

My Locomotive God

- Peter Selgin

On Sunday mornings when I was a boy of six or seven or eight, when most fathers took their sons to church, mine took me to explore the beds of abandoned railroads. We'd start out at nine in the morning, with the town's half-dozen church bells still ringing, filling the low New England sky with sounds of piety and grace. My father wore his crumpled 'Mr. Magoo' cap and hiking shoes. He'd bring his compass, his geological survey map (with tiny black squares standing for houses), and a red pen with which, over the map's filigreed, pastel-colored surface he'd trace the routes of the old Shepaugh and Housatonic Valley railroad lines.

I, too, equipped myself. I wore my trusty P.F. Flyers and red windbreaker and carried the perpetual hope that this time, at last, we'd come upon the remains of a rusty locomotive, just like the one on Petticoat Junction, complete with brass cylinders, triangular smokestack, and cowcatcher.

Our explorations took us to quaint towns with names like Washington Depot, Old Hawleyville, and Sandy Hook. We'd hike through apple orchards and industrial parks and the backyards of people who lived in those tiny black squares; their dogs would bark viciously at us or they'd come out and yell at us themselves — my father had no respect for private property.

Suddenly the trail would grow cold, and we'd pick it up again a half mile away, on the far side of a river, or in the woods skirting some farmer's field. We came across many interesting sights: the ruins of trestles, foundries and smelting ovens, even some tunnels, including one with a huge hornet's nest clinging to its jagged, sweaty wall, dozens of fat white hornets buzzing around it like light bulbs. I buried my face in my father's coat and begged him, please, not to make me walk past it.

"Don't be silly, Peter," he said. "They won't sting you."

"Promise?" I said.

"Yes, yes," said my father, impatiently. "I promise."

Sure enough, as we neared the nest, a hornet stung me on my exposed cheek, the pain as swift and powerful as lightning. I cried all the way back to the car. I should

have known better. My father, a man who delighted in irreverence — especially his own — was always saying to me and my twin brother George, “My promises are worth nothing.” He’d snicker whenever he’d say it.

But, he was my father, and boys are bound to believe their fathers — even when their fathers warn them against doing so.

Hornets aside, I enjoyed our abandoned railroad searches. But after three or four hours of hiking, my legs would grow tired, and I’d start complaining. To spur me on, my father would summon the rusty locomotive, the one that was always “just around the next bend” but which never materialized.

For me that rusty locomotive was like God: always present but never visible or attainable, an article of faith.

My father was an avowed atheist, as far as I know the only atheist in Bethel, Connecticut, where we grew up. He was also — aside from my mother — the only Italian immigrant (though he spoke better English than Walter Cronkite), the only full-time inventor, and the only certified genius. He’d aced the Mensa exam, passing it with a top score in half the allotted time. Occasionally he would take me and my brother to Mensa gatherings, picnics usually, where we would get to see all of the other geniuses. It was like going to the genius zoo. At one outing a quarrel broke out between a nuclear physicist and a philosopher, the subject being whether or not a can of baked beans placed unopened on the barbecue grill would explode. As George and I looked on from an instinctively safe remove, the two geniuses went at it, talking loudly of molecules and vacuums, of critical excitation and linear thermal expansion, gesticulating boldly to illustrate their opposed theories. Suddenly, there was a loud explosion. Seconds later both men — along with a handful of innocent bystanders — were picking baked beans out of their clothes, their hair, their eyes. Soon after that my father quit Mensa, calling its members “a bunch of idiots.”

Yet Papa was a gentleman, a forgiving man, a man who could never, as they say, hurt a fly. He was also a proud, passionate, unapologetic atheist. To witness the depths of his passion you had only to switch the television on to an evangelistic program and hear his thunderous oaths, his viles and loathsomes. The words “Jesus” or “Christ,” stretched to more than one syllable by men in pale suits with thick hair and white teeth, could deliver him to apoplexy’s door. They were like waving a scarlet cape in front of a bleeding bull. Papa’s face would turn a deep purplish red, his cheeks would puff out like the jibs of a sailing ship, his lower lip would quiver and sparkle with saliva. In his messianic fury, he himself would start to look evangelistic. We had to change the channel quickly or get him out of the room.

In our house, which was crammed with books on every subject, there was no Bible. There were books on science and art and psychology; there were novels and plays, dictionaries, encyclopedias, books about cars and planes and ships (and trains, of course), books in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian — languages my father spoke fluently. But no Bible. My father, who spent so much of his time reading and writing books, had no use for that one. When I once pointed out its conspicuous absence, my father made the awful face he'd make when something disgusted him, and waved the idea away. I might as well have suggested that he take out a subscription to *Soldier of Fortune* or *Swank*.

Papa hated almost everything to do with organized religion. I say almost everything because he had a weak spot for stained glass windows. Every so often, to my astonishment, we would drop into a church together, usually on a weekday when there were few people inside, strictly to admire the colors of the stained glass windows. We'd stand side by side, father and son in the cathedral's sepulchral hush, gazing up at the tutti-frutti shapes of colored light, oblivious of their symbols of Christ with His crown of thorns, the Stations of the Cross, and the Angel of the Annunciation. My father saw none of these things. He saw only bandwidths of bright spectral color, blood reds and cobalt blues, sunny yellows, royal violets and emerald greens, colors he'd built his livelihood from.

Colors were a big part of my father's life. The Color Coder, his most successful invention, was used industrially to measure and compare colors for quality control purposes, to make sure that Batch # 3,676,458 of Whip 'n' Chill was the same color as Batch # 3,653,567. In the Building, where he did his inventing, I'd dig through the boxes of test samples, rectangular plastic chips of every conceivable hue, colors without names — which made them all the more exotic — each color a spoonful of sweet, mysterious eye-pudding. I'd sample them all. They were the colors of life, of happiness, of dreams. The stained glass windows were like those samples, but brighter, transparent, trapping the light from outdoors, glowing with hope.

We never said a word, either of us. We'd stand next to each other looking up at the matrices of filtered light, my father with a beatific smile on his face, holding my hand. Papa didn't have to preach the gospel of colors to me; it preached itself straight into my heart. It is as close as he and I ever came to sharing a religious experience.

One time, leaving a church, my father said, "What a shame, all those beautiful colors wasted on such nonsense."

My father's laboratory sat at the base of the hill where we lived: a modest shack of peeling yellow stucco and slowly rotting wood. My mother called it "The Building" as

if it were the only standing structure on in the world, let alone in Bethel, Connecticut. As a boy I couldn't wait to visit my father there, in his rotting sanctuary, the cathedral where he built his inventions and where I would come to worship him and them.

After school, when the bus dropped me off, I'd hurl myself up our long dirt driveway, under the drooping branches of the six weeping willow trees lining it, to the Building's front door, on which I'd knock tentatively, cautiously. I don't know why I felt so shy about visiting my father, since he always welcomed me with a big smile, saying in his faintly British accent, "Well, well, Peter, my boy! How good of you to visit!" (What a gentle smile my father had, and what depths of frustration and rage it concealed: but I knew nothing of all that then.) Maybe it was my sense of reverence that made me feel so shy, that told me I was entering sacred ground, a place of hushed secrets shrouded in the green light of my father's oscilloscope, buried under the sounds of static from his tube radio (it never played anything else). In place of frankincense and myrrh there was the perfume of orange rinds and solder smoke, of burnt metal and white glue, of sawdust and typewriter ink, mixed with the smells of Papa's more than occasional gunfire farts.

Cautiously I'd proceed toward my father at whatever task preoccupied him. I'd find him at his typewriter (a black Royal — an antique in 1966 — on which he wrote over a dozen never-published books), or at the drafting table, or behind the band saw, or the drill press. Or he'd be bent down in front of the oscilloscope, soldering gun in hand, his features bathed in eerie green light. Or — if I was lucky — I'd find him at the lathe. I'd watch the metal-stained fingers of his left hand curve over the smooth spinning chuck, while his other hand manipulated an array of dials and levers, guiding the bit that sliced into spinning metal like the prow of a ship through heavy seas. I'd watch mesmerized as the bit spewed forth bright steaming turnings ("curlicues," I called them) of aluminum, copper and brass. Afterwards I'd sweep them into a dustpan, pocketing the longest and brightest for a collection I kept in a wooden box behind my bed.

I had another reason to proceed with caution. The Building's floors were riddled with holes where the rotted wood had broken through. My father joked about it. He claimed there were rats and snakes and other creatures living in the holes. "My friends," he called them, half-joking, since he truly loved all creatures, especially the most lowly and despised spiders and snakes: the lowlier, the better. "Careful now," he'd say seeing me making my way toward him, my PF Flyers kicking up ruddy plumes of rot-dust, "This is a holy shrine."

To me the Building was indeed a holy shrine, the place where my father spent all of his time and where, if I wanted to see him at all, to luxuriate in his divine

presence, I had to enter. Dressed in his ratty beige sweater and wrinkled, stained shorts, wearing his Magoo cap indoors, he'd show me his latest invention; there was always one in the works. A machine for measuring the irregularities in bolts of denim cloth, a machine for sorting shoe soles by their thickness, a machine for comparing the colors of real and false teeth, a machine for measuring the fat content in ground meat, a machine for determining the ripeness of fruits. One day he unveiled a metal box the size of a toaster, with a covered Pyrex dish mounted over a lens opening on top. Inside the dish sat a spoonful of a yellowish-brown substance I recognized instantly as one forbidden in the Selgin household.

"I call it the P-B Analyzer," Papa explained. "It's for measuring the consistency of peanut butter. Loathsome substance, mind you," he added, grimacing. "Whatever its consistency, consistently loathsome. Only Americans would each eat such crud."

In the Building's back room a series of wooden shelves sagged under the weight of boxes brimming with parts salvaged from Papa's failed inventions. As a child I grew mesmerized by the parts in those boxes, and by the names scrawled in marker on the red-bordered labels glued to them. Relays, rheostats, toggle switches, photocells, solenoids, transformers ... I'd savor these words, turning them over in my mind like butterscotch Lifesavers. To me, the parts in those boxes were as fascinating as the inventions that they'd been salvaged from. Other boys gazed to the stars. I gazed at my father's spare parts. They were the planets, moons and asteroids of a gadget solar system, my father the Sun at its center.

His workday over, my father and I would walk up the steep driveway to the house. The Building had no septic system. Along the way we'd stop to empty our bladders, standing side by side as when admiring the stained glass windows of churches, simultaneously micturating into the weeds, my father's stream arching, twisting, steaming and glittering high above and beyond mine into the dusk, resembling the brass turnings from his lathe.

If I missed having God in my life, I certainly didn't feel it back then. At six or seven my father was all the God I needed.

As I grew older, cracks began to run through my secular world. Hairline cracks at first, spontaneous and barely visible to the naked eye. They came in the form of questions: *why had I been born? Why the earth, why the sun, why life, and, more vexingly, why death (our dog, Pal, had died)? Was it all without purpose and, if not, what was life's purpose?* Not only did my Papa lack answers, he scoffed at the questions. Or he'd inhale deeply and say, "The 'purpose' (always in quotes) of life is to breathe. The rest is icing on the cake." But this hardly satisfied me.

Meanwhile other cracks were pounded into me by Bobby Mullins. Bobby Mullins — the perfect name for a Catholic school bully — shared the bus stop with me and George. He was twelve years old, two years older than us, and a better fighter, which isn't saying much, since neither George nor I ever learned to fight: our father, as uninterested in athletics as he was in God, never taught us. Somehow Bobby Mullins had found out that George and I were non-believers. How he'd done so I still can't imagine, since there were so many churches in Bethel it would have taken some research to learn that we didn't attend any of them. Someone tipped him off. That Bobby Mullins had to share his bus stop with a pair of ten year-old heathens outraged him. He challenged our atheism, squaring up to us with his pug-nosed, tow-headed, pimply face, demanding with a sneer, "Do you believe in God?" Having been taught to always tell the truth we would both answer, "No," and Bobby Mullins would punch. Sometimes he'd punch me and sometimes he'd punch George; he never punched both of us on the same day. He must have reasoned that, since we were twins, punching one was as good as punching two.

While one of us was getting punched by Bobby Mullins, the other would stand by and watch, helplessly. We didn't defend each other, not just because we didn't know how to fight, but because we felt guilty as accused, guilty of not believing in God. Even at age ten already I harbored the sense that my disbelief in God was, if not abhorrent, aberrant, at odds with the world around me. As I've said, we were the only atheists I knew, the only ones who didn't take communion or go to confession, who weren't even sure what those words meant. We'd never tasted the host or drunk the wine or clasped hands together in prayer to say a Hail Mary or an Our Father or even a Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep. Far out of memory's range George and I had, at our mother's insistence, been baptized, and yes, we'd both been named after saints. After that: nothing. Under the strict influence of her husband's secularism my mother's Catholicism lapsed, or simply collapsed. Except for an occasional funeral or wedding, mom never set foot inside a church again.

So I couldn't even count on my mother for a dose of piety and an exemption from Hell, where I began to assume I was headed. And it seemed to me, even as I suffered his blows, that Bobby Mullins shouldn't be blamed for the sins of my father, that he was serving a higher authority, doing God's dirty work, trying, in his crude painful way, to shepherd two of His lost sheep.

But Bobby's methods backfired. The more he punched me, the more I turned against God and refused to believe in Him: the more I hated God, even while refusing to acknowledge His existence (atheism gets very complicated).

There were others doing God's work, or trying to. There were the Rowlands, the parents of my best friend Christopher who, though no great or demonstrative believer himself, set the standard for me of how decent Christian Wasps behaved (as opposed to Godless Wop heathens). When I'd eat dinner with them, at their dining room table set with ringed napkins, lace doilies and hand-dipped candles, I'd always make the mistake of digging deep into my food and starting to eat just as they bowed their heads in prayer, to my shame. Gingerly, I'd swallow my mouthful of mashed potatoes, lower my fork, bow my head and murmur a meaningless string of words supposedly meant for His Lord, but actually for my own benefit, since I didn't want Mr. And Mrs. Rowland to think I was evil. And I felt sure that to not pray was in their eyes to be evil, to be the devil himself. That the rest of the meal proceeded in total silence save for an occasional "Pass the butter, please" didn't help. Back home, at our kitchen table (except on special occasions we never used the dining room), conversation with meals was not only routine and loud, it was usually rowdy and even violent, with everyone shouting at once, and not just shouting, but calling each other names, joking, laughing, cursing. The words "Pass the butter, please" may have been among the few never to broach the Selgin dinner table (while "Screw you!" and "Shuttup!" made as many crossings as the Queens *Mary* and *Elizabeth*).

The contrast between our two households, the Rowlands and the Selgins, couldn't have been more pronounced. For me, it exemplified the difference between those who feared God and those who didn't, with the burden of judgement falling squarely on the Selgin household, since there could be no question, no question at all, that we were the worse behaved.

One evening my parents invited the Rowlands for dinner. It was the first time they'd ever come over and would be the last. At some point during the meal, during desert, my father told one of his famously bad jokes — nothing off-color or outwardly offensive, I don't think; he'd managed to restrain himself, at least that far. Still, it was a very poor joke, the kind that makes people groan, and both George and I failed to restrain ourselves. Simultaneously we burst out with a loud "Pig!" The Rowlands (this was in 1970; Mr. Rowland was a staunch Nixon Republican) were scandalized. Afterwards, in the kitchen, like missionaries they took my mother aside and said to her, "How can you let your children speak that way to their own father?" My mother had to explain that in our house "pig" was a term of endearment, that each of us had an animal moniker: "toucan" (my mother, because of her large Roman nose), "fish" (George, because he loved to swim), and "tarsier" (me, I don't remember why). I doubt that this explanation did any good. Surely the Rowlands must have concluded that we were all going to hell.

It was a conclusion I finally came to myself. I knew right from wrong. I didn't go around kicking dogs or pulling the cane out from under old ladies. Still, I didn't trust my morality. It felt wobbly, like a house built on stilts. One day it would collapse and I'd become a child molester or a serial killer. Or just an average, run of the mill bad person.

There were other differences between the Selgins and other families. Like most Bethelites, most of my friends were churchgoers. At the very least they attended services on Easter and on Christmas Eve, and paid lip service to things like Ash Wednesday and Good Friday (which to my family was no better than any other Friday). Like everyone else, when Christmas came around, the Selgins put up a Christmas tree and decorated it lavishly, as lavishly as any tree on the block. And yet for me there was always the nagging worry that somehow our Christmas tree didn't live up to its name, that it would give us away. Something was wrong with the lights. They were the wrong colors, or didn't flash properly. The tinsel was too kinky, or hung at the wrong angle. We lacked the proper bulbs. I wasn't sure what the problem was, but there was something very wrong with our Christmas tree. It wasn't legitimate; it wasn't sincere. Who were we trying to kid, anyway? The Selgins didn't believe in God. By the time I turned eleven everyone knew it. That tree in our living room? That was no Christmas tree. It was a pagan tree gussied up to try and fool others into thinking we were moral people, when of course we weren't. We were atheists. We were evil and weird. Secretly, I knew we didn't deserve Santa or his gifts. We had no right to them, since he was a Saint and Saints had to do with God, with whom we had nothing to do. (It didn't help that when opening his presents my father played Scrooge to the hilt.)

Still, despite all my doubts, discomforts and fears, I never considered turning to God. It seemed to me that, as phony as our Christmas tree was, my turning to God would have been even phonier. The simple truth was I didn't believe. As far as I was concerned, belief wasn't a matter of choice. You either did or you didn't. And I didn't. As for trying to make myself believe, if you had to try (it seemed to me) you'd already failed.

What was "belief," anyway? What did it mean to "believe" in something, as opposed to simply knowing it, for a fact? The question perturbed me. I began to suspect that my skepticism extended far beyond God, that in fact I didn't believe in anything and couldn't believe, was incapable of it.

To find out just how incapable I was, I performed a little test on myself, asking myself whether or not I believed in certain things for which the factual evidence was unavailable or not close at hand. For instance, I asked myself: Do you believe that

the earth is round? The answer, to my relief, came back yes. Then I asked, Do you believe in miracles? To this I had to give some thought, since I'd never experienced a miracle and wasn't even sure if I would recognize one if I did. But then I concluded that the reason I would never recognize a miracle was because I would never live to see one, therefore what was the point in believing in them? The answer, then, had to be no. Third question: do you believe in your own future? Now I started to get anxious, because I knew this third answer would be the capper. If I said no to this there could be little room to doubt that I was incapable of believing in anything. I thought and thought about it. While thinking, the image of a clear blue, cloudless sky filled my mind: an endless, pristine expanse without horizon or foreground, sun or moon, or even a single navigational star. If I believed in the future, then this was it: nothing, a blank blue wall. I shook my head, no. That was the answer.

I was thirteen years old at the time. Thus began my period of agnosticism, for if, as I'd concluded, I was incapable of believing in anything, surely that meant I was incapable of believing in not believing in God. That being the case, it made more sense for me to consider myself agnostic, which I'd looked up in the dictionary and which, according to Webster's Collegiate, means *one who holds the view that any ultimate reality (as God) is unknown and probably unknowable*. Which struck me as perfect, much better than atheist, which the same dictionary defines as one who denies the existence of God — a much less passive stance and one ill-fitting someone like myself who, back then especially, felt powerless to act on any set of beliefs, let alone go around denying other people's. No, I told myself repeatedly, I am not an atheist (not an atheist, not an atheist).

But this, too, I failed to entirely believe.

Even death, the most certain of certainties, didn't sink beneath the depths of my skepticism. One day, at the height of my Doubting Thomas period, I was cutting through the town cemetery when I discovered, to my amazement, that some of the tombstones weren't made of solid granite or marble but cast out of aluminum and given a warm gray patina to resemble stone. They were hollow! I was flabbergasted. I went from tombstone to tombstone, testing with bare knuckles, listening for the tell-tale echo. At least a quarter of the grave markers were fake, as fake as the Selgin Christmas tree. I stood there wondering, did my grandmother's bones rest under a hollow stone? Would my parents'? Would mine? Even death, I remember thinking, the final reality, the one thing that could be counted on, had a hollow ring to it. It couldn't be trusted. *My promises are worth nothing.*

So — what saved me from drowning in a sea of skepticism? I'll tell you, but you'll be skeptical. What saved me was my secret belief — and it was a deep secret, even from

me — in the mystical power of Art. A contradiction in terms, I know, since (again according to Webster) to be mystical a thing must have a spiritual meaning or reality that's not apparent to the senses or obvious to the intellect and to be sure, the works of art that I admired most violated both of these rules. And yet I could imagine nothing more sublimely spiritual than any painting by Van Gogh, or Stravinsky's *Firebird*, or a Beatles' song. At age sixteen I wasn't yet sure what, exactly, I wanted to do with my life, but I knew one thing: I'd be an artist; I would make things that would move people, that would fill their senses with something like spiritual meaning: the unconscious hope behind this conviction of mine was that in doing so I would fill my own bleakly, skeptical soul with spiritual meaning and thus save myself from falling into that deep, blue emptiness, that nihilist's hell that I had imagined as my only possible future.

And so I applied myself, with something like religious zeal, to becoming an artist. Today, thirty years later, I still worship at the arguably secular altar of art. I write and I paint, and most if not all of my friends are artists of some sort. As I write this, a painting-in-progress of New York harbor sits on my easel, a fanciful interpretation with a pair of old-fashioned, red-funneled steamships jockeying for position among tugboats and skyscrapers. The style I paint in is faux naïve or neo expressionist, take your pick, with bright colors peeking out among more somber tones, the paint richly scumbled or crusty, the large shapes outlined in thick black strokes like the bars of lead in stained glass windows.

Do I envy believers? Sometimes. It would be nice to believe in a personal God, some ultimate benevolent force looking over things, making sure everything has its purpose, no matter how terrible. It would be nice to question things a little bit less. It would be nice to feel that warm, fuzzy glow that I imagine most believers feel and not just to feel it, but to emanate it.

Atheists are not especially loved. Excepting the scientific and academic communities, few societies embrace us. We're a flock of odd birds, pecking around in the shadows, reluctant to display the dull plumes of our skepticism. We don't proselytize or mount crusades or wage holy wars. No days are set aside for us on any calendar. We keep a low profile. When was the last time you heard a movie star or a politician admit to being an atheist?

Am I proud of my atheism? Only to the extent that I come by it honestly. But if pressed, I'll admit that what I'm really proud of is my honesty.

But then sooner or later everyone finds his or her own god. Whether it's the God of the Bible or of the Koran, the god of love or of lust, the gods of science or art

or nature, the gods of fame, fortune, friends, family, fear — or a combination of the above. As William James demonstrated, even disbelief is a form of belief. To live is to worship, to endeavor to believe. Every day, when I write or paint or go for a walk, I practice my religion: I'm humbled; I worship.

Meanwhile my atheist Papa has since passed away. Sadly, many of his own creative undertakings failed to pay off, at least not to his satisfaction. To see him grow old was not always a pleasant thing. That gentle smile I knew as a child began wearing thin in his seventies and by the time he turned eighty, it had worn off almost completely, revealing those depths of hidden rage and frustration. He still smiled now and then, but the smile no longer hid his disappointment and despair. One evening, nearing the end of his very productive life, before the first of a series of strokes did him in, as we were walking up the steep driveway together, suddenly he blurted, "I wish I'd been a monk. Yes, that would have suited me. To live simply, without ambitions or worries or fears, with a little room and a bed of straw. Of course, I'd have had to believe in God and all that crap, but I could have faked that. Most do, I'm sure."

Papa made a few last grabs at ambition, squandering his meager savings on shyster patent attorneys and charlatan literary agents, until at last he realized that the jig was up. Then, bit by bit, the strokes took him from me. My mother did her best to keep him home until she was forced to place him in a nursing home. If she chose one named after Pope John Paul II, we couldn't blame her: it was the best place (though we did finally convince the management to remove the Pope's portrait from the wall in Papa's room. There's such a thing as too much irony).

As if aggrieved by his departure, soon after he was put in the nursing home the Building burned down. I stood in the driveway, in the same spot where he and I would pee together, watching it burn. The next morning I sifted through the sour muck and soggy ashes, yanking out the carcass of a waterlogged oscilloscope, a box of drowned tubes, a heap of melted typewriter. In a mound of wet vermiculite something glittered. I picked up a brass turning, put it in my pocket.

At my father's memorial service there was no preacher; he would not have been pleased had there been one. It was a humble ceremony. In front of a small table, arranged with mementos of his e, each of us stood and said a few words. I said that, although an atheist, my father was one of the most decent men I'd ever known — a man who couldn't hold a grudge, who loved the lowly serpent, who never raised a hand in anger, who, unlike many self-described Christians, actually turned the other cheek. Though he refuted God, it didn't stop him from being, in his own way, a Christian. As Kierkegaard said, "a Christian is nevertheless something even more rare than a genius."

The ceremony over, I gathered up the artifacts from the table. There was my father's old typewriter, one of his manuscripts, the brass turning, and the geological survey map on which, thirty years before, he'd traced the routes of the old Shephaugh and Housatonic Valley railroad lines.

My father, my Papa, the virtual engineer of a chimerical steam engine, the hoghead of my rusty locomotive god.

The god I never saw, because his railroad runs through me.