

A black and white photograph of an industrial ruin. In the foreground, a large, dark, circular machine component, possibly a flywheel or a pulley, is partially visible. Several thick, braided cables are draped across the scene, some running horizontally and others diagonally. The background shows a brick wall with two arched openings. The left arch is filled with bright light, while the right arch shows a view of trees and a sky. The overall atmosphere is one of decay and abandonment.

*I have returned there  
where I had never been.*  
—Giorgio Caproni,  
“The Last Homecoming”

# The Kuhreihen Melody

Peter Selgin

Sometimes, while drifting off to sleep, I play a game with myself. I imagine myself in Bethel, Connecticut, my hometown, circa 1964, when I was six or seven. I imagine myself walking down Main Street, slipping into its shops and stores as they were back then. The object of the game is simple: to piece together, as comprehensively as possible, out of the Tinkertoys, Lincoln Logs and Lego bricks of memory, the place where I grew up, down to the smallest trivial details. Store by store, night after night, I reassemble my past.

*Photo by Matt Carman*

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It doesn't matter where I start. Tony's Food Market, at the north end of town, will do. I begin at the meat counter, behind which Tony—Mr. Caraluzzi—stands in his bloody butcher's smock, his hair not yet gone gray. The mounds of ground beef remind me of spaghetti. From there I inspect the aisles, admiring whimsical cereals in tidy boxes, cans of soup lined up like toy soldiers in their red-and-white uniforms, cartons of ice cream in freezer cases, racks of spices and baby food, tomatoes and grapefruits arrayed like cannonballs. Past a checkout counter I glide like a ghost, neither seen nor heard by the lady with the big hair and cat-eye glasses manning the bulky silver cash register, chewing Juicy Fruit, false nails snapping the keys, unaware that she is now grown old, her children married with children of their own, she herself imprisoned in an assisted-living facility somewhere in the low-tax Carolinas.

From Tony's I head down the hill to Noe's, the clothing store at the corner of Main and Rector, where Mom used to buy my brother and me dungarees. As soon as I enter, while the doorbells are still jingling, a rich, chemical scent of un-broken-in denim leaps up my nostrils. There stands Mr. Noe, in shirtsleeves behind the counter, his tape measure draped like a surplice over his shoulders. Mixed with smells of cotton and clothes is that of old wood, along with a faint odor of dust and something like vinegar—the smell of old days.

From Noe's I may make my way down Main Street to the five-and-dime store, or to Mulhaney's, where we used to pinch Matchbox toys, or I may drop in on old man Nelson at the hardware store. Of course they don't see let alone remember me, these ghoulish actors in my lucid dream, or sense my longing to hug them all, like Emily in the last scene in *Our Town*, when she visits her past from beyond the grave.

For the past three years I've been a visiting professor. Last year I was in Georgia, this year in upstate New York. Next year: Florida. Call me a "nomademic." As I write this, my belongings, the few that I need, fill a half-dozen cardboard boxes on the ground floor of the house that came with this latest job. Though for the past year I've referred to it as my home, for a visiting professor "home" is a concept, nothing more. My house isn't my house, my students aren't my students and my colleagues aren't really my colleagues. These things are no more mine than a river one swims across once. Meanwhile, my sixteen-month-old daughter, Audrey, is in Carbondale, Illinois, where her mother is a graduate student at the university. It's been

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over six weeks since I last saw either of them, and longer since I've seen anyone else in my immediate family.

The last time I saw my mother was this past January, when, for the first time in over a year, I returned to Connecticut. Soon after my father died, my mother sold the house in Bethel and bought a condominium in nearby Danbury, at a place called Kenosia Estates, named for the lake that was once home to Kenosia Amusement Park. The park, which opened at the turn of the century and was accessible by a five-cent trolley ride, featured gazebos, a merry-go-round, a horse track, a roller coaster and sail and rowboats for hire. A passenger steamer plied its crystal waters. A grand Victorian hotel overlooked its shores. At the height of its popularity, seven hundred people a day—men in striped blazers and straw boaters, women in knickerbockers twirling parasols—took the twenty-minute trip from town. Though the amusement park no longer exists (its grounds are now occupied by Mom's condo complex), the lake is still there. Soon after my mother moved, against the advice of her new neighbors I tried to swim across it. I got a dozen yards before the weeds stopped me. For days afterward my skin itched. I've disliked the place since, though I'd never say so to my mother, who is adamantly house proud. She never tires of saying to me, every time I visit, "I like my house." (It's *not* a house, I'm tempted to say; it's a *condo*.)

In Bethel we lived in a house, a Cape Cod, halfway up a hill at the far end of a driveway lined with weeping willows, their trunks as gray and wide as elephants. I dream of that house, too, of those willow trees lining its driveway and of the hill behind it, of the woods where my twin brother and I got lost when we were five years old, causing half the neighborhood to turn out searching for us, strangers armed with flashlights, whistles and lanterns (dusk had fallen), while all the time we crouched behind the rotting hulk of what had once been a guest cottage a few steps from the back door of our house.

In my dreams I run a finger along the pickets of the white fence enclosing one side of the yard, at one end of which a mulberry tree grows. The fence's chalky paint leaves the tip of my finger white, the color of the bird droppings that coat many of the mulberries and that used to look to me like cake frosting (I did not test this theory). In a nearby meadow, everything from strawberries to rhubarb grew. There was a slate stone patio outside our grandmother's room. A forsythia bush erupted there, blazing in her window.

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All kinds of things like this I remember. I remember the draw fan at the top of the staircase, next to the linen closet, and the sound it made thrumming through muggy summer nights. My father, an inventor, rigged up a crude timer switch with a pulley wheel for a dial. I used to imagine that a mythical creature, half vulture, half vampire, made its home in the draw fan's louvers (which opened impressively when the fan turned on). Though the switch was off limits to me, I'd still sneak out there in pajamas in the middle of the night and give the pulley a hefty twist so the fan would go all night long, billowing the blue ocean-liner curtains by my bed. Most nights, my mother would wake up and sabotage my mission; I'd hear her open the door to the linen closet (where the switch was), and then the fan would stop, leaving me lying there, hostage to the rasps and chirps of cicadas and crickets. It wasn't just coolness I was after, but the noise of the fan, that rumbling steady rhythm, like the turbines of a passenger steamship. That sound assured me that no matter how hot and humid and long, we'd all get through the night.

But what I most like to remember is riding around in my mother's black Mercury, in the backseat with its scratchy houndstooth upholstery and bulky transmission hump. I remember shopping trips to Danbury, to Genung's, to McRorey's and the Bargain World . . . all those shops fronting Main Street. At the lollipop rack at Woolworth's I'd search for my favorite flavor—root beer—this after gulping down two frankfurters smeared with emerald relish from a stainless-steel bowl while seated on a swiveling chair at the counter. Another store, too, stands out in my memory. I can't remember its name or what was sold there, only it stretching on and on and on, into infinity, obligingly, since like all good childhood things I never wanted it to end, but then it did, though with a free carousel ride that made the end worth it. Then back to Mom's Mercury, which by then would be as cold as a refrigerator or as hot as an oven, depending on the season, and which on the way home made me as seasick as a passenger on the *Queen Mary*.

When I relive such memories, I don't know whether to feel glad or sad, grateful or sorry, cursed or blessed with what seems like total recall. There are days when I miss *everything*, when the innocence, simplicity, continuity and security that I felt as a child seem as irrecoverable as childhood itself. The disease has a name: *nostalgia*, from the Greek *nastas* ("return home") and *algia* ("pain or ache; longing"). In most cases the longing isn't so much for a real home as for one that never existed or that exists only in memory. The term "nostalgia" was originally coined by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss medical doctor, in his 1688 dissertation describing the sometimes paralyzing

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sadness that overwhelmed Swiss university students, domestic workers and soldiers fighting abroad. This undifferentiated longing afflicted its victims' imaginations, incapacitated their bodies and exhausted their "vital spirits." Physical symptoms included everything from loss of appetite to a propensity for suicide. According to Dr. Hofer's thesis, the "nostalgic" suffered from his longing as if from a persecution complex, driven to the very urges that caused his suffering much as a paranoid is driven toward his darkest visions. Ironically, victims displayed a remarkable ability to recall sounds, sights, smells and other sensations with acute and even uncanny accuracy, down to the smallest mundane details—things that most people, experiencing them in real time, wouldn't notice—the better to torture themselves.

In experiments conducted with Swiss soldiers, Hofer found that certain memories were especially likely to trigger nostalgic responses. These included memories of certain tastes and sounds—like the taste of fresh milk or the melodies of certain folk songs. One rustic cantilena in particular was said to trigger nostalgic longings, a tune played on a horn by Alpine herdsmen as they drove their cattle to and from pasture. Known as the "Ranz des Vaches," or the "Kuhreihen melody," when heard by Swiss mercenaries in the service of the king of France it supposedly produced such an intense longing for home that those who heard it were moved to illness, desertion and suicide. So strong was the link between this melody and what the French called *mal du Suisse* that Swiss soldiers were threatened with severe punishment for singing, or even whistling or humming, the tune.

Long before Hofer first described the symptoms, the concept of *heimweh* (homesickness) had already been embraced. In a letter to the Council of Lucerne in 1569, at least one death—that of a man named Sunneberg—was attributed to the phenomenon. As for the cure for homesickness, or *mal du pays*, doctors prescribed everything from purging to opium, leeches and "warm hypnotic emulsions." During the war of Polish Succession (1733–1738), a Russian army officer, disgusted by the number of nostalgia cases cropping up among his soldiers, discovered yet another cure whose dispensation was as cruel as its efficacy was guaranteed: he buried one "nostalgic" alive and promised to do the same to others who complained of the ailment, markedly decreasing its prevalence. A fitting cure, since nostalgia suffocates its victims under a mountain of memories and emotions.

But the most obvious cure for nostalgia was to send the victim home or, short of that, to merely suggest the possibility, as Lieutenant Robert Hamilton, commander of light infantry in the British army's 82nd regiment, learned:

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[The soldier] had now been in hospital three months, and was quite emaciated, and like one in the last stage of consumption. . . . He asked me, with earnestness, if I would let him go home. I pointed out to him how unfit he was from his weakness to undertake such a journey . . . but promised him, assuredly, without farther hesitation, that as soon as he was able he should have six weeks to go home. He revived at the very thought of it. . . . His appetite soon mended; and I saw in less than a week, evident signs of recovery.

My mother is in her eighties but looks younger. She is healthy and spry and has no trouble getting around by foot or car. Left to her own devices, however, she prefers to sit in the dark playing solitaire with the TV on. As Judge Judy chews out her latest shameless litigants, my mother slaps one card after another down on her glass-topped coffee table, all the while puffing like a locomotive. *Snap, puff. Snap, puff.* She claims it's something to do with her heart, some vague undiagnosed condition that makes her breathe that way, though I'm sure it's just one of her slew of pathological habits, like overcooking vegetables and making sure that every cabinet and drawer in her home is brimming while making common household objects impossible to find.

Unlike the house in Bethel, this has never been my house. There's a guest room, and though I'm one of the very few people who sleeps there, it's not *my* room. The handful of my belongings that are still here, old notebooks and such, feel as foreign to me as everything else. Even my dead papa's slapdash oil paintings, which I love so and which line every wall, look strange here and might as well adorn the walls of some barricaded embassy in Jakarta. Not a trace of "home" survives. Meanwhile my mother plays solitaire. *Snap, puff; snap, puff. . . .*

When I can't stand it anymore, I suggest a drive and a walk. It's January; the roads are slick with ice and snow. Still, I insist. *Judge Judy* is over, I say, and we've looked through all the photo albums. My mother gives an extra-loud puff. Why do I want to drag her, an old woman, out into that mess? But I stick to my guns.

"Come on, Mom," I say. "It'll do us both good."

And so we head downtown, to Main Street in Danbury, to where Mom used to park her black Mercury, only now it's my beige Honda Civic. In the old days parking was a problem. No longer, thanks to the Danbury Mall, which as soon as it opened on the former grounds of the state fair turned Main Street into a ghost town. I remember the fair, sandwiched

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there between the interstate and Route 7, across from the local airport, a shoddy enterprise, with its crowded thoroughfares of dust and mud. There was a Dutch village, complete with windmill, and a frontier town, where shootouts were staged. Under the Big Top, farmers showed off tomatoes, pumpkins and poultry. There were Clydesdale horses, men on stilts, polka bands, a lake with ducks and a paddlewheel steamer. But what I remember most were the stock-car races on Saturday evenings. From my house you could hear the engines roar and smell burned rubber. For two dollars each, we'd jam into the stands, me and my brother and Lenny Polis and Victor Virgilio and other kids from the neighborhood. We'd buy boxes of French fries and slather them with ketchup—to eat, sure, but also to hurl down from the highest bleachers onto unsuspecting heads.

I park my Honda in front of the old movie theater, the Palace, where as a boy I watched the Beatles in *Help!* and *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* (possibly the only movie my inventor papa ever enjoyed). The bulky marquee is still there, dented where a trucker misjudged his clearance, as are the framed cases where movie posters once hung, though no movie has played there in decades. Through a crack in the plywood covering the main entrance I peer inside, hoping to glimpse rows of plush folding seats and a grand if peeling proscenium, but I see only darkness.

"*Ma cosa stai cercando?*" "What are you looking for?" my Italian mother says, impatient in coat and gloves. She doesn't suffer from nostalgia.

"Do you remember the last movie we saw here?"

She can't. Neither can I, though for some reason *If It's Tuesday This Must Be Belgium* comes to mind.

From the Palace Theater we make our way north up Main Street, with me poking my head into every storefront, looking for the store that never ends, the one with the carousel. Though most of the buildings still stand, the businesses that used to occupy them have fled, drawn to or chased off by the mall, replaced by Asian and Hispanic grocery stores, thrift shops and stores selling insurance, phone cards, postage stamps and louche women's fashions. A few are empty shells. It's as if one of those neutron bombs hit the place, the kind that decimates populations but leaves buildings intact.

"Hey, look!" I say and point to the pavement. "Woolworth's!" The name's still there, brass letters in pink terrazzo squares. "Wasn't there a policeman's kiosk out here, in front of this store? Or was that further down?"

My mother shakes her head. She can't imagine what I'm up to.

"Help me remember," I say.

"*Ma perché?*"



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“Why not? Don’t *you* want to remember?”

Mom gives me a strange look that I ignore, and then I ask her to name some old stores for me, the ones we always used to go to—I ask this eighty-two-year-old Italian woman who couldn’t remember the word for “pancake” this morning, whose command of English was never so hot and whose vocabulary has started to erode in earnest. I press her a bit, but then I lay off, seeing the aggravated look on her face and remembering the series of strokes that killed my father.

We walk past the former post office, down a side street, past a bar called Tuxedo Junction—formerly the Top Hat Lounge but in any case a dive, with neon beer signs in dark windows. Across the way, lining the parapet of a recently constructed building, a dozen black birds stand like statues; at first I think they *are* statues, until one by one they spread their raven wings, putting me in mind of one of Hitchcock’s least endearing movies. Like crows they are, but bigger, like those half-bat, half-owl monsters that crowd out the artist’s dreams in Goya’s *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. A man in a hooded sweat suit who speaks no English joins us, wondering too about the birds. Nor are the two dozing bums we come upon on the sidewalk much help. “*Dio*,” says my mother, tripping over one, and for a moment I feel as if I’m Beatrice leading Dante down through the crusty layers of Hell.

We’re on our way to a diner. The Holiday. The Windmill. Two Brothers. The Peter Pan: these are all names of diners I recall, though what they have in common, apart from a vague fairy-tale resonance, I have no idea. I’ve long been a sucker for diners, especially the stainless-steel kind shaped like Pullman cars, with their buck-toothed frappe machines, tall ketchup bottles and glutinous pies under glass domes. What I love most about them is that anywhere in America, in the Northeast anyway, I could walk into one and know what I’m in for, that for instance arranged along a phalanx of stools I’d find rugged men in green and blue work uniforms, while across the counter a waitress gripped a Pyrex carafe and wore a pencil tucked behind her ear. The food’s nothing to write home about, but it beats McDonald’s, and anyway you don’t go to diners for gourmet meals; you go for the sense of continuity, to feel at home. I do, anyway.

Once, at the very diner to which my mother and I are presently headed, I encountered love of the sweetest sort—yes, nostalgic love. It came in the form of a waitress whose name reminded me of rain. I saw the name first, on the plastic name tag she wore on her bosom, though I had no idea, would never have known, that this was the very same April with whom I had ridden the school bus in second grade, bus number 9, driven by overweight

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Miss Hatt (“Miss Hatt is fat she’s a dirty rat!”). On the backseat of that bus all through the second grade George and I belted out Beatles’ songs—“Ticket to Ride,” “You’re Gonna Lose that Girl”—songs from *Help!* that we first heard when the movie played at the Palace Theater. We were a hit, George and I, with our twin voices and bold harmonies. April, our biggest fan, always sat nearby. She had a crush on me, or was it the other way around? I can’t recall. But having served me my coffee and a corn muffin she said, “You don’t remember me, do you?” I looked at the name tag again, then up at her. “No,” I said. “I’m sorry.” Then she told me. This must have been ten years ago; I would have been in my midforties. The last time we’d seen each other, April and I had been seven years old (after second grade she transferred to St. Mary’s). Forty years stood between us. How could she have remembered, let alone recognized, me? As I kept looking at her, the memory of April’s face superimposed itself on the present reality until the two images merged. She hadn’t changed. Her hair was still dark and long; she had the same full face, and, though her lips were stingy, her generous smile more than made up for them. I’m not sure what we talked about after that. I guess she asked me what I’d been up to, and I guess I told her. At the time I was still married, still living in New York City, surviving as an artist. I’m sure I painted a much more romantic and successful picture than I might have, my feeble attempts at modesty notwithstanding; and there was April, a waitress at the Holiday (or the Peter Pan, or the Windmill, or Two Brothers) with a pencil behind her ear. She’d been married, she said, and having recently come through a divorce was struggling to make ends meet; hence the waitressing job. I didn’t ask for details. It seemed to me that this moment was like a song, and, like a song, should be short and sweet. I finished my coffee and muffin, and—having debated whether to do so—left a dollar on the table. With a peck to her cheek and after saying, “Take care of yourself,” I left the diner and April and ran through the rain to my car. Did I mention that it was raining?

And now we’ve arrived at the same diner, my mother and I, or what used to be the same diner but isn’t anymore. The stainless-steel sides have been plastered over with rough stucco, while the Pullman-style roof is covered with terra-cotta tiles. Christmas lights are strung along the eaves. A big wooden sign hovers over it: *La Playa*. From two dozen feet away we can hear the music drifting out into the street, along with an odor of fried food. We look at each other, my mother and I. Italians are naturally suspicious of their Latin cousins, especially concerning food and drink, and my mother and I are no exception. It’s a case of familiarity breeding not contempt, exactly,

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but something closer to competition, where authenticity comes into question, along with a dose of chauvinistic pride. Never mind: we're hungry, and here's a place to eat. Yet we no sooner step inside than a wall of greasy air and loud music pushes us away, and so we walk on.

It is now four thirty. Behind the Catholic church's dark witch's hat of a steeple, the sun hangs exhausted and orange. We haven't eaten since breakfast, though I'm not hungry—or I am, but my appetite is for nostalgia. We're on a back street, walking behind a row of stores, behind Genung's—or what used to be Genung's. I recognize it by the configuration of its back doors and am even able to imagine, based on an autochthonous memory, how their handles will feel against my skin when touched, as well as the odor of perfume and soft fabrics, subtle as a grandmother's kiss, that would greet us the moment we entered the place—a soft, luxurious fragrance. There was a time when for me Genung's stood as inevitably for luxury as the Taj Mahal, when I could no more imagine the universe without it than I could imagine the night sky without the Big Dipper. With its glass display cases of glimmering watches and jewelry, its endless racks of dresses, its twirling displays of lipstick and perfumes and women's hosiery extended over three levels (arrived at by means of escalators whose metal teeth would suck me in by my untied sneaker laces and slice me to ribbons if I failed to leap off at the proper instant), Genung's was for this son of an avowed atheist a combination holy shrine and museum to rival the Smithsonian. It didn't matter that the objects on display had little to do with me; they were mine: their shapes, their colors, their folds and textures, the glimmers of jewels and metal, the swirling patterns in a blouse or a skirt, they belonged to me, to my greedy, ravenous senses. I'm reminded of the last time I saw Audrey, my daughter. We were in Carbondale, where we spent time in a big department store not unlike Genung's. I forget what her mother was shopping for. While she shopped we had the run of the place. Audrey was especially taken with the male mannequins, sleek, faceless aliens modeling dress shirts and designer blue jeans. Every time she saw one she'd run up and hug (him? it?) around the knees. That store was more edifying to her by far than the science museum the day before that had cost us each seventeen dollars for admission, and where, within half an hour, Audrey passed out in her stroller.

As for what used to be Genung's, the place (I discover when I try the door, the handles of which do indeed conform to memory) is locked. Where not plastered over with FOR LEASE signs, the once inviting display windows are painted with an opaque substance to prevent curious eyes like mine

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from peering within and seeing—what? An opium den? A bookie joint? A covert surveillance installation?

As children we assume, with a conviction bordering on righteousness, the permanence of things. Whatever touches it, childhood consecrates. How can Genung's have ceased to be? Yet like the Temple of Artemis, it is no longer. The Big Dipper has quit the sky.

Lately I have less and less patience for reading. Novels no longer hold any interest for me. Reading them is like eating cotton candy. Newspapers I rarely touch; magazines are worse. As for nonfiction in general, I've no more interest these days in reading up on, say, the Berlin Olympics of 1936 than in immersing myself in the Codex Theodosianus. The only books that interest me are those with nothing as their subject. Such books exist. Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* is one; so are what Georg Lichtenburg called his "Waste Books" ("*Sudelbücher*"); so is *Efraim's Book*, by Alfred Andersch; so, essentially, are the "novels" of Sebald. To this list I might add Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, though the first is practically unreadable, and time has turned Henry Miller into the great misogynist windbag of modern letters.

Among my favorite books about nothing is one titled *Tsurezuregusa* (translated as *Essays in Idleness* or *The Harvest of Leisure*). Written in the fourteenth century by the Japanese monk Yoshida Kenko, the book consists of 238 essays of various length, arranged in no particular order except insofar as the arrangement pleased its author. It is one of the earliest examples of a genre known as *zuihitsu*, meaning "follow the brush," a metaphor for a stream-of-consciousness technique that not only allowed but encouraged authors to flit randomly from topic to topic at their whim, guided only by the flow of their thoughts. If Kenko's free-flowing book has a subject, it's the awareness of impermanence, or "mono no aware," the melancholy born of the passing of all things:

The world is as unstable as the pools and shadows of Asuka River. Times change and things disappear; joy and sorrow come and go; a place that once thrived turns into an uninhabited moor; a house may remain unaltered, but its occupants will have changed. The peach and the damson trees in the garden say nothing—with whom is one to reminisce about the past? I feel this sense of impermanence even more sharply when I see the remains of a house, which long ago, before I knew it, must have been imposing.

Dr. Hofer was wrong. Nostalgia isn't a disease; it's a symptom of a greater malaise, an unwillingness to accept, let alone embrace, the future.

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Nostalgia isn't merely an "expression of local longing" but a new and disturbing relationship to time or a longing to return to an old relationship. The healthy man, on the other hand, lives in the present with an eye to the future. In pop-psychology terms, he sees the glass as half full; time will fill the other half (and empty it, and fill it again). Whatever has been will be again—in one form or another. This notion of a continuous cycle of birth and death—the concept of "eternal return" or "eternal recurrence"—has its roots in Jainism and Buddhism and other Indian creeds and is usually symbolized by a wheel. In ancient Egypt, the dung beetle provided a parallel if less appetizing metaphor: out of shit comes life, and vice versa. As Kenko writes, "the old leaves fall due to pressure from underneath of new leaves." Nietzsche, who called modern man "a depraved creature racked with homesickness for the wild," addresses the doctrine of eternal recurrence, which he most likely encountered in Heinrich Heine, who offers this description: "Now, however long a time may pass, according to the eternal laws governing the combinations of this eternal play of repetition, all configurations which have previously existed on this earth must yet meet, attract, repulse, kiss, and corrupt each other again."

For the nostalgic, the cycle is broken; the hourglass is cracked. He yearns for its repair, for a slowing, if not a reversal, of the sands. He has no faith whatever in the future's ability to replenish what's been lost to time. If it spins at all, the wheel of life spins toward decay, destruction and doom.

Along Main Street—we're back on the front sidewalk again—all the shops I recall are gone. Feinson's Men's Clothing, Sturdevant's Photo Shop, the New Englander Motel, Buster Brown Shoes . . . What isn't gone appears reduced, the streets narrowed and shortened, inhabited by ghouls. We pass the hulk of the savings and loan where my grandmother kept her money. In that yawning, cool echo chamber, on an octagonal table surfaced with thick glass, she'd fill out a deposit slip (I doubt she ever made withdrawals) and then I'd stand in line behind her in her brown polka-dotted dress as she waited for *her* teller. She always went to the same teller, a short, plump woman with a beehive of red hair, Thelma Dudley—who could forget that name? To reward me for my patience, Miss Dudley would reach deep into her teller's drawer and hand me a lollipop—root beer, if I had my druthers. Then Nonnie and I would cross the street to the New Englander, where, in a restaurant under the main floor called the Mad Hatter, decorated with flocked red velvet fleur-de-lis wallpaper and an *Alice in Wonderland* mural, she would order us each the Salisbury steak, smothered with mushrooms

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and gravy, from the waiter in an ocher Eton jacket and insist that I tuck my *salvietta* into my shirt collar, chew with my mouth closed and sip, not gulp, my water: commands I happily obeyed given the momentous elegance of the occasion. Now that restaurant and the New Englander both are gone, as is the bank. Only their buildings remain, the latter still with its imposingly impenetrable bronze doors protecting nothing but a hollow granite bunker. As for the New Englander, it is now a senior citizen complex called Ives Manor, after the maverick composer Charles Edward Ives, born in Danbury, whose house was moved at great expense from its original Main Street location and now sits on a barren parcel abutting the town playground, its clapboards rotting, its roof starting to sag. The museum society that owns it has been struggling to raise money to repair it, no mean feat in this economy and given that very few people today know who Charles Ives was or would care much for him or his music if they did. So his house sits there, empty and forlorn, not yet a ruin but becoming one.

A few doors past the bank we find an open restaurant. A baize curtain on a brass rod divides the plate-glass window. The restaurant's name fails to register with me. There are three tables inside, each covered by an oilcloth imprinted with a hodgepodge of Italian tableaux, the Rialto Bridge on my end, the Trevi Fountain at my mother's. The place reeks of pizza. We are the only patrons. Over cups of obviously canned soup my mother conducts her own nostalgic inventory, remembering Tripoli, where she was born and where she rode everywhere on the back of her brother's Lambretta, how every kind of fruit grew in her backyard: figs, olives, lemons, dates. It was a sunny landscape unsullied by war, insurrection, hunger, death, disease or despots. She had a pet monkey named Guerlina (Little War).

She tells me not for the first time how her mother was close friends with Italo Balbo, the pilot; how Italian guns shot him down. "They say was accident, but Mussolini, he kill him. And now dey have dat *maledetto* Gaddafi. I hope dey kill him, too." She slurps her soup. In the past she has liked Colonel Gaddafi; she even once remarked to me how handsome he was. She must be in a bad mood. Outside the snow is melting; water drips from the awning. Though the sun is nearly gone, I'm eager to get back to our walk, feeling as if I've walked into my own dream, as if already I'm remembering this moment with my mother in this sad excuse for a restaurant, a moment lived ages ago, in another life, as if my mother is already gone and I am dreaming of her alive and well and here sipping lukewarm barley soup with me, now. I used to have such dreams about my father, years after he died,

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of us together riding up Mount Beacon on the creaky wooden funicular that once led to a pavilion overlooking the Hudson River where people danced, though the pavilion had long since vanished, burned down. Now the funicular, too, is gone. In my dreams I saw the breeze through the open car stirring my father's gray hair, its few remaining strands. That's how lucid those dreams were. It's the same here with my mother right now, though the dream is "real." Still, I have to resist reaching across the oilcloth-covered table, over the Rialto Bridge and the Fontana di Trevi, and taking her hand in mine like a suitor. Though other sons might, I've never done such a thing, perhaps because even at eighty-two my mother is still so much more beautiful than average mothers, let alone grandmothers.

Instead I change the subject. "What about that other store we used to go to, the one that went on forever?" I'm referring to that other department store, the one with the endless narrow configuration that wound its way to a carousel in the back. My mother's gaze drops; while blowing into her by now lukewarm soup, she refuses to make eye contact with me. She's upset, I can tell.

"I no like this," she tells me.

"What, the soup? It's canned."

"No the soup, what you are doing. Dis game! Remember dis, remember dat! What is wrong wid you, Peter?"

"Weren't you just doing the same thing?"

"Is no the same! I am an old lady!"

She's right, of course; it's not the same thing. She's also right that something's wrong with me; there's no denying it. The disease has me in its grip.

"I tink you depressed," my mother decides.

I nod into my soup and own that it may just be the case. She suggests that while in town I could visit her doctor. "Maybe he help you," she says.

So I make an appointment with Dr. Jerome. If memory serves, he always wore a bow tie. His office is on Sandpit Road, in Germantown. What the heck; maybe he'll prescribe me some interesting pills. I go by way of Bethel. It's not on the way; in fact it's in the opposite direction. But there's a breakfast place there, a diner that, if it's still exists, has good corn muffins, and right now I need a good corn muffin no less than I need to see a doctor.

But what I really need, what I'm really after, is to see my hometown, something I've resisted until now. All those places in my waking dreams? I want to see what time has done to them. I can't resist.

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I drive to Bethel, along shady back roads whose names I rehearse along with those of the people I knew who lived on them. Long Ridge Road, Reservoir Street, Saxon Drive . . . At his house on that street, I listened with Billy Norse to the Beatle's *White Album* for the first time and was thunderstruck by "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?"—a good question, I thought then, to which the world offered all too many even better answers.

I drive on. Soon I'm passing Pete Smith's house, or rather the house where he and his numerous brothers and sisters grew up, a disheveled Victorian with a wraparound porch and abundant gables. He was the first of my class to marry and, at twenty-three, have a child (beating me by thirty-four years). The same year he had a child, I wrote my first (bad, unpublished) novel. I remember him saying to me, "Until you have a kid, Pete, you'll never know what it really means to create something." The remark rankled.

I drive on, past tire shop and liquor store, signs of civilization and culture, Bethel style. Soon I'm on Wooster Street, in my old neighborhood, passing Terry Deifendorf's house.

This fall my high school graduating class is planning to hold a reunion, its thirty-fifth. I won't be going. I have an aversion to reunions of all sorts. They're ghoulish undertakings, nights of the living dead. As for the nonliving dead, already several of my classmates have made the transition, including Terry Deifendorf, who, in exchange for ice-cold bottles of Yoo-hoo, would get me to do his paper route for him. Terry, who must have been kept back a grade or two, was two years older than I. His was (is: it's still there) one of those nondescript one-story rectangular tract houses that sprang up all over the Northeast in the mid-'60s, with a one-car garage under one side. In that garage we'd sip Yoo-hoo, and Terry would show off his model Corvette collection. I looked up to him, probably because he was older than I and wore crisp white T-shirts and cuffed Levis. He was, to me, an all-American boy, something I decidedly was not. He'd hand me a stack of the *Bethel Home News* with instructions and send me off to do his route for him. He would let me borrow his bike; in fact, he insisted on it. It was a green Schwinn Sting-Ray with a banana seat, butterfly handlebars and custom extended sissy-bar. On frozen/sweltering days, with his blessing ("Take it easy, Selg,") Terry would consign me to a hell of shabby roads, delinquent customers and fierce, unchained dogs. Once, chased by a rabid terrier, I rode Terry's Sting-Ray into a ditch, scratching the handlebars. Terry's disappointment knew no bounds. "I can't trust you with anything, can I, Selg?" More often, though, he seemed pleased with my performance. "Nice work, Selg," he'd



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say patting my back on my return, and then—like Ali Baba proffering a jewel-encrusted vessel from his cave—hand me a sweaty can of Yoo-hoo from the garage refrigerator. This, along with the privilege of riding Terry’s Sting-Ray, constituted payment in full for services rendered. But my real payment was having Terry like me; it was being embraced—or anyway tolerated—by this all-American boy. Once, when we were horsing around in a dirt lot whose owner had aborted the construction of yet another rectangular house, Terry, popping a wheelie, rammed his Sting-Ray into me. The threaded shaft of its front hub gouged a wad of fatty flesh the size of a garden slug out of my calf. Mr. Deifendorf drove me to the emergency room. I still have the scar, the glossy white ghost of a garden slug.

We used to poke fun at Terry and his passion for Chevrolets. If we so much as breathed a kind word about a Ford, he’d grab us by the scruffs, march us to the nearest Corvette (usually the powder-blue convertible parked in the bicycle-seat factory lot), force us to our knees before its front grill and have us bow and repeat three times, “Hail Chevy! Hail Chevy! Hail Chevy!”

And now Terry Deifendorf is dead. He died about a year ago. I suspect heart issues, since the low-resolution black-and-white photograph accompanying his obituary, which I found online, was of a man whose obesity had done away with his neck, who wore glasses and whose hairline had receded but who was without question Terry (or “Terrence”) Deifendorf and who, the obituary went on to say, had “retired as a captain with the Bethel Volunteer Fire Department” and was the owner of something called “Ironclad Spray-on Linings.” Yet for me Terry remains in his garage, tinkering with his model cars, sipping Yoo-hoos. I don’t want him to have grown up, let alone grown old and died. I want him alive in his T-shirt and cuffed Levis, calling me “Selg” and telling me to “hop on” (or off) his Sting-Ray. In a sense, my survival depends on it. Instead Terry is the one survived: by a father, a wife, a son, a sister, a brother, a father-in-law, a sister-in-law, two grandchildren, sundry nieces and nephews. And now by me. Though I can’t honestly say that I *liked* Terry, I liked him enough to choke up a bit as I sat there, at my computer, my insomnia having woken me at two A.M. It seemed to me suddenly that all the Terry Deifendorfs were dead, popping wheelies in heaven or hell. And so was I; I was dead, too, only I’d been too busy dreaming up this *other* life, the one where by some miracle I remained untouched by time, forever innocent, a child in a world of old, dying and dead men. Let me say it just once: *I don’t want to die.*

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I'm coming up to my old house now, 75-rear (or 75 ½) Wooster Street. The house sits far back from the road, at the end of the long driveway once lined with weeping willows, though the willows, I can see as I drive past, are gone now, every one of them. Before, they would have hidden both the house and the structure at the bottom of the hill that was my father's laboratory. Having turned right up the road of a development that runs parallel to the driveway, I have a clear view of both structures. My father's laboratory (the Building, we used to call it) has been left to rot. Its roof sags, the windows are boarded and what used to be something of a lawn next to it has gone to brambles; the adjoining barn has collapsed. Unlike Mr. Ives's house, it most emphatically qualifies as a ruin. Why this should anger and sadden me I'm not sure, since like many people I usually *like* ruins. I used to especially love the ruins of hat factories that were so much a part of my childhood landscape, with their crumbling brick walls and chimneys. My inventor father and I would go out of our way to explore the ruins of trestles, mills and foundries. On our first visit together to my hometown after her birth, I carried my infant daughter, still in a swaddling blanket, up the steep path to what's left of Hearthstone Castle, the former summer residence of E. Starr Sanford, an affluent New York City photographer. The three-story stone structure once had seventeen rooms, including nine bedrooms, a library, a billiards room and an eleven-foot verandah. The castle produced its own electricity, I've been told. Now it's a ghostly shell on the brow of a hill in Tarrywile Park, taken over by the city, which has consigned it to the forces of nature. Against her mother's better judgment I carried Audrey up there, thinking it might impress her, and though she dozed through the ordeal, *I* was impressed. There is something beautiful about ruins, something melancholy and sublime in how, while disintegrating, they pay tribute to that which no longer is. This is what the artist Piranesi captures so well in his etchings of Roman ruins, the dream of a present in which the past is alive and transparent, heightened and even glorified in its disintegration. The beauty of ruins—and what are memories if not the ruins of experience?—lies in this paradox: that they glorify the past by underscoring its absence. Ruskin, an early advocate for the preservation of ruins, was among the first to appreciate their transcendent power:

A broken stone has necessarily more various forms in it than a whole one; a bent roof has more various curves in it than a straight one; every excrescence or cleft involves some additional complexity of light and shade, and every stain of moss on eaves or wall adds to the delightfulness of colour. . . . This

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sublimity, belonging in a parasitical manner to the building, renders it, in the usual sense of the word, picturesque.

But when the ruin is that of your own past, it's more grotesque than picturesque, and in the rotting hulk of my father's former laboratory I find nothing to admire.

As for the house at the top of the driveway, I'm afraid to look up at it, but do. It's still there. I see the garage where I kept my first car, a rust-bucket MG convertible with four different-sized tires, and the porch where on muggy summer days we ate poached chicken with my mother's homemade mayonnaise as the louvered draw fan at the top of the stairs sucked air in through the screened windows. In winter the porch was off-limits. A rolled towel shoved under its door kept the cold from leaking into the rest of the house. My mother kept the liquor there, ancient bottles of vermouth, creme de cacao and kirschwasser, all wearing furry gray mantles of dust (my parents didn't drink much), and a filigreed Arabian tea set that now adorns my brother's Georgia home, as do most of the good antiques we grew up with. If our mother ventured into the porch on winter days, it was to toss bread crumbs to the wild turkeys that visited her once a day, gathering by the dogwood tree. Now the porch is boarded up with sheets of plywood, the memories of those years boarded up with it. A gutter hangs. The antenna sprouting from the chimney is bent at ninety degrees. The three stately maple trees that engulfed the house are all gone, including one that I made a feeble attempt to cut down with a toy saw when I was five. As for the picket fence leading to the mulberry tree, two-thirds of the pickets are missing. No fewer than five cars sit parked in the driveway. No doubt a commune of paperless day laborers lives here now.

I've seen enough. I pull away, vowing not to say a word of what I've seen to my mother, who would rather not know. It would break her heart. It might even kill her.

I decide to skip breakfast; I've lost my appetite, and besides, I don't want to see the town. I don't care to visit Tony's Food Market, or whatever has taken its place. Ditto Noe's, the five-and-dime, the hardware store. I've had enough of haunting and being haunted. I turn around and head toward Germantown, to the doctor's office. I'll tell him I've been losing sleep (true) and that I've been visited recently by suicidal thoughts (also true, though less so).

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But what really bothers me is the sadness, this crushing weight of nostalgia bearing down on me, dragging me under. At least I assume nostalgia is the culprit, though I may be wrong. Since making my appointment, I came across a newspaper item about a study conducted not long ago by psychologists at the University of Southampton. According to the study, since nostalgics tend to have more positive feelings about their pasts, they feel a greater sense of continuity and meaning in their lives. Nostalgia therefore increases their self-esteem while making them feel more loved and protected. It may even improve physical health. “[Nostalgia] is,” writes theologian and philosopher Ralph Harper, “the soul’s natural way of fighting sickness and despair.” Apparently this is especially so with older people, who suffer from feelings of neglect and isolation. “Nostalgia is now emerging as a fundamental human strength,” the study’s authors conclude. “[It] has an exciting future.”

I’m not convinced. Though it may give succor to the aged and infirm and provide material and inspiration to poets (Rilke continually refers his young poet to the “treasure house of childhood”), for a healthy not-yet-old man, looking backward is about as helpful as looking down is to a tightrope walker. Anyway, it makes me sad.

Though still on Sandpit Road, Dr. Jerome’s office isn’t where it used to be; it’s just down the street, in a shiny new complex of medical office buildings once occupied by a small park, with a shallow wading pool that my mother used to take George and me to. In the sumptuous waiting room there’s a directory on the wall with photographs of all the physicians serving the private clinic. From a distance I try to tell which of a dozen gray heads belongs to Dr. Jerome, but my nearsightedness defeats me. At last I give up and approach the poster to find that my mother’s doctor has indeed grown older, advanced (degenerated?) from middle to old age. I’m reminded of another article I read once about another doctor, Samuel Johnson: how distressed he was when in middle age he returned to his Litchfield roots to find his “play-fellows” all grown old, forcing him to suspect himself of no longer being young. According to the photo at least, Dr. Jerome still wears a bow tie. That comforts me. Forty minutes pass before I’m seen.

“Mr. Selgin—Pinuccia’s son?” Dr. Jerome says, and I nod. He gives me the once-over. “How old are you?” he wonders, squinting.

I tell him.

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“Well,” he says, “for a start I’d say you’re suffering from a serious failure to age properly. Must run in the family. Come with me.”

He leads me to the examination room, where he checks my vitals and where we exchange small talk. He asks me what I’ve been up to. I keep it simple. “You’re the artistic one, right?” he says.

“Something like that.”

“So—what can I do for you today?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I guess I’ve just been feeling kinda crummy.”

“Kinda crummy, huh?” He presses his stethoscope to my chest. “Hmm, I don’t know that there’s any cure for kinda crummy. You sure you don’t have gout? I can cure gout. Or scurvy? Have you got scurvy? I can cure scurvy.”

It occurs to me that a physician who wears a bow tie will crack jokes. I grin and bear it.

“What’s the matter, really?” he says when I barely laugh. “Talk to me.”

“I guess I’m just depressed,” I answer with a shrug.

“What are you depressed about?”

“Nostalgia.”

“You’re feeling homesick? But you’re home now, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I say, “and no,” and I refuse to elaborate. Instead I say, “You know it used to be a disease.”

“Nostalgia? Is that so?”

“Among Swiss mercenaries. They used to bleed people for it.”

“We don’t do that here.”

He tells me to stand. “You have children?”

“A daughter,” I say. “Sixteen months.”

I didn’t plan to be a father. Certainly I didn’t plan to become one at fifty. In fact I’d made the opposite vow: that I would never visit upon my own child the curse of an older father. Don’t misunderstand; I adored my father, who was forty-five when I was born. Yet I suffered from his being older than other fathers, from his unwillingness to throw balls or run or jump into bodies of water. “I can’t; I’m too old!” How often I heard that refrain! Yes, we did other things; we went to museums; we rode the funicular up Mt. Beacon. But I wanted a baseball-throwing father, a father who would be with me in body and spirit. At the height of my frustration I took my silent oath. But passion and biology had other things to say about the matter. And so at fifty-two I became the father of a healthy fetus, one that I begged its mother, over a plate of congealing fettuccini at a tavern in Gramercy Park, to destroy. Outside, it rained. I remember us walking across the park at

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Union Square, her mind firmly made up, my arguments exhausted, sharing an umbrella. I could no more imagine myself a father at fifty-two than I could picture myself walking in space. My biggest worry, apart from financial concerns, was that I wouldn't love this fruit of my own flesh. Suddenly the same future that I'd long doubted and distrusted, that bleary nebula, had hardened into a solid mass sharing my DNA. Not only was I forced to accept it; I had to bear the responsibility for it. When a friend of a friend got the news, she remarked, "I guess Peter finally decided to grow up." In fact, by then I'd resigned myself, but the golf-ball-sized thing growing in my lover's womb was more a cause for fear than affection. I felt not as a father feels toward his child, but as a son toward a father who wields absolute power and authority and whose verdict is final. She (by then we knew it was a girl) commanded *my* fate. Despite all that, I wanted to be a good father and especially to overcome or at least make up for the curse that I'd handed down to her. When she grew up, I promised us both, I'd throw balls, I'd jump into lakes, I'd run and play with her. I hadn't counted on the fickleness of an academic career, on visiting posts spread far and wide or on my partner's determination to complete her graduate degree in poetry at a university in the middle of nowhere, Illinois. I hadn't counted on feeling so cut off—not just from the future but from my past and from myself.

It was around then that I began dreaming of Bethel, of Tony's and Noe's, of a driveway lined with elephantine weeping willows, of the picket fence leading to a mulberry tree.

"Congratulations," says Dr. Jerome, probing my scrotum. "Has she got a name, this daughter of yours?"

"Audrey."

"Like Audrey Hepburn. Very nice." He snaps my undershorts back on.

"She's in Illinois," I say, "with her mother."

"Oh," says Dr. Jerome.

"Mom's in graduate school, and I've got a one-year visiting appointment at Saint Lawrence University."

"I see." He leads me to the scale. "How long since you've seen her?"

"Six—no, seven weeks." A tear tugs at the corner of my eye.

"No wonder you're feeling nostalgic. You must miss her terribly."

"I do," I say—and for the first time I feel the weight of this truth.

"Are you taking anything? For depression?" the doctor asks.

I shake my head.

"Would you care to?"

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"I'm game if you are."

He writes me a prescription for Lexapro, a month's supply.

I still have all thirty pills.

I've been reading up on bioluminescence, the phenomenon of living things giving off light. While the kinds of lights that we normally see (the sun, a lamp, a candle) come from high-density energy sources (heat, in other words), bioluminescence is the product of low-energy systems with no significant changes in temperature involved. The light emitted by fungi growing on rotting wood is one form of bioluminescence; fireflies, algae, bacteria and plankton as well as some types of jellyfish, coral and other invertebrate animals have all been known to generate it. The term comes from the Greek *bio* for "living" and the Latin *lumen* for "light."

This is nonfiction, but it interests me. I'm especially intrigued by something called foxfire, also known as "will-o'-the-wisp," "corpse-candle," "spook-light" and "friar's lantern," the faint glow of light seen by hunters and others who find themselves in the woods after dark, arising from patches of leaf-covered ground or from old stumps and decaying wood. Thought to be supernatural, these "cold" fires were the source of speculation, folktales and myths concerning elves, ghosts and forest sprites. Since the odd light emanated from dying things, before its true source was learned many assumed that the process of decay was the cause, that it was the light of death that they were seeing, the essence of mortality, of impermanence.

Nostalgia gives off a similar glow and may be just as misunderstood, since what gives the past its glow isn't that it's dead or dying but that new things and ideas, new hopes, spring from it. Where I've looked to the future and seen devastation, others see a blooming garden. This is a healthy way of seeing things. Now and then, with Audrey in mind, I have shared this vision, or something close to it, with my daughter as the single bright bloom growing out of a ravished landscape and me standing there holding my little watering can that feels mostly half empty, in search of a spigot or a well, aware that I must nourish and nurture. Though it comes with a hefty dose of anxiety, how can I not be grateful for this image?

Nostalgia is a form of irony (feigned ignorance). It therefore can never be taken at face value. It alters its object; it is not *of* its object, though it is usually confused with its object, *which does not really exist*. I have ceased playing that game in bed at night where I revisit my hometown and haunt my own past. I no longer heed the siren call of that particular Circe's island with its treacherous lullabies. Let the broken hourglass spill its sand!

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At Saint Lawrence, in my library carrel, on the otherwise bare white wall above my computer, I've kept a photograph of my daughter sitting in her little rubber chair. In Old English *Audrey* means "noble strength": what we all need to look forward, to face the future. As for what to look forward to, in a few days, before I pack up and leave here, I'll see her again, my daughter whose face lights my way as surely as any will-o-the-wisp. She is my bioluminescence, and I the stump from which she grows. I'll take her for a walk into town, share a muffin with her at the local greasy spoon, watch with a father's pride as she insists on forcing the blue square peg into the red round hole: so like her papa!

And from now on, when she's not around, when I tuck myself into bed at night, instead of going back to Bethel in my dreams I'll picture the two of us together riding that creaky wooden funicular up Mount Beacon, to that gay pavilion at its summit where, I'm told, people once danced.



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# M E E T T H E A U T H O R



## Peter Selgin

“Unlike that of many writers, my memory isn’t strong. In fact as writers go I may have the worst memory in the world. Part of my need to write, to nail experience to the page, stems from this deficiency, from the need to recover memories, which, after all, form so much of who we are. I think to some extent all writers are nostalgic, but the better ones are careful

not to confuse their nostalgic reveries with the truth and risk sentimentalizing the past. Since this essay addresses the issue of nostalgia head-on, in a sense I get a pass on sentimentality.

“For me those lucid dreams I write about in the essay were a great bounty. And yet by putting me in mind of so much that was lost, they also exacted a psychological toll. Until I began to have them, I hadn’t processed my losses. It never would have occurred to me that Bethel’s streets and stores, the names and faces of kids from my neighborhood, all these things had touched me so deeply. For years I’d been telling myself, ‘You’re a cosmopolitan, a New Yorker. Where you grew up is irrelevant.’

“In part that stance was my way of dissociating myself from the uncomfortable sensation I had while growing up of being an alien in my own backyard. My parents were European immigrants, fresh off the boat, so to speak, from Italy, though they shared nothing of the typical immigrant experience. My father, who came here in the ’30s, earned his PhD in physics at Harvard and within a decade was running the patents division of what was then the National Bureau of Standards in Washington, DC—a cushy job that he shrugged off to become a full-time inventor. He spoke with an Oxbridge accent and pedaled a rusty Raleigh to the post office in a Magoo cap and black knee socks. My mother, on the other hand, had a thick accent and looked like an Italian movie star. *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* meets *Green Acres*. To the neighborhood kids we might as well have been from Neptune. Mine was a happy childhood, but tinged with the sense of not belonging.

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“Much of the essay, by the way, was written in the Danbury Fair Mall, at a dining table near the merry-go-round installed at one end of the food court—one of those settings where, in blocking out all kinds of noise, writers achieve a diamond-tipped concentration. Writers need something to push against. At the mall, I pushed against noise, depression and mixed feelings about what it means to go ‘home.’”

Peter Selgin is the author of *Drowning Lessons*, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction, as well as a novel (*Life Goes to the Movies*), two books on the craft of fiction writing and two children's books. His first memoir, *Confessions of a Left-Handed Man: An Artist's Memoir*, was published by the University of Iowa Press. A recently completed novel, *The Water Master*, won this year's Pirate's Alley/William Faulkner Society Award for Best Novel. His stories and essays have appeared in dozens of journals and are included in several anthologies. A visual artist as well, he has had art in the *New Yorker*, *Gourmet*, *Forbes*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Outside* and other publications. He is the prose editor and co-art director of *Alimentum*, a literary journal devoted to food-themed writing. He teaches at Antioch University's MFA writing program and is Distinguished Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Rollins College.