me. He'd been an inventor. While he sat in his chair in the living room, I took Oliver to see his laboratory at the base of our driveway. Papa's last project was a revolutionary transformer using spools of flat, lasagna-like copper instead of regular round wire for the windings. Oliver, lover of metals, was drawn instantly to a heap of copper scraps. He asked if he could take one. "Yeah, by all means. Papa would be pleased."

As we left the laboratory, I explained how, walking up the driveway as a boy, I'd pass by the window and see my father at work inside, always with a big smile on his face.

"An inwardly directed man," said Oliver.

8.

For the next fifteen years, Oliver and I swam together. In pools, lakes, rivers, ponds, creeks, estuaries, oceans. Twice we swam across the Hudson River, jellyfish and other matter oozing between our fingers. Though we timed our swims to fit the twenty-minute slack tide window, the second time we still got caught and swept downstream by the current. In torn Speedos we scrambled up the rocks, laughing.

9.

Like my father, Oliver had a British accent, though his was the real thing, while my father's was something of an invention. Though both men intimidated me with their genius, Oliver was much more forgiving of my intellectual laziness and ignorance.

After swimming, we would often stroll in the Bronx Botanical Garden. These strolls functioned as a kind of scratchpad on which Oliver worked out topics relevant to his latest work-in-progress. My role was mainly that of an ideal listener. Every so often I'd throw a question his way, or supply a useful analogy. But mostly I listened.

Usually our walks took the same path, beginning with a tour of the Members Only garden, with its varieties of wildflowers, then through the fern section, then into the woods, until we found ourselves walking along the Bronx River toward the Snuff Mill, stopping at waterfalls to watch the water cascade in a white, curtain-like sheet.

10.

One day we discuss memory. Oliver distinguishes between two types of memory: procedural and episodic. Procedural memory applies to things we do without having to "remember" or even to think about them.

"The test for procedural memory is if you can do something else at the same time," says Oliver. "Procedural memory is what we use when humming a symphony or reciting Shakespeare."

"Or swimming," I say.

"Yes," says Oliver. "Or swimming."

Episodic memory is more complicated. "With episodic memories," Oliver explains, "the individual parts are connected or flow into each other like the links of a chain—though 'flow' and 'chain' don't fit very well together." As we keep walking Oliver arrives at a better analogy: a series of bridges below which, in a person with no episodic memory, there's a bottomless chasm.

"This is what happened to Clive," Oliver says, referring to the English musician who, owing to a traumatic injury, lost his episodic memory and can't remember what happened a moment ago, or the moment before that. "Clive's life consists of an endless series of discrete moments that exist completely independent of each other except when they're united in some pattern by some procedure or design—like the notes in a symphony."

We discuss other cases involving amnesia, including Jimmie, the Lost Mariner in the book that Oliver refers to simply as *Hat* or *The Hat Book*, and another man who, in order to compensate for his lost memory, never stopped talking, as though the

only way he could pass safely from moment to moment (bridge to bridge) was on a river his own words.

"That was his way of avoiding the abyss," Oliver says.

11.

In the fern garden we study the names in Latin. *Vulgaris:* common. *Salvaris:* wild. *Praecox:* precocious. *Spicata:* spiked. The droll absurdity of plant names. "Snake root." "Strawberry bush." Back at the magnolia trees, I cup a fat blossom in my hands.

Oliver: "Look at it calling forth—all of nature signaling, putting up banners, saying, Reproduce! Reproduce!" His expression turns suddenly wistful. "Maybe that's why I feel the way I do today."

"What way is that?"

"Ahm . . . nauseated."

"I doubt that's what nature intended," I say.

Oliver laughs his snorty laugh.

12.

At an outdoor café table, we trade different substances we'd like to swim in. Oliver would like to swim in a sea of gallium, the metal with a melting point of 85.6 degrees, the same as chocolate.

"Why not just swim in a lake of chocolate?" I ask.

"I love chocolate," he replies, "but I love metals."

"A sea of mercury?" I suggest.

"That would be very unhealthy."

"What about Dutch gin?" (Oliver loved Dutch gin; a phalanx of the empty ceramic bottles lined the kitchen counter in his Greenwich Village apartment.) "You could get drunk while swimming."

"True, but since alcohol's density is lower than water's, you'd have to be an extremely strong swimmer, and even then you'd probably sink like a stone."

13.

A kiwi, a pomegranate, a persimmon, other exotic fruits: that's what my wife and I serve him for breakfast the first time he comes over. Our guest is delighted. Nothing he won't try once.

He doesn't care if it satisfies his appetite, as long as it satiates his curiosity. The fruits could be poisonous; he would still try them. Oliver loves novelty, variety, eccentricity, excess. No wonder the elements amuse him. He approaches the periodic table like a child in a *gelateria*.

At our kitchen table, Oliver reads the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the only one we have ("You must get the King James"), quoting the nasty God of Ezekiel, the "carrot and stick" God: *He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord*.

14.

When it's too cold for lake swimming, or when we don't have time for a day trip, we swim at Riverbank State Park on the Upper West Side. The park was built over a sewage treatment facility. When it first opened people avoided it because of the smell. The problem has since been remedied, sort of.

Arranging items in his trunk, transferring them in and out of an array of pockets and bags, Oliver indulges in some OCD counting:

1. Goggles in plastic bag
2. Plastic bag in coat pocket
3. Shoehorn out of gym bag
4. White sneakers in bag
5. Remove orange sneaker #1
6. Remove orange sneaker #2
7. Put on white sneaker #1
8. Put on white sneaker #2
9. Shoehorn back in gym bag
10. Seat cushion in plastic bag . . .

etc.

I'm reminded of Beckett's Molloy sucking his stones.

15.

We've changed and showered and stepped from the locker room onto the pool platform to find a group of lifeguards gathered around the shallow end, keeping us at bay as one of their number emerges from the water with a very small brown object caught in a fish net.

"Fecal matter," the lifeguard pronounces grimly.

A toddler has shat in the pool, which is subsequently closed.

As we re-dress back in the locker room, I can't resist saying, "What does a little fecal matter, anyway?"

Oliver: "One little turd and civilization grinds to a halt."

16.

We'd start lake swimming as early as April, with a ceremonial frigid plunge. We'd drive to one of several lakes up in the Catskills. Oliver's driving was a blend of skill and aggression, augmented by Tourettic outbursts. *Shit! Bugger! Fuck!* He hated being stuck behind another vehicle, especially one that obstructed his vision ("Swinish SUVs!"). He'd slap the steering wheel, bang his fist on the dashboard, kick the floor. If I happened to be driving, he'd snarl, "Overtake! Overtake!"

17.

Breakfast at a greasy spoon. With Oliver you had to be careful what you ordered, since he'd order the same thing, then get mad at himself—and by extension at you—if he didn't like it. I order a corn muffin: a mistake. Though good in other respects, the muffin is very crumby.

"Ach," Oliver says, picking crumbs from his lap with thick greasy fingers as if they're worms or ants. "I despise crumbs. Why did we order these damned muffins? I never eat muffins. Now I know why. They're much too crumby. I've never seen so many crumbs. Ach! Ugh! Remind me never to eat a corn muffin again!"

18.

We stay at a lakeside hotel, in one of six small cabins dotting the shore. With wetsuits on we swim twice around the lake, then take turns sitting on a rock, helping each other off with the skin-tight wetsuits. The resultant tableaux is half vaudeville skit, half comic book, Laurel and Hardy meet Plastic Man.

The hotel is under new management. We're the first customers of the season. They haven't turned the heat on in the cottages. They give us extra blankets. It's too cold to sleep. We spend the night shivering and talking. Oliver shares his sexual proclivities with me, a secret I'll keep for the next twenty years.

Oliver: "I don't initiate, but I don't refuse."

His sex life in a nutshell.

19.
"When you hear a piece of music in your head," Oliver asks later that day as we explore the lake's perimeter by foot, "what is it that you hear, exactly?"

"I hear the music," I answer.

"Note for note, fully orchestrated, or a simplified version?"

"Note for note," I say.

"Like you're listening to a recording?"

"Yeah. That's right."

"Interesting . . ."

"Why? What do you hear?"

"The raw melody line—as if a child were playing it on a toy piano or a xylophone."

20.
I asked him once if he'd ever encountered an old enemy, someone he once detested, but then, seeing this person years later, felt the urge to hug him or her. He had. I asked: "Do you think that response is the product of nostalgia? Masochism? Narcissism? Or a healthy outlook?"

"Maybe a bad memory," he answered. "I know that I've run into people from my past who I'd disliked or even despised, but who sparked wild enthusiasm when seen again twenty years later. I think the mere fact of having one's survival thrust in one's face by the survival of another may explain it. They're still alive and so are we. A continuum is established and upheld for which we can only feel grateful, even if the other person happens to be someone whose guts we hated, who beat us up or made fun of us or gave us a stiff caning.

"Having said that," Oliver continued after a pause, "were he still living and were I to see my old headmaster at Braefield, my impulse wouldn't be to hug him, but to give him a swift solid kick in the rump."

"How often did they cane you in that place, anyway?" I asked.

"I don't know. Daily, twice a day, once every twenty minutes."

"No wonder you carry that seat cushion around with you."

Snorty laugh. "Very good!"

21.
In low moods, Oliver puts himself down, lamenting his lack of significant accomplishments as a "real scientist"—like Darwin,

Luria, and Mendeleev, his heroes. Oliver: "Ah, yes, Sacks. He had such promise, such potential. Pity he never amounted to very much . . ."

I cheer him up, or try to. "You're something as good or better than a scientist," I tell him. "You're an artist. You make beautiful things with words. You entertain and move and educate millions of people. Your books are works of art."

"Yes . . . ahm . . . I've had that thought from time to time."

All the time I'm thinking to myself: *If* he *hasn't amounted to very much, what the fuck have* I *amounted to?*

22.

Oliver had an absolute horror of dog shit. One day, as we get out of his car near Riverbank, he steps in a pile.

"Damn it, Peter! Why didn't you warn me? You're a young man with a young man's vision. Didn't you see it? These people with their shitty dogs. No other city in the world is so full of dog shit! It's everywhere! Remind me never to park along Riverside Drive again. A brand new pair of sneakers—ruined. I'll have to throw them out, or boil them. I'll have to boil my car. I'll have to boil this stretch of sidewalk. The entire Upper West Side—all of New York City—the entire world, must now be sterilized through boiling."

23.

Discussion (while walking through the botanic garden) inspired by glorious yellow and red tulips, their burning mouths open to the sky. Subject: Cryptogamic plants. "Cryptogam": a plant (fern, moss, algae, or fungus) reproducing by spores but that doesn't produce flowers or seeds. *Cryptogamic:* plants in which the reproductive organs are concealed (unlike tulips and most other flowers that flaunt them to attract insects). *Phanerogamic:* the opposite meaning. Plants are phanerogamic when their reproductive organs aren't merely visible, but gaudily displayed.

I ask Oliver, "Is man cryptogamic or phanerogamic?"

"Both," he says. "On the one hand, our genitalia are located up front and forward, designed to attract attention or at least to be seen. Baboons come to mind. With humans the whole issue of hairlessness and the invention of clothes complicates things, though a few tribes today still go around completely naked. As for the design of the human body itself, its erect posture, that

raises the question why—assuming he wants our genitals to be hidden—God didn't provide for their concealment as he does with the elephant, for instance, and other mammals—and not just by a dab of pubic hair, either."

"Other mammals don't walk on two feet," I observe.

"That's right," Oliver says. "As we must in order to use our opposable thumbs. If our pricks are exposed in the process, so be it."

We sit by the waterfall observing a lone Canada goose as he stands there, motionless, admiring the view, apparently.

"Another argument for man's essential cryptogamia," Oliver continues, "is the fact that despite being clothed and having his genitals otherwise hidden for millennia, man still reproduces himself very successfully. Clothes don't seem to have been an impediment."

"If anything they're an enhancement," I say.

"Right, which raises another question: were we to shed all of our clothes and be more 'at ease' with our nakedness—with the sight of each other's exposed genitals—would the sexual urge 'relax' and become diminished? In itself that might not be such a bad thing, but it tears a hole in the argument that nakedness is man's natural state. Whatever else nature wants of us, it wants us to reproduce as much as possible."

Oliver scrutinizes me. "Now you," he decides, "with your macho leather jacket, you're definitely phanerogamic."

"What about you?" I say.

"Me, I'm strictly cryptogamic."

The Canada goose stands there. We wonder what's going through its mind. A moment of pure contemplation? A moment of aesthetic appreciation? A state of mental and physical suspension? A form of meditation? A hypnotic trance induced by the steady white noise and endlessly repetitive visual of the waterfall?

"All of the above," Oliver decides.

24.

Of mentor-disciple relationships, Russell Baker once remarked that no matter how much more successful an older writer may be, it's a mistake for a younger writer to ever expect very much sympathy from him. The older writer has relatively little time

left; as far as he's concerned, the younger writer has his whole life ahead of him. Therefore older writer envies younger writer despite how little accomplishment or renown younger writer has achieved.

When I looked at Oliver, I saw someone whose talent and accomplishments I'd never begin to approach, let alone match, a man who, though nearly a quarter century older than me, had as much or more vitality and curiosity, and was far more industrious, intelligent, intuitive, and knowledgeable. And when he looked at me, what did my friend see? Youth, time, infinite possibilities, inexhaustible potential: a (comparatively) limitless future.

25.

Another trip to Huntington State Park. The last stretch takes us down narrow, twisty roads.

Oliver: "How much longer? I don't like all these curves. Isn't there a less curvy way to get there?"

A few miles from the lake, a tree-surgery truck blocks our lane. Despite a small pickup heading our way in the opposite lane, in a bold move Oliver pulls around the tree truck. But the pickup truck's driver refuses to give way. Soon we're face to face with him. Finally Oliver is forced to give in. Reverse, his least favorite direction. As the small truck passes (and I cringe) Oliver rolls down his window.

"What's the problem?" he asks the pickup truck driver.

Pickup driver (stern-faced, lock-jawed, steely-eyed): "Obstructed lane stops."

He drives off.

"Was that psychotic behavior?" asks Oliver as we head on. "Would you say the driver of that truck was psychotic? What sort of person behaves that way, do you know? I've never seen anyone act so absurdly. What did he mean by what he said, anyway? It sounded like some phrase out of some sort of military-strategy manual. Obstruction lane *what?* What on earth was he going on about? Is this science fiction? And his face—did you see that face? The face of of of of—of *evil,* a *fascistic* face! Those dull, deep-set eyes, that snarling, vicious, half-twisted mouth. I can't do it justice. I doubt Poe could do it justice. Tell me: what sort of person has a face like that? I doubt that I'll ever forget it.

I'll have nightmares about it. A truly psychotic face. Only I've met psychotics, and none of them were that disturbing. I mean, there really was something sadistic in that man's look, in the furrow of his brow, in those cold, cruel, Satanic eyes. And just what point was he trying to make, anyway? What do you call such behavior? You're a writer—how would *you* describe it? Aggressive—is that the word? Confrontational? Assertive? Was this a demonstration of what is meant by the phrase 'to assert oneself'? 'Self-assertion?' Is that what he was up to, what he was demonstrating? That's the problem with America, with this country, this confrontational, aggressive, righteously defensive, self-assertive, don't-tread-on-me, Wild West aggressiveness. A showdown—isn't that what we've just experienced? One needs to carry a six-shooter with that sort of mentality. But no, really, I ask you in all sincerity: might that person have been insane? Is it possible? . . ."

Oliver's tirade lasts the rest of the way to the lake.

26.

As we're walking toward our swim hole, an old man fishing along an embankment sees us and jokes, "If we catch you, we keep you." I joke back that I prefer to be fried in olive oil, with a dash of pepper and salt.

"You're very sociable," Oliver says as we walk on.

"That's me doing my imitation of a normal person," I say.

"Well, you're very good at it," says Oliver.

27.

Oliver's loves (a non-exhaustive list in no particular order): cycads, cephalopods (especially cuttlefish), orange Jell-O, swimming (especially the backstroke), ferns, copper, the heavy metals (the heavier the better), Mozart, Mendeleev (periodic table), Darwin, schmaltz herring (and herring of any persuasion), Swiss Miss (diet), Alexander Luria, spicy Thai chicken-coconut soup, big bathtubs, Dutch gin, motorcycles, minerals, his patients, his friends, yellow pads and colored Flair pens (green, purple, red), his standing desk, his Montblanc fountain pen, his Selectric, smoked salmon, radishes, Proustian sentences, Gibbon's footnotes (and footnotes generally, including his own), hard cider, hot coffee (especially on the road), punctuality, his neck-worn pocket spectroscope . . .

28.
We took a few road trips together. In Woods Hole Bay, Oliver swam while his friend Paul Theroux and I paddled kayaks. In Brattleboro, Vermont, we visited Saul Bellow and his family at their farmhouse. We pulled into the driveway and there he sat, Nobel Laureate, author of *Herzog* and *Humboldt's Gift,* on a rocking chair, wearing a floppy fisherman's cap, reading the Sunday *Times*. Oliver and I sat on either side of him, sipping beers as Saul told us the story of how, as an undergraduate, he and a fellow journalism student hitchhiked to Mexico, intent on interviewing Trotsky, how they got there just in time to view his corpse laid out on a gurney under a white sheet.

"I'll never forget it," Saul Bellow said. "His white beard had reddish brown gunk in it. To this day I can't say if it was iodine or blood."

That evening, at the dinner table, Bellow, who at eighty-seven had stopped writing, told the exact same story again, word for word.

29.
In group situations, Oliver tended to listen rather than speak. He did so as Mr. Bellow shared with me his idea for a children's book that he'd been wanting to write for a long time.

"It's called 'The Elephant in Marshall Field's Window,'" Saul said.

"Really?" I said. "That sounds fascinating. What's it about?"

"I don't know," said Bellow. "I have no idea. All I know is there's an elephant in Marshall Field's window."

Having delivered himself of his children's book concept, Saul leaned close to me and, gesturing toward where Oliver sat, remarked *sotto voce,* "He's a rare bird."

30.
At the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario, we sit through a dress rehearsal of his friend Jonathan Miller's production of *King Lear,* with Christopher Plummer doing a marvelous palsied Lear.

On the way back from Canada, we discuss possible titles for Oliver's almost finished memoir[1]. He likes "The Garden

[1] *Uncle Tungsten.*

of Mendeleev" but worries that not enough people know who Mendeleev was. We come up with some alternatives, including two inspired by Flaubert's "The mind, too, has its erections": *Sacks' Mental Erections* and *My Chemical Hard-Ons,* by Oliver Sacks.

Other topics for the drive: Kaleidoscopic patterns under eyelids. Mental symphonies: imagination or hallucination? On fitting in, being or wanting to be "one of the guys."

We take turns behind the wheel of Oliver's Lexus, seeing who can get the best gas mileage. I win.

31.

Christmas holidays. Riding the Amtrak from Washington, DC, to New York. We board the "Quiet Car," no cellphones or radios of any kind permitted, hushed voices: "A library-like atmosphere encouraged." *Eureka!* we think.

No sooner are we seated in the Quiet Car than we consider the possibilities. Why not quiet gyms and quiet restaurants, quiet cafés, bars, and beaches? How about a Quiet Brothel or a Quiet Construction Site? Our minds race with possibilities. Quiet Buildings. Quiet Streets. Quiet Neighborhoods. Quiet Counties. Quiet States. State motto on license plate: "Shhhh!" Imagine Quiet Radio Stations (instead of listening to talk or music, you tune in to silence). Quiet Books. Quiet Websites. "Quiet for Dummies." Is it our imaginations, or do all of the passengers in the Quiet Car seem more sophisticated, better-dressed, better-looking, healthier, wealthier, wiser, and wittier?

Oliver and I (quietly) read our books. Oliver: *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. Me: *Out Stealing Horses*. When we get bored we wander to the café car, Oliver bracing himself, his feet unsteady down the swaying aisles. We snack on hummus, olives, and tea. Back in the Quiet Car, Oliver is in a chatty mood. He whispers, discussing the distinction between romantic and clinical descriptions. I'm not sure how long we've been talking, whispering—five minutes, ten? —when a tall passenger wearing expensive tortoise-shell bifocals materializes, crouching in the aisle so his face is level with ours, a middle-aged face with thick gray hair brushed back and parted in the middle. His face is red; his eyes bulge.

"Excuse me," the man seethes, "but you are talking"— his lips spell the words for us—"VERY LOUDLY. This is THE QUIET CAR. If you want to talk LOUDLY, move to some other car.

This is THE QUIET CAR." His jowls tremble. He looks as if he is headed for apoplexy. I say, "I didn't think we'd been talking that loudly." "Yes, yes—you were talking VERY LOUDLY and this is THE QUIET CAR."

The man returns to his seat.

Oliver and I exchange looks, then bury our chastened heads in our respective books. After a few moments Oliver opens the little vellum notebook he keeps with him always and writes, using one of the three colored Flairs he likewise keeps on hand at all times: *Was that a bit exaggerated?* He hands pen and pad to me.

I write: *I think we've just encountered a Quiet Car Fanatic.*

Oliver (writing): *A Quiet Asshole.*

Me: *A Quiet Hole.*

And so on. We giggle like school kids—silently. This is, after all, the Quiet Car.

32.

In some ways he was like an older brother or an uncle to me; in others more like a father. Like a father he could be critical. On learning that, at fifty-three, I'd become—not on purpose—a father myself, his response: "That's kid stuff, Peter. At your age you should know better." He disapproved of my saying "different than" (as opposed to "different *from*."). We disagreed over the proper use of "that" vs. "which."

He could get angry, too. Once, at a swimming camp in Curaçao, while pulling ahead of him in a race, I accidentally kicked him with my foot. I had no idea I'd kicked him. Later, in his room, I found him seated at his desk strewn with papers, with more sheets scattered on the floor, all with strange diagrams drawn on them with his red and green Flair pens, the sort of diagrams football coaches draw for their players, with circles, arrows, and Xs. They were Oliver's schematics of "the event," proving, beyond any doubt, that I and no other swimmer in the pack had kicked him in the face, as if he were preparing for a tribunal. I pleaded guilty. It took him a day or two, but he forgave me.

33.

I was still living in New York when Oliver learned about the melanoma in his right eye. He'd picked me up for a swim. As soon as I got in the car I noticed the strained look on his face. I

thought his sciatica might have kept him up. It had been acting up lately. As we pulled away he said, "I'm afraid I've had some rather distressing news." He explained how he'd gone to the movies two days before to see the latest *Star Trek* film. At some point while watching the film he became aware of a strange, burning shape, like a glowing coal, in the upper corner of his vision. As the dark screen brightened, the glowing coal disappeared, but soon it was back, along with flashes like camera bulbs going off.

"At first I thought I was having a visual migraine," he explained, "only it affected just one eye, which is odd, since migraine auras originate in the brain and typically effect vision symmetrically."

The visual distortions persisted through the movie and afterward, when he got home. He phoned his opthamologist, who, it turned out, was away on vacation. Another doctor was covering for him. The doctor, who saw him the next day, found a growth close to the retina. It might be a tumor, the doctor said, or a blood clot from a hemorrhage, though the color was more indicative of a tumor. If a tumor, it might be a melanoma. If a melanoma, then—worst case—it might have already metastasized to the liver, as eye melanomas are known to do when they grow to a certain size.

"If it has metastasized?" I asked. "What then?"

"That would be a death sentence," said Oliver.

He said it matter-of-factly. I remembered the story he told me of Bishops Latimer and Ridley being burned as heretics at the stake. *Play the man, Master Ridley.*

34·

We had our swim. Afterward, as we walked back to the car (he with a cane now; since breaking his leg in the mountain fall recounted in *A Leg to Stand On,* he'd not been very steady on his feet), he spoke of how the news had changed his perspective on things, how it had forced him to consider his achievements, to ask himself whether, were he to die in a few weeks or months, his would have been a worthy, satisfying life. His friend Stephen Jay Gould came up in the ensuing discussion, so did Susan Sontag, Hume, Gibbons, Freud, and others who'd lived life to the fullest and faced death bravely, and even (in Hume's case) with great good cheer. Then there were less posi-

tive examples, like the polymath physicist John von Neumann, who'd been an atheist until he learned that he had eighteen months to live, when, to the dismay of his fellow atheists, he became a Catholic and lived out his last months in fear of hellfire and damnation.

"I don't see that happening to you," I said.

"Nor do I," said Oliver.

35.

In his office he reads to me from a slim parchment notebook: the diary that he's kept since learning of his eye tumor, recounting that moment in the movie theater. The notes sound like notes from one of his case studies, only now the patient is himself. He describes blind spots drifting like clouds over the newsprint in the Sunday *Times,* and how the day will soon come when he'll have to say goodbye to bright colors and stereoscopic vision (*Goodbye to All That,* the title of Robert Graves's autobiography, keeps recurring to him). He smiles while reading, amused as ever by his own words and observations, despite their being occasioned by a life-threatening illness, his own. He approaches his own mortality with the same spirit—sympathetic, curious, with wry, deadpan humor—as he approaches his patients' symptoms: with empathy and interest rather than detachment; sympathy, but not pity; concern, but not alarm; clarity, without coldness. Like good poetry, his notebook is the record of emotions recollected in tranquility.

36.

The growth is malignant. Worse, it's right next to the optic nerve. Radiation treatment will be risky. The good news: the tumor is small enough that it probably hasn't metastasized yet. He orders his priorities: *life, sight, eye*. He's already decided against enucleation—a gruesomely scientific word for having one's eye removed. Radiation offers the best prognosis.

"Either way, I'll probably lose all sight in that eye and with it my beloved stereoscopic vision. Still," Oliver says, "if it saves my life, the loss will be worth it."

I ask him what he plans to do for the holidays. He says he's not sure. Usually he goes to DC to visit a friend and his family. On one hand, the distraction may do him good, he says. On the other, he doesn't want to have to be merry around strangers.

37.
(Every so often, though, the clinical detachment dissolves. Oliver's beleaguered eyes lose their focus. Gravity draws down the edges of his lips. Under his gray beard his jaw tenses: he steps out of his clinical observer's role into the body of a man diagnosed with cancer. The poet/scientist disappears; the helpless patient takes his place. He needs the detachment offered by language, by analysis, by thoughts and words sweeping over a page, the alchemist turning despair and terror into words.)

38.
"Let's have a walk, shall we?" he says.

We bundle up and head out in search of lunch. The Japanese restaurant is closed. We go to the Bus Stop Café. It's afternoon. Oliver orders a buttered bagel and coffee. I ask for a glass of Chianti. Tomorrow Oliver goes for his liver test (one reason he abstains from wine himself, though he doesn't much care for wine anyway: too sour; at home he even puts sugar in it, or mixes it with Jell-O). If the test results are negative, it will mean that the cancer hasn't metastasized; if not, there will have to be other tests to determine for sure if the cancer has spread or not. One way or the other, he'll know the worst.

39.
At noon the next day he phones. No metastases.

40.
In 2009, having accepted the first of several visiting positions in pursuit of a new academic career, I left New York City. That pursuit led me here, to Georgia, to my house on a lake.

Whenever possible, on my visits north, Oliver and I would swim together. Otherwise, at least every other weekend, typically after my morning swims, I'd phone him, my Speedo still dripping, to rub in his face the fact that I lived on a lake (as he had once) and try to entice him to visit. During one call, after we spoke of other things, he shared his bad news: after a long remission the melanoma had metastasized to his liver. Some treatments might extend his life for a few months, but there was no cure.

"This is it," he said.

Outside of his assistant Kate and others in his "inner circle,"

he hadn't told anyone. He would make the news public in writing, probably in a *New York Times* essay. He didn't seem all that scared or sad or even concerned. His words carried more resolve than anything.

He shared with me his determination to use well whatever time he had left. "I'll spend it with my friends, swim and take walks, read and play the piano, laugh and have fun."

But the main thing he wanted to do was to write.

"You sound resolved," I said.

"My cancer is resolved. Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well, Oliver," I said, "it's probably no comfort, but dying is just about the only thing you haven't done yet in your life."

Snort. "Very good."

I'd carried my cellphone out onto the deck, where I could look out at the lake as we spoke. Afterward I stood there, holding it, crying.

41.

I remember my last visit with him. We and his partner, Billy, swam together in the back yard pool of his home in Rhinebeck. The pool was just big enough for the three of us to swim back and forth abreast of each other. Billy and I had a push-up contest. Then we sat there, the three of us, lounging under a pergola in our wet bathing suits.

Our last swim.

Two weeks later, back in Georgia, I awoke to an e-mail from Kate saying that Oliver had died that morning at two o'clock. He died peacefully in his sleep within days of putting the finishing touches on his last essay.

42.

December. My last lake swim of the season. The water temperature has dipped below 60 degrees. At first it's painfully cold, but after a few dozen strokes I feel as comfortable as if the water were twenty degrees warmer. I do my usual swim to dock four houses away and back, two hundred strokes each way, thinking, as always, of Oliver.

Whenever I swim now, for as long as I keep swimming, I'll think of him. I'll swim for us both.

Truth & Delight: Resisting the Seduction of Surfaces
Peter Selgin

Among the least pleasant chores of a writing teacher: dissuading his students of the notion that what sounds good in a piece of writing is, necessarily, good. It's the part of my job that I most dread and dislike, the part where I'm forced to play bad cop opposite a dozen good cops who reply, "But I liked it!" Yes, yes, I say. I *know* you liked it. But it doesn't *mean anything,* or it doesn't mean *what you meant,* and it's not precise (which is *why* it means little, if anything).

Inexperienced writers, especially young ones, often sacrifice meaning for effect. Sound and sense are divided—or anyway not faithfully joined. And so, for them, it's possible for something to "sound good" even when what is being said lacks rigor, precision, or even allegiance to truth.

Having once been a young writer myself, I was no exception to this rule. I fell in love with words not for their meanings, but for their sounds. Like most healthy young people, I was a sensualist, a glutton for whatever tickled and otherwise amused or delighted my senses, for things sharp, bold, bright, piquant, dazzling, smooth, saucy, bitter, sour, sweet—for colors and smells and surfaces. I cared little about what lay hidden and invisible *under* those surfaces, for their precise meanings and implications. Those depths could come later; meaning could wait. Life offered too many sensual delights on the surface to bother about hidden things. Why dig under rocks when the rocks themselves were so alluring?

This was how I felt when I was a much younger writer, and it's common for young writers today to feel this way. The words “truth” and “meaning” weigh grimly and onerously upon young hearts and minds. They imply drudgery, duty, joyless determination, and other things antithetical to youth, to freewheeling pleasure and delight. No fun at all.

I still remember the poems I wrote when I was in my early twenties, when I’d just started writing, when I was still in the throes of a seduction by words, verses aggressively devoid of meaning, but that tickled my senses with impudent word play and fancy rhythms. *Sat upon the way vast upon deep beyond the tree wide and wind …* That sort of stuff. I wrote oodles of it, endlessly amused by the sound of my own voice (or what I thought of then as “my voice” but was, in fact, a distorted echo of Hopkins and Thomas and other poets whose rhythms and sounds I appreciated, but whose meanings rarely touched me). I dared to show some of these verses to my father—an engineer and inventor who also wrote books. I remember his loud “aughs” and “ughs!” and other sounds of disgust that he emitted while suffering through them. At last he cast his verdict, saying, “Peter, you must learn never to write for *effect!”* I said, “What do you mean?” With an exasperated sigh he said, “Words have meanings. Otherwise they’re meaningless!”

I couldn’t feel too bad. After all, this was the same father who had it in for Marcel Proust. “His metaphors are all wrong,” Papa once complained to me. “I’ll give you an example. At one point Proust writes something to the effect that the leaves of a tree give off a scent when ‘allowed to’ by the rain, ‘*la parfum que les feuilles laissent s’échapper avec les dernières*

JENNIFER PASTILOFF

THE MANIFEST-STATION

On Being Human

GUEST POSTS

S–T

MARCH 14, 2015

BeautyHunting
BeautyHunting.com

By Peter Selgin.

ABOUT JEN PASTILOFF

People Magazine says: *Jennifer is changing women's lives through her empowerment workshops.* **Cheryl Strayed says:** *Jennifer Pastiloff is a conduit of awakenings.* **Lidia Yuknavitch says:** *Dear Jen, From you I have learned to alchemize fear with love, to redistribute love through compassion, to enter a room with others. Jen leads her signature* **Manifestation Workshop: On Being Human** *all over the world & online. Her workshops are a unique blend of writing and some yoga. She has developed a massive following based on her writing & workshops. A London workshop attendee says, "A space*

"What is toilet training if not the first attempt to turn

a child into a civilized member of society?"

—Rose George, *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable*

World of Human Waste and Why It Matters

Tube: a hollow elongated cylinder: especially one to convey fluids. People are tubes. This is about the human gut and what passes through it.

Twenty-five years ago I was diagnosed with a supposedly incurable condition known as ulcerative colitis. About five out of every thousand people have it. The disease causes inflammation and ulceration of the large intestine, resulting in bouts of severe bloody diarrhea. Left untreated, UC can be extremely debilitating. But even the best treatments often fail, leaving no choice for victims other than surgical removal of all or part of the big gut and the unglamorous prospect of a colostomy bag.

Until recently for the better part of those twenty-five years I've been in remission, with relatively minor digestive complains and no flare-ups. All that changed, or seemed to, not long ago after a routine colonoscopy, at a follow-up visit with a nurse practitioner (the doctor who'd done the exam was on vacation). She told me my disease was not only as chronic as ever, but—despite few symptoms—active. What I'd chalked up to bad digestion was the resurgence of an incurable and potentially devastating disease.

The nurse practitioner's verdict left me distressed and depressed, contemplating a return to the regimen of draconian (and mostly useless) diets and drugs whose side effects were as considerable as their efficacy, and that offered only some relief, but no cure.

So I did what many do these days when confronted with a nasty diagnosis: I went online. For two nights running, I stayed up searching for the latest treatments for ulcerative colitis. Since my last flare-ups, a couple of new drugs had come on the market, each with a laundry list of dastardly side effects, none offering more than the possibility of remission.

Then, after hours of nocturnal research, I came across something that not only caught my eye, but that made me wonder if I'd fallen asleep and was dreaming, something so bizarre, so outrageous, it would have been right at home with the most transgressive works of surrealist cinema and literature, with Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou* and Bataille's "Story of the Eye." A procedure known as an FMT—a "Fecal Microbiota Transplantation." A shit transplant.

Treating diseases with fecal matter isn't new. It dates all the way back to the 4th century, when, according to Chinese medicine doctor Ge Hong, patients were fed a yellowish broth ("yellow soup") of fecal matter to cure them of food poisoning and severe diarrhea. Among the many "cures" for the Black Death was one that called for lancing the buboes of the afflicted and applying to them a poultice of tree resin, roots of white lilies, and dried human shit. In the early days of steam-powered vessels, when boilers and pipes exploded routinely, human shit was used as a salve and applied to the burns of Irish trawler crews.

laughter and tears mixed in! To be held and encouraged so beautifully by Jen, who won't flinch....but stay connected to us all through the journey. She creates a strong container, sits on the edges of our yoga mats listening to the stories that weave us together as human beings. She gives us the gift of attention, space and time. It's a space for connecting, for intimacy...you leave in a different place from where you arrive...It's a chance to show up, to own our fears and our dreams, our deep yearnings and the things we'd love to manifest in our lives. A chance to be wholeheartedly present and come back home a little more to ourselves." **Jen also leads retreats with Emily Rapp & Lidia Yuknavitch. She is also the guest speaker at Canyon Ranch three times a year. All info is at the top under Retreats/Workshops. Donate below to our scholarship fund to help send someone to a workshop/retreat who can't afford to attend.**

ABOUT ANGELA GILES PATEL

Angela Giles Patel is an editor and fellow badass at The Manifest-Station. She is an accidental warrior who fiercely believes in the power of grace and quiet kindness. She also believes in the power of words and a good cup of coffee (though not always in that order). Angela has had her work appear online at The Nervous Breakdown, Literary Mothers, Medium: Human Parts and other

patients of their life-threatening intestinal disorders using enema solutions of donated "healthy" feces. Since then, similar procedures have resulted not only in complete remissions, but in actual cures for people suffering from supposedly "incurable" bowel disorders, in particular *Clostridium* or *C. difficile*, a disease attributed to the destruction of necessary intestinal flora resulting from overuse of antibiotics. The procedure has also been used to treat those suffering from other autoimmune diseases, including asthma and rheumatoid arthritis. The treatment bears quick, if not instantaneous, results, costs little, can be done on an outpatient basis, and poses minimal risks.

All this I learned propped up in my bed long after midnight, my iPad glowing in the dark. Imagine, I thought, walking into a doctor's office with a nasty "incurable" disease, only to walk out a few hours later with someone else's shit inside you, cured. It seemed too good to be true.

Sure enough, there was a catch. I continued investigating, trying to find out where in my part of the world Fecal Microbiota Transplantations were being offered, plugging different terms into Google's search engine, only to realize that it wasn't being offered anywhere in the United States, that I'd have to go to Australia and England, and even then I'd have to add my name to long waiting lists. In my own country, with few exceptions—and those limited to medical trials exclusively for those suffering from *C. difficile*—no one was offering the treatment.

Blame the FDA, the United States Food and Drug Administration. In its infinite wisdom, under the undoubted influence of pharmaceutical corporations and their lobbyists, the FDA declared human shit a drug and subjected it to the same draconian regulations as apply to all experimental medicines, enforcing the need for complex and expensive clinical studies such as only pharmaceutical companies can afford, making it next to impossible for willing doctors to provide the therapy. I sat there, in the darkness of my bedroom, my raised hopes dashed.

All wasn't lost, though. Though the FDA has the power to declare shit a drug, it can't otherwise regulate that which the healthy human body produces in substantial quantities, and on a regular basis. As far as the average consumer is concerned, supply side economics still hold. As long as we're not doctors treating patients with it, shit is free and available to any of us who want it.

Thanks to this, something like a cottage industry in do-it-yourself fecal transplants has sprung up. There's even a website dedicated to it: *The Power of Poop: promoting safe, accessible fecal microbiota transplant for all who need it.* From there my online searching led me to a half-dozen YouTube videos, each providing detailed instructions as well as lists of equipment: a plastic Tupperware (or some other airtight container) for collection of the "donor stool," a large measuring cup, a disposable enema (emptied), a kitchen strainer, sea salt, distilled water, a sacrificial towel, a spoon, rubber gloves (for the squeamish), and a dedicated food processor or blender.

Watching the videos, seeing the evangelistic zeal with which their producers embraced the therapy's virtues, I got the feeling some of them would keep at it long after their diseases were cured. Joking aside, they seemed to be well-meaning people, people, people with bad intestines but good intentions.

Four a.m. My iPad's battery was just about drained. I lay there, a set of wind chimes tintinnabulating beyond my bedroom window, daydreaming of disposable enemas replete with fecal milkshakes, and of my own rosy guts basking in the salubrious glow of *eschericia coli, candida albicans, ruminococcus calidas,* and swarms of other beneficial flora.

Shades of Blue, an anthology on depression and suicide from Seal Press. She tweets as @domesticmuse, and when inspired updates her blog, Air Hunger. She doesn't sleep much, always has at least one book in her bag, and is really good at being far more direct than people expect.

But there was another catch. Though billed as a "do-it-yourself" undertaking, a home administered FMT requires another willing participant: the donor. Said donor must, it goes without saying, be free of diseases and infections. He or she should also have a normal, healthy digestive system, one capable of producing an ideal "donor stool."

In case you happen to wonder just what that is, there's the Bristol Stool Chart, the brainchild of a Dr. Ken Heaton of the University of Bristol. The chart features seven different stool classifications, from Type #1 ("separate, nut-like hard lumps; hard to pass") through Type #7 ("completely liquid, no solid pieces"), each accompanied by a colored illustration, with the Ideal Type (#4, "like a sausage or snake, smooth and soft") halfway down. Though not required, the ideal contributor of this *el supremo* stool would be a close member of the patient's immediate family, the better to insure compatibility.

For me the choice for a donor was obvious. All these years my twin brother George has taken *my* shit; it seemed only fair that for a change I should take some of *his.* The difference was I'd have to ask his permission.

How would I go about doing so? What would I say? *Hey, George, I need some shit, can I have some of yours?* I'd have to go about it much more discretely, to work up to it incrementally, through a series of inconspicuous inquiries. "I see you've been re-reading Spinoza lately," or "What sort of soil augmentation do you recommend for planting hydrangeas?" "Say, did you grout those bathroom tiles yourself?" Something to get the conversational ball rolling, so to speak. Eventually we'd get to the matter at hand. It seemed simple enough.

But it wasn't simple. Over the years I'd asked my twin for all kinds of things. Still, I couldn't imagine asking him for that. Why was it such a big deal? It's not like I'd be asking him for a leg or part of his liver. Hell, it wouldn't cost him a thing. And he'd be saving my life—well, he'd save it from all kinds of misery, anyway. So what was the problem? *What's not to like?*

The short answer: *shit.* Waste product, excrement, metabolic—or bodily—waste, feces (or "faeces"), fecal matter, excreta, egesta, ordure, night soil, dung, crap, crud, poop, poo, number two, deuce, doodoo, doody—whatever you call it, most people don't like it, not their own, and especially not anyone else's. We human beings are ill-disposed toward that which is disposed from our bodies.

Witness the extremes to which men have gone to dispose of or dispense with this part of their existence, the elaborate sewage systems of Paris and London, the latter with 37,000 miles of drains, culverts, tunnels, and aqueducts in a catchment extending from the center of the city eighty miles to the town of Swindon in South West England. "Good riddance to bad rubbish" sums-up Western attitudes toward shit.

Westerners aren't alone. Among Islamic peoples the left hand, reserved for bodily hygiene and therefore unclean, is never used for eating; to shake hands or give someone something using it is an insult suited for infidels. Among Hindus in India's ancient caste system the handling of human waste was considered taboo and assigned to "sweeper" communities of Untouchables. So determined are we to disassociate ourselves from our own excreta we can't even bring ourselves to even utter its name: shit, a word of noble pedigree whose use as both a noun and verb goes back to the 14th century, and whose roots can be traced to the Old English *scite,* and Middle Low German *schite,* meaning "dung," also to the Old English *scitte* ("diarrhea"), and from there to the Dutch *schijten,* the Swedish *skita,* and the Danish *skide,* each extending from the Indo-European *skheid,* meaning "split, divide, or separate," making shit a cousin to

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INSTAGRAM SLIDER

Given its history, it may surprise some to learn that in its formative years the word "shit" had no vulgar or negative associations; those came later. It was a simple harmless verb meaning "to defecate," or a noun for that which was defecated. Over centuries it took on its other meanings and connotations, including as a vague noun standing for just about anything (*I'm not taking any more shit from her; You need to get your shit together)* and a vaguer expletive of surprise *(No shit?)* or shock *(Shit!).* Shit stands for trouble, as in *We're in deep shit* and *The shit's gonna hit the fan,* also for displeasure (*That was a shitty meal; what a piece of shit),* but it can also express approval or dominance (*X is the shit, man!).* Still, by and large its use is pejorative, as in *You're full of shit*—which, though literally true, still isn't meant as a compliment. Nor do the expressions *shithead, shitheel, shitface, shitdick, shitbreath, chickenshit,* or *shit-for-brains* qualify as terms of endearment.

I remember the very first time I heard a grown-up other than my father use the word. His name was Art, and he was a machinist my inventor papa hired to turn metal parts for him in his ratty laboratory at the bottom of the driveway of the house where I grew up. While operating the lathe, between slugs from a pint bottle of *Rock and Rye,* Art, whose face was always ruddy and shadowed with razor stubble and who had an overall gruff manner, used to sing a little ditty. It went:

Took my gal to the baseball game Sat her up in front Along came a fly ball And socked her in the — Country boy, country boy Sitting on a rock, Along came a bee And stung him in the — Cocktail ginger ale

five cents a glass If you don't like it, Shove it up your — Ask me no more questions, I'll tell you no more lies A man got hit with a bag of shit Right between the eyes.

I was seven years old, and the ditty, or anyway hearing Art say "shit," made a deep impression on me, as if the word itself had flown in through the window of my father's laboratory and struck *me* between the eyes. My father was an avowed atheist; except once or twice to admire the stained glass windows my brother and I had never set foot inside a church. Compared to most of my churchgoing friends the conditions of my upbringing were anarchic; my twin brother and I knew relatively few boundaries, and nothing was sacred. Still, when Art pronounced that word, suddenly this child of an atheist grasped the concept of profanity no less than if he'd witnessed the sacking of the Somnath temple by Mahmud of Ghanzi.

Years later, playing scrabble or Gin rummy in the sunroom of his Wading River, Long Island, home, my fiancée's father—a survivor of the "bloody" Rapido River and Monte Cassino—wouldn't tolerate the words "shit" or "crap" spoken in his presence. You could say "Damn!" or "Screw it!" or "Christ!" and even "Son of a bitch!" and an occasional "Fuck!," but "shit" and "crap" were off-limits.

One day I dared to ask him why.

"Because—they're dirty," was all Mr. Loughlin would say.

To avoid uttering the word "shit," people have gone to extremes almost as far as London's sewers, resorting to euphemisms from the clinical ("feces," "defecate") to the bureaucratic ("human waste," "excretory product") to the poetic ("night soil") to the colorfully sacrilegious ("play chess with the Pope") to the downright racist ("dropping the Cosby kids off at the pool"). So great is the cultivated aversion to shit, even the places of excretion must be kept hidden behind a veil of euphemisms, with the too-indiscreet "toilet" giving way to "lavatory," "bathroom," "powder (or 'rest' or 'wash') room," "water closet," and the even more covert "w. c." In *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* Edward Albee's Pulitzer

drama whose otherwise scathing frankness scandalized viewers in 1966.

Given the current status of toilets and shit, it's hard to believe there was once a time when to attend a monarch sitting on his commode was considered an honor. But just as the word shit's profane implications developed over time, the taboo against the substance itself is a relatively recent development. As Erasmus notes in his 1530 conduct manual, the *De civilitate morum puerilium (On Good Manners for Boys):*

But is it also true that men are offended not so much by excrement itself as by the current view of it; to the earliest mortals this substance was not so disgusting as it is to us, for they called it by the very auspicious name of *laetamen* ['manure,' from *laetare,* 'to gladden'] and they had not hesitation in giving the god Saturn the nickname of 'Sterculeus' [from *stercus,* 'dung, shit'], and this was a compliment if we believe Macrobius.

There was a time when people valued shit, when it was considered not only useful, but magical. As Theodor Rosebury notes in his *Life of Man:*

Feces renewed the life giving virtues of the earth; urine did a better job of cleaning than plain water¼ Today it is hard to reach back through our cultivated aversion and our affluence, when these materials have come to be the prime symbols of worthlessness, to a time when aversion had not been thought of and anything useful was necessarily treasured.

Shit hasn't just been considered useful or magical; it's even been held sacred. According to Susan Signe Morrison in her book *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages,* "The very filth marking degradation can be transformed into a sign of sanctity." Among the greatest trials of Christina of Markyate—the twelfth-century recluse who, having taken a vow of chastity as a young girl, hid herself in the closet of a hermit monk's cell to preserve her purity from a forced marriage—was her inability to defecate in that enclosed space. From Osbern Bokenham's *Book of Holy Women*:

Through long fasting, [Christina]'s bowels became contracted and dried up¼ But what was more unbearable than all this was that she could not go out until the evening to satisfy the demands of nature. Even when she was in dire need, she could not open the door for herself, and Roger [the monk] usually did not come till late.

"Christine's trial with excrement," Morrison writes, "is made a glorious indication of her virtue and sanctity." Through her pious withholding Christine "amend[ed] fecal matter into a sacred commodity."

Notwithstanding which, by 1532—two years after Erasmus wrote his treatise for boys—the current suppression of things shitty by cultivated civilization was well-established. That was the year the censors at the College de la Sorbonne stigmatized Rabelais' *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* as obscene owing to its scatological humor. But our aversion to shit isn't purely founded on squeamishness and righteous indignation. There are practical considerations. Shit can be dangerous. It's a potential carrier of all kinds of infections—bacterial, parasitical, viral and protozoal, including dysentery, typhoid, cholera, e. coli, to name only a handful. According to the World Health Organization, such waterborne diseases account for just over 4% of the total global burden of disease, and cause 1.8 million deaths annually. The lion's share of those deaths can be traced to microorganisms found in human waste. Shit kills.

While we abhor our own shit, we're also fascinated, and even obsessed, by it. Witness the use of human feces and other bodily fluids in works of modern and contemporary art, from Piero Manzoni's 1961

Homecoming of Naval Strings," an installation for the 2004 London Frieze Art Fair consisting of a live young woman defecating next to her chair each morning after reading a chapter of a novel by Philip Pullman. And not long ago I read somewhere that the curators of a San Francisco art gallery held an exhibition gathering artworks made of—or inspired by—human feces. The exhibit's title was "I Poop You" and it was sponsored by a company of the same name, a "poop delivery service" that, for a modest fee, will ship an anonymous parcel of livestock dung to anyone you like—or don't.

Poet Stanley Moss wrote an ode to shit:

… Out of the pain of this world

a kindness, a shape each of us

learns by heart: moon crescent,

jewelweed, forget-me-not,

hot lava. Christ, is this

the ghost of everything,

what I can and cannot,

I will and will not,

I have and have not,

what I must and must not,

what I did and did not?

If all that's not proof enough of shit's equivocal position in contemporary society, a few years back, at the Environmental Assessment Center in Okayama, Japan, in his quest for sustainable alternative sources of protein for human consumption a scientist named Ikeda came up with the ideal solution: a recycled form of protein-rich waste made from "sewage mud," i.e., human shit. Ikeda's process extracts proteins and lipids from the "mud." The lipids are then mixed with a "reaction enhancer" and whipped by a device called an "exploder" into a substance with a texture not unlike ground beef, which, mixed with some soy sauce, makes a supposedly decent burger. According to Ikeda, at the time of the interview the cost of a "poop burger" was ten to twenty times more than its beef equivalent. Still, the substitute meat is not only low in fat, it helps reduce carbon emissions. Its inventor predicts that if their psychological aversion can be overcome, consumers will be more than willing to, as he put it, "complete the food chain." It's a sizeable "if."

Useful or not, sacred or profane, taboo or not taboo, shit will always be with us, and not just with us, but on our minds and on the tips of our tongues.

"After her stroke," essayist Donald Morrill writes,

One evening at dinner, she burns her finger as she puts a plate down before her family.

"Shit!" she hisses, amazed at a term she has only used once or twice in public. Then she stands embarrassed and smiling.

Everyone is elated, and she says it again and again, slowly, and then again even more quickly, laughing, unable, though she tries, to utter any other term.

* * *

By now it was six in the morning. Through the cracks in my venetian blinds the sly beginnings of daylight peeped. So, I said to myself, I'd appeal to my brother; George. He'd take it in stride. He'd crack some bad jokes about being full of shit or the two of us getting our shit together. He'd slap my back, chuck my chin, and chalk it up to the liabilities of being my older (by two minutes) brother. "Think nothing of it, buddy," he'd say. We'd seal the deal with Old Fashioneds or some other cocktail of George's choosing, and never breathe a word of it to another living soul.

Unfortunately, that isn't the George I know and love. Magnanimous in other ways, the George I know, the lover of good wines and fine dining, the curmudgeonly aesthete whose wrap-around-porched Queen Anne Victorian is so elaborately embellished even the wall stencils have stencils, would be disinclined to take part in an initiative that's not only unquestionably unsanitary, but arguably dangerous and that reeks of quackery. And even if I could counter that last charge with published medical findings (including one in the *New England Journal of Medicine),* still, it wouldn't do any good, since my brother, an economist and scholar for the better part of the last quarter century (as long as I've had my disease), knows as well as anyone that if you want to foist a ream of highly scented bullshit on a gullible readership, a scholarly journal is the place to do it.

No, I thought, lying there, the morning growing brighter through the slits in the venetian blinds, George will have no part of it. He flies around the world, invited by kings, sultans, emirs, and presidents to discuss their economies. He dresses in hand-tailored suits with Northamptonshire shoes and French-cuffed shirts of raw silk. Think of James Bond with a PhD in Economics instead of a License to Kill. He suffers fools poorly and eats cranks for breakfast. And though my brother's no prude, an Edwardian streak about as wide as his porch runs through him. He'd no sooner take part in my or anyone else's shit transplant than he'd shoot heroin or enter a hot dog eating contest or mud-wrestle. I could picture the look of disgust and contempt on his face—one identical to mine save for its squarer shape and finer nose: a look not unlike the look he—a free banker of the Austrian school—gets when confronted by Tea Party Objectivists or their bleeding-heart counterparts, his nose hairs crinkling to the stench of a truly shitty idea. "You want to *what?* With *what?* Have you lost your *fucking mind?"*

"Don't be a fool," I heard George say. "Listen to your doctor or doctors. And stop surfing the damn Web, speaking of fecal matter. The Internet is a reservoir, but it's also a sewer. Anyone can drink from it, and anyone can pee—or shit, as the case may be—into it. Go home and take care of yourself, brother."

No, my twin would have nothing to do with my fecal fantasies.

Or maybe he would. Yes, of course he would. He was my brother, after all; he loved me, he'd do whatever he had to, whatever was needed, to help me. But I could never bring myself to ask him.

Satie, reading Carlyle or Gibbon, luxuriating in his cluttered Victorian splendor, as I, with an empty Tupperware vessel and a half-pleading, half-expectant look on my face, burst through the beaded curtain.

Seven a.m. Birds singing. I hadn't slept a wink. I wondered: who else could I ask? My papa was dead; my mother too old. The rest of my relatives were safely across the Atlantic Ocean. As for close friends, one by one I considered and rejected them all. Too awkward, too embarrassing, too degrading. I'd rather have my gut yanked. I'd rather shit into a plastic pouch. I'd rather die.

In the end, there was no need to broach either my brother's beaded curtain or his shit. My condition wasn't as dire as I'd thought. Two weeks after that initial follow-up visit, I returned to the office of Dr. Heathcliff, the doctor who performed my colonoscopy, this time to meet with him in person. Reading from the same chart, he assured me that, however chronic, my ulcerative colitis was in no way "active." The nurse practitioner who returned that damning verdict had misread the doctor's scrawl.

I'm still in remission.

Yet I can't say that I'm displeased by having undergone this upheaval. After all, it's given me something to chew on—scratch that; some food for thought (scratch that as well). It's made me think differently about something that, before, I either took for granted, ignored, or dismissed as disgusting.

No, I don't think I'll ever look on shit in quite the same way. From now on, before I dismiss or disparage or distance myself from it, before I flush it out of sight and mind down a series of dark hidden pipes, I'll take a moment to reflect, to contemplate, to appreciate this unfairly condemned substance that, under different circumstances, might have saved my life. I'll give it some consideration, some respect.

Then I'll pull the handle.

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gouttes to pluie.' It makes no sense, not if you think about it. The rain doesn't 'allow' or 'permit' anything. That sort of language just doesn't work, not for me."

Heartened by having something in common with Proust, I, as an undergraduate at Bard College, presented a sampler of my poems to Robert Kelly, then a gargantuan poet. He gave them a quick perusal and, nodding, announced, "I find your poems arbitrary in every way." Mr. Kelly didn't care what my poems *sounded* like. He saw nothing in them apart from what they meant, or what they failed to mean.

Back then I considered his verdict harsh. Now, thirty years later, I consider it just and generous. I feel similarly toward Frank Conroy, the famous Iowa Writers Workshop director who, in a summer workshop, having arrived at the word "preponderance" within my story's first paragraph, tossed the paper over his shoulder. In another story of mine he objected to a sentence that had "sparks" of spittle flying out of an angry character's mouth.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"What's wrong is it doesn't say what you meant."

"Yes, it does."

"What did you mean?"

"I meant that little flecks of spit are shooting out of the guy's mouth."

"That's not what you wrote."

"Yes it is!"

"You wrote *sparks,* 'sparks' of spittle. You meant *flecks*. Write flecks."

Sparks of spittle. It still sounded good to me. But Conroy wasn't criticizing my *sound;* he was asking me to be precise; he was insisting that I *say what I meant.*

And now I am a teacher myself, the "veteran" author insisting upon the very qualities that I resisted when I was a young writer: rigor and meaning and truth and precision and authenticity. At times I ask myself: do you really want to do this, Peter? Do you really want to devote so much of your days to dampening the still-fresh-as-wet-paint enthusiasms of talented young people with your fogey values? What good will come of it? Why not shut up and let them have their fun?

Then I remind myself: these are not ordinary young people dabbling in their diaries. These are young people who *want to be good writers,* who are devoted to and serious about the craft of writing. At their age, in their shoes, would I have preferred to wait ten or fifteen years to discover the things that it took *me* ten or fifteen years to discover? Namely that, though the immediate delight of a sentence may lie in its texture, shape and sounds, those

pleasures last only as long as the sentence itself. But for the same sentence to stay with us, it must earn its keep. It must *mean something and mean it precisely.*

So I find myself saying to my students time and again—especially when they've written something extremely clever, something that grabs the attention and wins the approval of most of their fellow students, something that *sounds really good:*

"Yes," I say, "*but what does it mean?*"

And then—in words simple and straightforward and pure and true, they tell me.

"Write that," I say.

They look at me like I'm kidding.

"No," I say. "Write that. What you just said. That's what you meant, after all, and that's what you should write."

Occasionally students object: "But it doesn't sound as good!"

"That depends," I say.

"On what?"

"On how willing you are to divorce beauty from meaning."

Whoever said that sound and sense—music and meaning, precision and poetry, truth and delight—can't be joined in holy matrimony on the page? Isn't the whole point of writing, after all, to marry them?

The grey warm evening of August had descended upon the city and a mild, warm air, a memory of summer, circulated in the streets. The streets shuttered for the repose of Sunday, swarmed with a gaily colored crowd. Like illumined pearls the lamps shone from the summits their tall poles upon the living texture below which, changing shape and hue unceasingly, sent up into the warm grey evening air an unchanging, unceasing murmur.—James Joyce, "Two Gallants"

Meaning and sensual delight go hand in hand. But they won't join hands unless we exercise rigor and resist the seduction of surfaces.

On the Pleasures of Not Writing

September 19, 2016 § 5 Comments

i
5 Votes

By Peter Selgin


Peter Selgin (photo by Katinka Neuhof)

Not writing has many advantages. You can walk with both hands in your pockets. You can peel and eat an orange. Other fruits, too, become accessible to the non-writer.

When not writing it is possible to participate in all kinds of physical activities unavailable to writers. Swimming comes to mind, as well as other water sports such as water skiing and scuba diving. Operating any kind of watercraft, even a small rowboat or sailboat, is inadvisable while writing.

Although thinking is still possible when writing, it is not nearly as pleasurable. Among other things one is constantly interrupted if not entirely waylaid by concerns of grammar, spelling, usage, not to mention syntax, structure, and style. Writing takes most if not all the fun out of thinking.

One should never drive or operate heavy machinery while writing. Conversely, those who do not write are far better disposed to enjoy operating (for instance) a bulldozer.

Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that sexual performance is enhanced by not writing.

John Updike, a famous author, observed that "the pleasures of not writing are so great that if you ever start indulging them you will never write again." This is just as true in reverse. The pleasures of writing are so few one would be wise never to start in the first place.

Similarly, though Walter Benjamin tells us "Never stop writing because you have run out of ideas," I say, "Never *start* writing just because you *have* ideas."

Not writing isn't for everyone. Some are so predisposed to the condition that, however hard they try, they can't break the habit. Our hearts go out to them. Still, such people are best avoided. However genetic, their lack of self-control may be contagious.

Habits:

1. Though some prefer the evening hours, and even the hours after midnight, for most the best time to not write is in the morning.
2. Though sometimes I don't write in notebooks and yellow legal pads, generally I prefer not to write on the computer.
3. When not writing it's best to let your thoughts flow freely. Try not to censor yourself.
4. Choose a comfortable location, preferably out of direct sunlight. If you must not write outdoors, then be sure to wear sunscreen. Just because you're not writing doesn't mean you won't burn!
5. Remember, too, that like all good things not writing should be enjoyed in moderation. Don't overdo it. Every so often, just to remind yourself of what you're "missing," you may want to pick up a pen or sit down at the computer and stare at a blank document. But don't write anything. Just sit there calmly for a few moments appreciating the fact that, while you are perfectly free not to write, many others are not so lucky. Close your eyes and think about the poor devils for a moment or two. Say a little prayer for them if you're so inclined. Or simply acknowledge their existence.
6. Then put your pen down, turn off your computer, and go back to not writing.

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Peter Selgin's essays have earned a dozen Best Notable Essay citations as well as two inclusions in the Best American series (Best American Essay 2006; Best American Travel Writing 2014). He is the author of *Drowning Lessons,* winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction, a novel, two books on the craft of fiction, and two children's books. His work has been published in *Colorado Review, Missouri Review, The Sun, Glimmer Train, Creative Nonfiction, Fourth Genre,* and other reviews, and has won the Missouri Review Editors' Prize, the Dana Award, and many Pushcart Prize nominations. An essay collection, ***Confessions of a Left-Handed Man (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1609380568/brevitynonfic-20)***, was published by University of Iowa press and short-listed for the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. Selgin's second novel, *The Water Master,* won the Pirate's Alley William Faulkner Society Prize. Of his first memoir, ***The Inventors (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0989360474/brevitynonfic-20)***, published in April, 2016, the *Library Journal* said, "It is book destined to become a modern classic." He teaches at Antioch University's low-residency MFA program and is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College & State University.

Tagged: **humor**, **Not Writing**

Swimming to the End

A (PLOT) TWIST IN THE RIVER

ON LABOR Day weekend a few years ago, some friends and I decided to swim across the Hudson River. That may not sound like a great idea. And in fact, unless you're a skilled swimmer with an escort, and depending on bacteria levels, tide tables, and boat traffic, it probably isn't a good idea at all.

We had an escort. Paul claimed to know the river by heart. He was a tidal expert and kept tabs on the river's bacteria levels. From a dock at the Riverdale Yacht Club in his rubber Zodiac, he piloted us across the river to our starting point. He and a team of three kayakers would be guiding us back as we swam, the yacht-club dock our final destination. We had timed our swim with the slack tide, the short period when there is no tidal motion or current in a body of water. In the Hudson, slack tide occurs when the river's current is counterbalanced by the incoming estuary tide. According to Paul, slack tide would start at 3:30 PM and last a half hour. Once it began, we had only that long to complete our swim. Otherwise we'd be dragged downstream.

Once we got to our starting point, there was some confusion getting under way. One of us had forgotten his goggles; another suddenly confessed to having next to no experience in open water, let alone water with currents, tides, barges, and freighters. Two of the three kayakers who were supposed to escort us failed to show up. Since the exhaust fumes from its outboard were sure to asphyxiate anyone swimming less than a dozen feet behind it, Paul's Zodiac quickly proved useless as a guide boat.

By the time we got in the water it was a quarter to four. Slack tide had already peaked. The crossing would take at least thirty minutes. By then the current would be flowing rapidly again—or the tide would be coming in, I wasn't sure. We decided to swim anyway.

The river was gray-green and murky, too murky to see my hand break the water in front of me. Bits of gel-like matter passed between my spread fingers. The river tasted of mud, salt, and something I tried not to think about. I aimed for the yacht club, a tiny white triangle on the now distant shore. Every time I looked up, the triangle was

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PHOTO CREDIT

further to my left. I was drifting. We all were. The Zodiac spluttered by.

"Oh-point-two-five!" Paul shouted, meaning we had three-quarters of the distance yet to go. I felt like I'd been swimming forever.

I kept going.

A few days earlier, the students in my writing workshop had challenged me to explain plot, to give them some recipe or formula to follow. Like most writing teachers, I approach the subject of plot with dread and loathing. Having invoked Philip Larkin's recipe ("a beginning, a muddle, and an end"), I drew two points on the blackboard, about three feet apart, and connected them with a straight line. Then, using a dotted line, I showed how, two-thirds of the way through a typical story, the trajectory symbolized by the straight line is thwarted: Something unanticipated occurs, throwing the plot off its seemingly predictable course, sending it in a whole new direction toward a surprising yet inevitable end.

As I kept swimming, seeing my target veer further and further to the left in spite of my efforts to compensate for the current, I thought of the illustration I'd used in class: how the author begins with an inciting event, Point A, which then leads into the heart of the story—the middle (muddle) of the river—with its somewhat anticipated complications (barges and freighters churning up wakes); how the plot widens and deepens as it moves toward the distant Point B, the likely or obvious outcome, the distant white triangle. But then, about halfway across, something unexpected happens. The current builds, the tide comes in; a cramp grips the calf of one's leg. The plot has shifted, the path twisted; the element of surprise has come into play. And there are more surprises in store.

I was some two hundred feet downstream of my target. The current grew stronger and stronger. I tried to fight it, swimming at a sharp angle to it. That's when my left leg gave out; I couldn't move it. The cramp seized my calf first, before corkscrewing its way up into my thigh. I stopped swimming and treaded water, and told myself to keep calm. When the cramp subsided I started swimming again, aware that I was now at least three hundred feet downstream. The Zodiac was nowhere in sight.

The image of the plot curve kept recurring to me as I swam on, that simple line on a blackboard delineating drama—incident, event, surprise, the unexpected. Could that simple line with its unanticipated twist at the end represent the tragedy of this day? Had I inadvertently followed the rules of plot to a tee as in Tragedy? Who was it that said tragedy was all very well when it occurred on a stage, but that in real life it seemed closer to absurdity? If one of us died on this day, on this glorious, cool, sunny day with not a cloud in the sky, would it be tragic or absurd? Or both?

And how fitting that, viewed on a map or from the sky, the course of each of our journeys would correspond exactly to that classic plot curve, bending like a bow from Point A (best laid plans, hopes and aspirations, innocence) to the wholly new and unanticipated Point C (comedy, tragedy, irony—but in any case, The End). Would people trace the last moments of our lives on that graph and say, "They died dramatically, in perfect form, with strict adhesion to the rules of good storytelling?" Would they think silently to themselves, "Like all good endings, a surprise—but in retrospect, inevitable"? Or would they think, "Unbelievable: highly improbable, if not altogether impossible and hence, unsatisfactory. Another draft, please!"

For me, swimming ahead, with the shore refusing to come any closer no matter how hard or fast I stroked, the plot had begun to seem all too inevitable. The pedant was about to be hoisted by his own petard. Would the others die of my pedagogy? Would we all be the victims of the perfect plot?

The image of the plot curve kept recurring to me as I swam on, that simple line on a blackboard delineating drama—incident, event, surprise, the unexpected. Could that simple line with its unanticipated twist at the end represent the tragedy of this day?

It took me another fifteen minutes to reach the rocks. By then I'd suffered a second bad cramp, this one in the other leg. I was barely able to beach myself.

Twenty minutes later, we were all on dry land. The current had carried one swimmer six hundred feet downstream, almost as far as the Spuyten Duyvil Creek. A second swimmer was carried to the shores of Inwood Hill. A third nearly made it to the George Washington Bridge. Had we set off a few minutes later, she'd have been swept to the Verrazano Narrows and beyond.

In the end, the plot had twisted itself back into a more-or-less straight line, with comedy tempered by the potential for tragedy rather than tragedy itself. We had survived this dramatic journey, full of tides and turns and shifting currents, and would live to tell the story. The air was crisp and sunny and dry. So was the champagne we drank to celebrate our crossing, to toast what tales might lie ahead.

BREVITY's Nonfiction Blog

(Somewhat) Daily News from the World of Literary Nonfiction

On Writing vs. Painting

May 6, 2016 § 11 Comments

i
5 Votes

By Peter Selgin

Peter Selgin

I'm a lucky man. I paint, and I write. The two blessings seldom visit me simultaneously; usually I have to choose between them, like choosing between two lovers. One of those two lovers is of a sentimental and playful disposition, brimming with joy, light, and sweetness; the other is dark, brooding, at times even forbidding. Although she smiles from time to time, her smiles are laced with irony and often with bitterness and despair. She can never stop thinking.

Before I ever started writing I was a visual artist. I say "visual artist," though that's too highfalutin a term for drawing pictures of ships and skyscrapers. It seems to me that I could always draw, from the very beginning, that I never had to learn, not really. I was born (so it seems) with the ability to "see" perspective; although my father tried to explain it to me in technical terms, he didn't have to explain to me what I could very well see with my own eyes, that the rails of the train tracks converged at the horizon, while the tops of the telegraph poles grew shorter. Where other people saw straight lines I saw angles and curves. Not long ago, a well-known author tried to explain to me how, prior to the invention of the camera obscura, the artist Van Dyke could never have "gotten" the perspective of a chandelier in one of his paintings, that such things could only be grasped by the photographically trained eye, which in turn could only exist with the invention of photography or its equivalent. To this I thought (but didn't say) humbug: in Van Dyke's or any other time I could have drawn that chandelier.

Ukrainian Nightscape, by Peter Selgin

I don't mean to brag. My ability to draw is nothing to brag about. It's just something I happened to be born with, the way some people are born double-jointed, or with perfect pitch. That said, I can't deny the great joy that drawing has always given me, how often a pen or pencil and paper have rescued me from boredom and ennui (how would I survive those monthly university department meetings without doodling on my legal pad?). When traveling, I've considered a sketchbook and watercolors as indispensable as my toilet kit, credit cards, and passport. Don't leave home without them. There were times when, having set out to do a watercolor in the morning, hours later in the middle of the afternoon I'd awaken as if from a trance, my face sunburned, my back sore, having lost myself completely in my painting-in-progress. I count such hours the happiest of my life. The painter in the midst of his work is impervious to suffering. He or she is a truly happy person. I can think of no place I'd rather be than in the realm of constructive oblivion that is painting a picture.

There—in that realm bounded by four points on a single plane—I exert total, dictatorial authority; I'm in charge. I get to achieve something close to perfection, or at least to aim for it. Within that circumscribed realm no one else can tell me what to do, or whether what I'm doing is wrong or right. When it comes to painting, I consider myself above and beyond criticism. When people like my paintings, I'm pleased. On the other hand I couldn't give a damn what the "experts" think. I already can guess that most "real" painters would find my work superficial if not entirely irrelevant, that they would dismiss my paintings as products of a technically proficient amateur, one entirely unversed in the protocols (and politics) of the academy, who doesn't "get it." Of course these days the very notion of an "academy" in art is frowned upon, especially by those who belong to it. Once, at a communal dinner at an artist's colony on an otherwise deserted island in Maine, at a table full of conceptual artists (one of whom, I remember, was constructing a clock from the carcasses of dead lobsters) I dared to invoke Picasso's name, eliciting jeers and head-shakes: did I not know that Picasso was "out"? "He's just a painter," one of the artists remarked disparagingly. Painting was Out; Dada was in. But they didn't belong to any academy.

Never mind. I like to paint and I paint what I like. I paint to give and receive pleasure. When I mix tint into a gesso ground, when I size a board or a canvas, when I paint shape over shape, color next to (or into or over or around) color, when I thicken the paint to a heavy paste, or thin it so it runs and bleeds, when I add sand or ink or sawdust or chalk, when I scrape one color away to reveal traces of the color underneath, when I butt up a delicate line against a heavy form, or a heavy line against a delicate form, when I key the colors so close and low it's as if they are whispering secrets to each other, until I add a splash from beyond their range, a high-octave red or a blazing yellow that adds a piercing scream to all those mumbles and whispers . . . all done in the spirit of play, the spirit with which children make mud pies or build sandcastles on the beach. There's no pain in painting, not for me. None at all.

I can't say the same for writing. Writing hurts. It distresses me. You have to think when you write. (You have to think when you paint, too, but it's a different kind of thinking, it's thinking without words; it's a purely physical process void of any language other than that of colors, textures, shapes, values—closer to dancing than to what writers do).

There are days when I wonder why, given a choice between painting and writing, do I choose to write? Why would any sane person, given that choice, choose that way? What on earth compels me to forsake the joyful realm of pigments and shapes for the stilted black and white universe of words and so-called "meanings"—when deep down inside all of us know perfectly well that, assuming meaning is to be found anywhere in life, language is surely the last place to look for it.

Why, then, do I bother writing?

The only answer I can give is that I write because writing is so hard, that the challenge of drawing (I use the word advisedly) meaning from words is irresistible precisely because it's impossible, because after all words can only express thoughts, ideas, concepts, symbols—man-made and artificial things. Whereas paint is color; shapes are shapes; lines are lines; textures are textures. They don't stand for anything (they can stand for things, but they don't have to). As much as we take words into our hearts and love them for themselves, for the way they look and sound, in the end they can only stand for things beyond words. They are not the ends but only a means.

But then that 's what makes them so achingly beautiful. Because they are so difficult, so clumsy, such an inconvenient, inefficient means toward expressing feelings and creating beauty, like trying to build the Taj Mahal out of chewing gum and toothpicks. Pigments and grounds were given to us; we dug them out of the ground. Words we had to invent from scratch. As clumsy, inefficient, and inelegant as they are, for better or worse, words are the only medium we can truly claim as our own.

That makes them irresistible.

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Peter Selgin's essays have earned a dozen Best Notable Essay citations as well as two inclusions in the Best American series (Best American Essay 2006; Best American Travel Writing 2014). He is the author of *Drowning Lessons,* winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction, a novel, two books on the craft of fiction, and two children's books. His work has been published in *Colorado Review, Missouri Review, The Sun, Glimmer Train, Creative Nonfiction, Fourth Genre,* and other reviews, and has won the Missouri Review Editors' Prize, the Dana Award, and many Pushcart Prize nominations. An essay collection, ***Confessions of a Left-Handed Man (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1609380568/brevitynonfic-20)***, was published by University of Iowa press and short-listed for the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. Selgin's second novel, *The Water Master,* won the Pirate's Alley William Faulkner Society Prize. Of his first memoir, ***The Inventors (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0989360474/brevitynonfic-20)***, published in April, 2016, the *Library Journal* said, "It is book destined to become a modern classic." He teaches at Antioch University's low-residency MFA program and is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia College & State University.

§ 11 Responses to *On Writing vs. Painting*

- ninagaby (http://ninagaby.wordpress.com) says:
  May 6, 2016 at 7:52 am (https://brevity.wordpress.com/2016/05/06/on-writing-vs-painting/#comment-27144)

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