

New Haven Review

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His Long Game

Rand Richards Cooper

—So, he says to his wife as the boy stomps across the dirt yard, toward the hill that leads up to the Navajo Trading Post.

—We're just letting him walk away?

—Did you see him punch out that window? she asks. —Did you see the look on his face?

—Of course I saw.

The boy puts one hand on the split rail fence and vaults over; up go the Levis—the Levis she patched for him—and down again on the other side. He doesn't look back. Disappears around the garage with that bandy-legged, little man's walk of his, brush-cut head bobbing.

—I'm sorry, she says. —But it doesn't feel right any more. He's so angry at us.

—He's twelve, he reminds her. —No one said it would be easy.

She turns to their daughter. —Laura, honey, she says, put your mittens back on, it's cold.

He inspects the shattered window of the Rambler as their four-year-old croons to her pink stuffed bunny. There's no doubt the boy has a temper, could be a delinquent in the making, if no one steps in. The boy's father is a drunk: he himself has stitched up the man, following a drunken fender-bender. One thing the Public Health Service hadn't told him, fresh from his internship back in Pennsylvania, was that half the tribe were alcoholics. He sees them over in Gallup, where they go to drink off-reservation: whole families standing in empty lots, passing the bottle around, father, mother, sons. A delinquent, because that is normal out here, unless someone steps in.

Slammin' Sammy, he'd started calling the boy—not for his temper, but for golf. A golfer-in-exile himself, he'd tee off from a grassy patch behind the Health Service clinic, with a dry arroyo for his water obstacle and joshua trees for pins. When his balls started disappearing, he suspected the mange-ridden dogs that scavenged

the settlement. But the scavenger was a boy: a boy named Sam, like so many Navajos. He caught him skulking away from the arroyo bed, the golf balls in a paper bag. The boy had clubs too, it turned out—an ancient driver and some rusted irons, one crudely flattened into a putter. He lived in a dingy hogan over the hill behind the trading post. Had never even seen a golf course. *But you should see the swing on this kid*, he told his wife that night. *He's a natural*.

He picks glass from the broken car window. —Ever see his mother? he asks her now. —She's the one with the burns.

—I know, she says. —It's sad. It really is.

Burns are epidemic in the tribe. They build fires in the centers of their hogans, and people fall in. The boy himself always smells of smoke.

—Steve, she sighs. —We tried. It's not working.

Nothing much has worked here, he thinks; nothing has happened as they imagined. Their house a drafty log shack, their daughter always sick, the weather far too cold for Arizona, their cat vanished, snatched perhaps by a coyote. And him doing little more than stitching drunks back together and delivering Indian babies with no more future than mud. That was why they decided to help Sammy. Why sponsor a child in Africa or India, they reasoned, when they could save one right here?

With a whisk broom he sweeps glass from the car out onto the driveway, then into a dustpan. There are things he hasn't told his wife. Like how on the way back from Albuquerque with Sammy—the nearest golf course—he spied a shiny new club in the boy's bag; how, when he turned and drove back to the course, the boy went sul- len, then burst out, flailing and yelling in the parking lot, so that it almost came to blows between them.

His daughter has gotten her mittens back on and is playing with her bunny, wrapping it in a blanket his wife helped her knit. He thinks about how he and the boy grappled in the parking lot, until finally he got him in a bear hug, and the boy calmed down and meekly

did as he was told, bringing the stolen golf club back into the shop and handing it over.

—I don't like giving up, he says, and dumps the broken window glass into the garbage. —Are you sure we should be giving up?

—No, she says, I'm not. I'm not sure at all.

—And you're wrong about one thing. He's not angry at us. He's just angry.

At that moment, up on the hill by the Trading Post, he sees the boy, heading for home.

—*Hey Sam!* he calls out. —*Slammin' Sammy!*

Too far to hear, the boy keeps climbing, doesn't look back.

—I think we should give it one more try, he says.

He sees the indecision on his wife's face and watches the boy climb toward home. He doesn't want him to get over the top of the hill. If he lets the boy get over, he decides, it's done, he's gone, back to where land is so arid you need twenty acres to graze a sheep; where repo men lurk at the edge of the reservation to take back pickup trucks; where people own nothing but their misery.

He goes into the garage. Fetches golf ball, driver, and a tee.

—What are you doing? his wife asks when he comes back out.

—Watch this, he says, stabbing the tee into the dirt. He takes a practice swing, sighting past the fence and up toward the top of the hill. It's nearly two hundred yards, but his long game has always been his strength.

—I'm bringing him back. I'm airmailing an invitation.

—You're crazy, she says, but she's chuckling. —Look at Daddy, she tells their daughter. —Daddy's crazy.

He takes aim above the boy, for the crown of the hill, and as he swings, he's caught up in the gesture itself, in its poetry. Steve knows more than he has told his wife: the two times Sammy has shown up at the clinic, bruised and hurt and cursing his father, and the re- venges taken, the thefts, the fights at the mission school, the fires lit behind the broken-down hogan; he even suspects the boy is behind

the disappearance of their cat. But Steve believes you can save a twelve-year-old. And because he himself is only twenty-seven and has been blessed so far with a lucky life, he cannot imagine how the drive he now hits, lofting toward the hill, might crash to earth in a far reach of his family's future. A burly twenty-four-year-old knocking at their door in Pennsylvania; their teenage daughter missing; a car joylarking into a telephone pole at ninety miles per hour: It hangs out there, a world of grief. But Steve doesn't sense it, not even a shiver. For now, it is a sunny afternoon in 1966, and he is glad to think he and his wife are intervening in a boy's life, without imagining that the boy might actually be intervening in theirs. And so he feels only satisfaction as his perfect drive plunks the hillside not twenty feet from the top and trickles back down; and Sammy, startled, turns and looks, then picks up the ball and starts back down the hill.

Two Poems

Eamon Grennan

Visitors

At first it's a distant persistent barking, like dogs in the city after midnight. Growing closer, a falsetto yapping fills the air until the cold December sky is darkened by them, a hundred or more wild geese on the wing. In one slow glide they are an arc of brown wings down to where I know there's water, a pond paling in late light that will at their landing blacken with floating goose bodies. Out of some northern nowhere they've wind-sailed to settle overnight this station on their way south, a surface that will take their reflections, the eager image of geese that know by the feel of air and tilt of wind the cold season sniffing at them, ice-teeth snapping. Come morning, the pond will be, under blue sky and harried cloud, only a vacant ragged circle of water reflecting blue sky and harried cloud, the sun a blind white eye blazing in it. It will wear an air of bleak abandonment, be a winter feeling that will start from the surface to harden and harden, thickening to its own opaque, glassy silence without them.

In the Known World

Did the heron I saw swimming in the small pond by the highway imagine—long neck erect and puffed wing feathers curled over its bony frame as it moved across the dull gleam of water—imagine itself a swan? It would have been perplexed, so, by how its three-toed feet slid through the heavy element, finding no purchase. Surely, though, the cock pheasant shining out of the undergrowth, its feathers a blaze among pine needle beige, and the silent wild turkey with its tiny grey head and the metallic dazzle of its back, its bent quiverful of chocolate tail feathers, knew exactly who they were and were at home even in the bright electric green patches of our domesticated grass. When I watch such free creatures, or even see our cats as they pause mid-stride as if deciding precisely why they're doing what they're doing, I can't help thinking of the painted ox and mild-eyed ass at the manger, partakers in their innocent bewilderment of mystery, yet each so solid in its own presence, each follicle of what solders them to the air we share bristling with primary information, a grid of what is beyond what any words can manage—each particle fire-tipped, holding its own settled, elementary, vigilant justice.

Home Repair

How our grandfathers knew from furnances

Mark Oppenheimer

During the coldest depths of the winter of 2008, my wife and I would sleep with the dog between us all night, then come downstairs in the mornings, huddled in our bathrobes and wearing two pairs of socks each, the dog trudging mopishly behind, and look at the expensive automatic thermostat that the previous owner had installed in the foyer. The digital number indicating our desired temperature always read the same: 68 degrees. But the number displaying the actual temperature was always below 68, suggesting that the furnace was unable to keep up with this stretch of frigid, near-zero nights. And every morning the actual temperature would be lower than the day before: first it was 66, then 64, and so on, until one morning Cyd and I awoke to find that our house was 58 degrees, ten degrees below where it should have been. Just as troubling, the house didn't get much warmer during the day; we would hear the furnace valiantly boiling water in the basement, and the hot-air vents around our baseboards felt warm, but the house stayed cold.

"Have an energy audit," everyone told us. So we called our local gas company, which sent out a mustachioed man with strange wands that he pointed at windows, walls, and doors to divine where cold air might be seeping in. "Not much seepage at all," he said, sounding proud of us for having such an air-tight house. He put some additional weather-stripping about the doorways, where the doors met the jambs, and recommended that we put plastic sheeting over the windows. "That should help a little," he said, "but really, it's just about as good as it gets right now." That wasn't what we wanted to hear, but I didn't tell him that; I worried that he'd be hurt if I said, "You don't get it—we're looking for an answer. We want something to be wrong, something we can spend lots of money to fix and then have our house be warm."

We bundled up for the next couple days, paid a scaldingly high gas bill, and held ourselves with a general mien of despair. We

figured that as long as the dog and our one-year-old daughter didn't mind the cold—and they didn't seem to—we could just struggle through, and pay our bills, until the thaw. We both knew that there was surely a way out, and that one of our handier, more capable neighbors would have found it by now, but we figured this was the price we had to pay for being ignorant homeowners; my wife, who had grown up in the apartment that her family has inhabited for three generations on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and who thus had no experience of the repairs or home improvement that attend three-bedroom houses, seemed to accept the cold and the escalating utility bill as a tax on her people, the Apartment-Dwelling Jews.

Not long after the gasman's visit, a neighbor stopped by to return a borrowed soup ladle. She stepped inside our front door and remarked on the cold—an impressive feat, since she was leaving a 20-degree outside to come inside. She asked what was wrong, we told her we'd done all we could, we shrugged helplessly. "But have you had an energy audit?" she asked. On being told that we had, she said, "But which kind?"

Nobody had told us that there was the regular audit and the secret extra-super-charged audit, but a week later we were standing outside as a team of men from a special, elite company that the gas company subcontracts with quarantined our house with plastic sheets and tape, like it was some kind of plague-ridden building in an epidemiological thriller. The men backed a truck up our driveway and stuck a Slinky-like rubber hose through a hole left in the front door's plastic, as if to suck out alien microbes. Then, through some process that either involved blowing the house full of air or vacuuming the air out of the house ("Will this suffocate our cats?" I wondered, a bit late in the game, as I stood outside shivering), they set out about to determine whether there really were any drafts. Their machines and seismographs would catch what the lone man with his electric wands had not.

"Not much problem," the main guy told us, as he removed his spaceman helmet. "Pretty tight house. Well built. Not much air escaping in or out." His team unsealed the house with alarming efficiency, rolled up the rubber hose, and drove off to their next job.

I plunged into an even deeper despair. My wife accepted the cold, stoically, as if it was her fate. I was the prisoner undergoing his eleventh hour of torture, and had begun to develop a masochistic taste for the suffering. Surely I deserved it.

A day or two later, as I sat hugging my dog for warmth, a thought occurred to me. "What if," I asked Cyd, "the furnace just isn't big enough? Maybe we need a new one?"

The next morning, I called Tri-City Heating and Plumbing, and that afternoon, a really nice guy named Steve showed up. He was lanky with bright red hair and a rather quiet, equipoised manner. He spoke softly and slowly, weighing his words, as if to avoid misdescribing what he saw or sacrificing the necessary nuance. He poked his head into each room, sniffed around, and then said, "Where's the basement?"

Two minutes later, Steve was back from the basement, holding in his hand what looked like a dryer filter covered with a thick coat of lint. "Here's the problem," he said, triumphantly. "When did you last change your filters?"

He might as well have asked me what breed of unicorn I prefer. "My filters?"

"Yes," he said, patiently. "Forced-air heating systems have filters, so that the air they're sending out is purified. They filter the air coming out of the furnace. You should change them at least once a year if you only have heating, twice a year if you have AC too. But it's best to change them even more often. Your filter, as you can see, is basically completely covered with lint and particles. So even though the furnace was blowing hot air at the right temperature, almost none of the air was getting through. It was getting stopped by your clogged filter. I put in a new one here, and I'll put in another one in

your attic unit that heats the upstairs. But you should go online and buy some. You can get them for a couple bucks each, but I'd recommend getting the ones that cost more like eight or nine dollars. They're better."

All the energy auditors, all the sympathetic neighbors—they had checked for everything under the cold winter sun, but none had thought to ask about my filters. They apparently had all figured that checking them was the first thing I would have done; getting an energy audit without first checking the filters was like calling a plumber without trying a plunger first. Worse—it was like calling a plumber without reaching with one's hand and removing the visible wad of toilet paper your toddler has just stuffed down the toilet. Who would do that? What kind of homeowner would be so ignorant of the basics of his property that he would waste hundreds of dollars, and subject his family to weeks in the bitter cold, all for want of a nine-dollar filter?

I am not handy. I don't know anything about home repair or maintenance, just as I know nothing about car repair or maintenance. (Is the carburetor part of the transmission? What is this "transmission" you speak of, anyway?) I don't know gardening. I have never landscaped. I can't sew, not even a button. I have never changed a tire, although I have called Triple-A. I can't make anything or fix anything. I am so not handy, I am a-handy.

Once upon a time, I didn't care. When I was a younger homeowner, unmarried and living in a condominium that was one floor of a 1890s New Haven brownstone, I took a certain pride in my dilapidated surroundings. The more small holes in the plaster, and the more uneven the paint on the ceiling, the more I felt like a struggling poet on the Left Bank, or like one of Anatole Broyard's comrades who tramp through the Village in *Kafka Was the Rage*. For a time it seemed that I was always reading books that confirmed the romance of being a poor man in the city, too immersed in his reading and writing to notice the anomie all around. Leonard Michaels's

Sylvia was in this regard particularly good for my self-fashioning, as not only the narrator's flat but also his love life was a wreck; it made me proud of all my deficits. I could cook for myself, and I swept the floors regularly—for an intellectual like me, that regimen seemed sufficient. I wouldn't have done less, but I couldn't be expected to do more.

Since that time I have acquired a wife, two daughters, and a two-story house, and while I am rather competent at taking care of the wife and daughters, I have learned nothing about attending to the house. Things come up—a plaster wall begins to buckle, a door swells and needs to be shaved so that it fits beneath the jamb—and what could cost twenty bucks in supplies from Loews and a few hours of my own labor easily balloons to a hundred, two hundred, five hundred dollars, as a professional gets called in. We've only lived in the house for four years, but already my wife and I have had about twenty visits from the handyman. There have been two handymen, in fact, first Vinnie and now Mark, and one of my elder daughter's first attempts at a full sentence was "Mark Steeves hammer! Mark Steeves hammer!"

For a time after we moved into our house, I stayed cool about my ineptitude, figuring that even as I scaled up in square footage I could stay sanguine about not knowing how anything worked. Just because I owned more joists, why should I have to learn the meaning of "joist"? But I have become increasingly aware of how handy some of my neighbors are, and—what's more—how well their handiness works for them. When I think of the men and women on my street who seem to do all their own home repair, I can't dismiss them as all brawn, no brain. The very handy across-the-street neighbor Brad is a high-school English teacher, and his very handy wife, Naomi, is a classical flutist. Jack is a high-school social-studies teacher, and his wife, Michelle, teaches third grade at the school on the corner. ("I'm working on the stairs today," Jack told me, when I was out walking the dog early one Saturday, "and Michelle is re-tiling the backsplash.") Across the street lives Bill, who for many years was a

carpenter for the Yale Repertory Theater—he’s so handy that Jack calls him with questions. Jim and Steve, a quiet, dog-owning couple who also live on our block, have gorgeous, variegated landscaping—poinsettias and marigolds, impatiens and lilacs—and a koi pond in the back yard, and Jim does all the work himself. I am surrounded on all sides by men and women, gay and straight, who build their own decks and rec rooms, solving whatever problems arise in them; garden like pros; and keep the handyman’s phone number as a last resort. I am the outlier; I am the lonely, check-writing wretch.

When I do or say something that puts my deficits on painful display—when, for example, Brad has to stop me from buying a new garden hose by explaining that fixing its leak only requires a new rubber washer, which can be had in a pack of ten for \$1.19—I imagine that people perceive this shortcoming as somehow tied to my profession, for don’t writers live inside their heads? Don’t we lack connection to the physical world? And actually a lot of us do, enough that there exists a sub-genre, the Exceptions to the Rule, writers like Wendell Berry the farmer, Thomas Lynch the undertaker, and most recently Matthew Crawford the mechanic, whose appeal rests not only on his beautiful sentences but also, as he surely would admit, on the rare, macho statement that his writing makes: I can fix a motorcycle and write beautiful sentences about it.

Had my family history been altered ever so slightly, I could have been one of those admirably capable multitaskers, crafting new pieces of furniture and then essays about them with equal aplomb. For I am not from a long line of physically ungifted men. My maternal grandfather, Walter Kirschner, was an able carpenter whose porches, decks, and family rooms still stand throughout the Olney neighborhood on the north side of Philadelphia. He was not entirely self-taught, having taken shop and mechanical drawing classes at West Chester State Teachers College (he always scoffed at its mid-1980s upgrade to West Chester University). But one imagines that he brought more to the classroom than he took away. His final

project, a butterfly-winged cherry end-table of uncommon grace and durability, is in my parents’ house to this day; it’s the work of a young man with real innate talent. By the time he took these classes, however, he was already a father—my uncle Rick had been born in April 1931, eight months after my grandfather and grandmother’s rather ... hurried marriage—and he quickly accepted a job teaching school, leaving little time for woodworking, whether for pleasure or income. The first year he taught, his subject was shop, and perhaps some mathematics (his recollections were inconsistent, or perhaps embroidered), but by his second year in the Philadelphia public schools he was a history teacher, at his alma mater, Roxborough High School.

My uncle Bob was born in 1941, and as the sole breadwinner for a wife and two sons Walter was excused from service in World War II. (Here, too, the story in later years seemed to vary. I once heard my grandfather say something about a spot on his heart, but it must have been a rather benign spot, one that he carried until his death in 2006 at the age of ninety-five.) My mother was born in 1944, and so at war’s end my grandfather had three children to support. Good thing, then, that with the return of millions of GIs there was a building boom. Needing money, still in possession of a full set of carpentry tools, my grandfather placed an advertisement in the Olney Times, announcing his availability for all kinds of small jobs. Somebody called, he drove out, made an estimate, got the job, did a good job. His reputation grew, and he worked steadily for the next forty years.

Later in his career Walter had a partner, Lou Fauzer, and occasionally they would take on another helper or two, but for the majority of his jobs he was a sole practitioner. It was an arduous life. He would leave school at 2:30, go home to his house on Gorgus Lane, change from his two-piece suit into his dungarees, get into the station wagon, be on the job by 3:15 or so, then work until 7:00, returning home for a late dinner with the family, unless the children had been too hungry to wait. Unlike some of the other dads, his brothers

and brothers-in-law, he did not give the children their baths, a typical dad ritual for the time. Exhausted, he would read a little bit of the day's *Philadelphia Inquirer*, then watch a bit of TV, especially if one of his favorites, like *The Phil Silvers Show*, was on. My mother says one of her great pleasures as a little girl was watching her father laugh uproariously at Phil Silvers. In 2003, I met Mickey Freeman, the last living member of that old *Phil Silvers* cast. He was shrunken but merry, and once I realized who he was I felt a surge of gratitude for the pleasure he'd given my grandfather, so achy and tired after a long day of sinking nails, many years before.

My grandfather worked Saturdays, too, until 1971, when he put in for retirement from the public schools. Then for ten years, the best ten years of his life, he carpentered full-time but only five days a week. His children were out of college, he had his public-school pension, and he had more contracting work than he could handle. These were the years when he and my grandmother finally did some traveling—to Europe, Israel, Mexico—although this was more to satisfy intellectual curiosity, to see those places he had read about in the newspapers and in the pages of *The Nation*, than because either of them liked being on the road. They were homebodies, well grounded in their West Mount Airy neighborhood. The travel Walter enjoyed most was motoring on a Sunday to the countryside beyond the urban sprawl, in Bucks County or in the Amish country farther out. He liked other neighborhoods, too, including the one where he did most of his carpentry. Occasionally when I was visiting he would take me on a weekend drive past a job site, explaining as he slowed the car how he was improving the house we were passing. These were modest ranch houses, maybe the occasional Dutch Colonial revival or Cape Cod, sometimes dressed up with a contrasting color of paint lining the dormers. "I'm fixing those steps," he would say, or "Around back I'm putting on a new back porch." Then we would drive off and go to a movie, followed by dinner at Wendy's or ice cream at Friendly's.

My grandfather did not talk about his work as if he were a highly

skilled craftsman. He had accomplished his best and most delicate work earlier in life, and for no money: the furniture he made for class assignments in teachers' college, some copper pitchers that he hammered, and—my favorite—two small woodcut prints on white paper, including one of Walt Whitman in profile, looking like a lion-maned satyr. Matted and framed, they now hang in my mother's dining room. My grandfather was a good artist, and he could have been great. His life story could be written as a litany of what-might-have-beens: he also had a very fine ear for music, but never learned to play an instrument. Still, I do not think he ever regretted the tradeoffs he made. He forewent art and music so that he could support a family. Having married in the depths of the Depression, he stayed married for fifty-nine years, and more if you count the devotion that lasted into his widowhood. He had three children, twelve grandchildren, and more great-grandchildren than he could count. Not so bad for the sixth of eight children born to an illiterate Jewish cobbler who never learned more English than it took to say hello to his scant customers.

My grandfather was industrious to the point of self-denial; he was incapable of spending money on himself, and he only permitted himself a nice house because he could do the work to make it so. He was not a Puritan—he loved a dirty joke—but he had a very old-fashioned, and nonnegotiable, sense of himself as a provider, and once married he would never have stepped out on my grandmother or left the family. He was not very communicative, but he was there, and he paid the bills, and he could fix any leak or mend any breach in the wall, and his family knew that they were safe.

It's common to identify these qualities of industry, abstemiousness, and grateful stoicism with men and women who were young during the Depression. But my grandfather was already out of high school by the time of Black Tuesday and his experience of the Depression was not a child's fear and bafflement but a father's sense of responsibility to do something about this mess. As a teenager he had become interested in radical politics, and now he was a new dad, still without a college diploma, unsure what the future held. He began

to read more deeply in left-wing magazines, and soon he and my grandmother were attending Communist Party meetings. During the 1950s, when some family friends lost jobs during the HUAC witch-hunts, and when a pair of FBI agents appeared at my grandparents' door one day to ask them what they knew, my terrified mother asked her mother, Rebekah, if she and Dad were Communists. "I'm not going to tell you," my grandmother said, "because then if anybody asks, you'll be able to say that you don't know."

I actually am not sure that my grandparents ever really were Communists. My grandfather was one for self-mythologizing. Also, when one stops to imagine how he and the Party would have fit together, it's tough to come up with a plausible scenario. He didn't have much patience for listening to other people talk, and he liked being the smartest, most intellectual person in the room. Could he really have sat patiently in endless meetings, listening to others debate the finer points of the Bolshevik-Menshevik split or Stalin's execution of Zinoviev? Not likely.

But whether or not he ever signed on the dotted line, I do think that aspects of the Party mentality were always discernible in my grandfather. He always prized loyalty, for example, and he did sometimes prize correct ideology ahead of truth. This blind spot had some salutary results, however. Not only was my grandfather progressive on the Negro question way back in the 1930s, because Communists were supposed to be, but he was tolerant of gays and lesbians in the 1980s, a time when most retired, heterosexual septuagenarians still considered homosexuality an unfortunate deviance, at best. It's not that he felt any kinship with the gays, any more than he would have had black friends fifty years before; it's just that he never lost the Communist habit of siding with an oppressed group. He didn't get *The Daily Worker*, and he had long dropped off of any CP mailing lists; his lefty reading consisted largely of Lewis Lapham's essays in *Harper's*. But he knew the Party sided with the little man.

He also had a Communist attitude toward manual labor, and

toward the balance in one's life between thought and labor. Although he never explained it to me this way, I have realized since his death that he must have been cognizant of how perfectly he embodied the ideal proletarian revolutionary. In fact, it's the kind of worker's well-roundedness in which he certainly took a good measure of pride. He divided his days between teaching history to working-class white kids (and trying to slip some class consciousness into his lessons) and working with his hands, building better housing for the masses. His bookshelves were stocked with old radical classics, Steinbeck and Dos Passos and Howard Fast. He was sexually continent but politically adventuresome. If the Soviet Union had been stocked with Walter Kirschners, Communism never would have fallen.

In fact, my grandfather's aestheticizing the carpenter's vocation this way, seeing it as one component of a healthy proletarian soul, would be a good explanation for how he was able to leave it behind. When he retired in the early 1980s, having been hit with an unusual spell of bad health—a heart attack followed quickly by a curable kidney cancer—he retired swiftly, un sentimentally, and for good. He sold his station wagon. He boxed up his tools and delivered them to the Boys' Club, saving for himself only a hammer, a wrench, and a set of screwdrivers. He was still in his early seventies, quickly returning to the good health he would enjoy for another twenty years; he could have become a hobbyist, made furniture, rediscovered his gift for woodcuts. He could have ceased being an artisan and become an artist. None of it interested him. He was done. It always perplexed me that he could slough off a talent like that. But if what drew him to carpentry was, in part anyway, the political statement it made as work, then perhaps it held no appeal as pastime. After all, wood-working as a hobby sounds like an activity of the leisured class, and that was not how he saw himself.

That attitude would explain, too, why he did not bother to teach his children. Uncle Rick, my mom's oldest brother, spent two summers working alongside his father, but when I asked him not

long ago about the experience he said it had been far from satisfying. “He would send me to get stuff at the hardware store, or ask me to hold his ladder steady,” Rick said. “He didn’t trust me to do any real work, and he didn’t have the patience to teach me.” Rick had an aptitude for building things, as did my mother, who almost never got to go along on jobs; Uncle Bob, the middle child, was a bookworm who had little patience for manual labor. But it hardly mattered to my grandfather, since carpentry was not a hobby to be shared with one’s children. It was work, and since Rick and Bob and Joanne would find their own work, well suited to their talents and inclinations, it was of no concern if they couldn’t use a mitre saw.

In fact, my grandfather generally held hobbies in low esteem. To him, they were no better than games, and he hated games—the only thing he wouldn’t do to please his favorite grandson was play cards. He also didn’t go to the beach, or grill meats in the back yard, or join clubs of any kind. These were all markers of middlebrow bourgeois existence. My grandfather believed in hard work, self-improvement, and the appreciation of high culture (he always had season tickets to the Philadelphia Orchestra, as well as several theater companies, and he reserved his highest esteem for the violinist Jascha Heifetz); he did not like small talk or Rotarian bonhomie or voluntary associations. He was not interested in civic improvement, or self-improvement. He was a revolutionary, but as it had turned out the revolution was not coming, so best to just keep one’s head down and do some honest work.

It would be too generous, however, to pretend that this was all personality, no persona. Like just about everybody else in the world, my grandfather styled himself. He wore clothes until they were threadbare, but he knew it: he liked looking too busy, and too indifferent to bourgeois fashion, to shop for something better. (At the same time, he very much enjoyed my grandmother’s beauty and her good taste in dresses; she was a lady, she had her hair set regularly, she wore a tasteful amount of jewelry—she was a catch.) His carpentry, too, was not just a vocation, not just a political statement, but a

form of self-presentation. At his best moments, in his Party days, he must have had a terrific self-image: In a sea of bookish wonks, many of them unathletic yeshiva bochers, he was the lone guy with real proletarian skills. His act was that he was the one who didn’t have to put on an act.

That was his way, and my grandfather never seemed bothered that he had failed to bequeath it to his descendants. Like the Yiddish language in this country, it was a one-generation thing. The carpentry, the handiness: It died with him. His children grew up to become a doctor, a lawyer, and a social worker. His grandchildren include two lawyers, a businessman, a wine merchant, a sexual-health educator, and two writers. I don’t think any of us can fix anything; if one of us can it’s kept pretty quiet. There is no family less likely to make conversation, during a bar mitzvah or a Thanksgiving dinner, about power drills or drywall.

I have to imagine that most of us have learned, as I did in the winter of my freezing-cold discontent, to wish for a little more of the old man’s skill. Being unhandy does not serve one well. One of my brothers has tried to do better. Daniel lives in Austin, Texas, where there surely is more unspoken peer pressure to know how to hang a door than there is in New Haven, Connecticut. Also, like me, he’s a husband and father without much money. So when it came time to paint the nursery, he and his wife painted. When it came time for moldings on the walls, he had a handy friend come and show him how, and they did it together. He’s trying. Meanwhile, I call the handyman, and to make myself feel better I do self-serving, exculpatory math: “This piece that I am working on instead of fixing the screen door, if I can sell it to a glossy magazine, I’ll get maybe two dollars a word, ten thousand dollars—that pays for a lot of handyman time. Even if I sell it to a literary quarterly that nobody reads, maybe that will be five hundred dollars. Why would I fix things when I can write? Division of labor! That’s the ticket. Mark Steeves is good at fixing our house. I am good at writing about why I need him to.

That works out well.”

And it does, but I am not satisfied. It’s not the loss of dollars that haunts my sleep, not even the loss of dignity. It’s the loss of knowledge. Like Yiddish—like communism, for that matter—handiness was powerful. A language offers a particular way to order one’s thoughts; the language that the Jews brought from Eastern Europe inclined them toward a wry, wise, weary melancholy. A political ideology, too, helps construct experience, and in my grandfather’s case it gave him a canon of books, and a whole world of intellectual reference points, that helped elevate his thinking above what his peasant, immigrant parents were capable of. I suppose some people hold every one-time socialist responsible for the crimes of Stalin, and in truth I’d have been pleased to hear my grandfather sound a little more regretful about the years he’d spent apologizing for the Soviet tyranny. But that’s not fair, I think; the movement had given him ideas, it had given him books. That counts for more than those of us raised with literature can imagine.

More than his childhood language or his young man’s revolutionary ideals, my grandfather’s grown-up vocation empowered him every day with a physical, sensible pride in what he could do, and what he had done. He made things that he knew would outlive him: decks, sunrooms, screened-in porches. Writers hope to make things that last like that, but we’re aware that our kind of knowledge is often perilously ephemeral. For proof, look no further than my grandfather’s Yiddish, which is almost gone now, and his beloved political tracts, which championed an ideology now in disrepute; in his lifetime, my grandfather saw how quickly even the most profound and animate words can be rendered impotent, like Golem put to sleep in the attic.

But attics! My grandfather renovated quite a few of those. If he were alive he would drive by them, point from his window, and show you what a man with a little learning and a few tools can do.

My Decade on Broadway

*In a group home, in
New Haven*

David Fitzpatrick

Ten years is a dreadful amount of time to spend cooped up with very sick people, especially if you're sicker than most of them yourself. I know that *mentally ill* is the more accepted term nowadays—the one that NPR uses—but *nuts* or *whacked* seems closer to the bone, to the truth that people feel down deep about those who are unstable.

Or, should I say, the truth that I felt.

Parent's Foundation for Transitional Living (PFTL) is a residential living center in New Haven for those with severe illness. I'm often flustered when I try to describe my decade there to someone who's never been around the psychically wounded. Words like *peculiar* and *crazy* are the first words that come to mind, followed by some perhaps unexpected ones: *helpful, warm, comforting*.

PFTL's two-story red brick building runs for about a half a block, right between some Yale apartments and a church parking lot. When I was there, it was diagonally across from a defeated-looking Shell station and an addict-filled Popeye's; the thriving university was just down the block. The building is divided into a residential living center—the group home—and a supervised apartment program, where clients have their own kitchenettes and are more independent. During my stay, some residents moved out eventually, some disappeared when they ran out of cash, and some decided to stay there permanently. For those paying full cost, it was quite expensive. My ten years there, including medication, staffing, food, lodging, and case management, cost my parents about \$400,000, which didn't include the private psychotherapy.

The residents ranged in age from eighteen to seventy-one, with histories of multiple hospitalizations and, I think it's fair to say, a basic difficulty in adjusting to the world. Some of us were motley, mouths drooling from excessive medication. Others had difficulty

keeping quiet during the voluntary group meetings that were part of the resident and recovery enrichment program, which included horticulture, art, music, and discussions of current events. I learned rapidly that non sequiturs, psychotic rambling, and inspired verbal expositions were a madly popular form of communication around the building. Random, paranoid comments whipped through the air about venomous snipers on rooftops stalking the chosen or telepathic, or female police officers with teeth in their vaginas waiting to castrate clients. Stolen thoughts and hurtling ESP pronouncements ricocheted around the smoking courtyard, during some meals, and during late-night television viewing. Satanic spirits and religious riffs on everything related and unrelated. It wasn't an unusual request for one resident to ask another to please stop coveting his thoughts.

PFTL took me in on a clammy March morning in 1997, after I'd spent years bouncing around mental health facilities throughout the country. Eventually, I was diagnosed with bipolar II disorder—commonly known as manic depression—with hypomania, an avoidant personality, and an anxiety disorder. I'd also developed a brutal obsession with self-mutilation over that time, repeatedly slashing myself with razors. After seven years, I began burning myself with cigars and cigarettes. Earlier in my career, I went AWOL from a Hartford mental hospital, got my head shaved, picked up several packages of straight-edged blades and began slicing. I snuck back onto the hospital grounds and wandered the property, smearing my blood over the statues and buildings. There was a large, ornate, porcelain fountain with cherubs reaching skyward. I climbed it, hung on and screamed into the blackness. It was hellish but also gave me a phenomenal rush. I felt as if I were in a swirling, twisted dream. I know that sounds crazy—it was crazy—but it was the best feeling I'd ever had at that point in my life, and it was what I was shooting for each time I hurt myself in the future. *Carry me back to that fluidity of the dream, I used to muse. Get me back there!*

I was overcome by racing thoughts about cutting, cutting and my blood—the texture, the thick, sticky richness of it. I spent months lusting after a simple straightedge razor. Commercials for Gillette blades—the best a man can get!—would send me into a frothing panic. A year later, after being discharged, I got a room in a swanky hotel in downtown Hartford and brought in two small paint brushes, a plastic drop cloth, some hermit bars, a liverwurst sandwich, and a half-gallon of skim milk. Then I spent five hours slicing and smearing across the bathroom. I wrote giant bloody phrases to amuse an invisible audience: *I BLEED THEREFORE I AM* and *THIS THING CUTS LIKE A KNIFE!* I took breaks and watched *Entertainment Tonight* and the news throughout my night.

At around three in the morning, I panicked, calling my old therapist at his home.

“Christ!” he said. “Are you bleeding badly?”

“Not as severely as before,” I said.

“Just walk out the lobby and go to the Civic Center and I'll have an ambulance meet you there,” he said, “Goddamnit, David. You've got to stop this or you'll die. You're out of control.”

I left twenty dollars and a note on the television for the chambermaids: *Don't worry, I'm basically okay and do apologize for this childish mess. Sorry for scaring you—take care.*

During those severe incidents, I chose to get help, to phone my doctor or walk toward the security guards on the grounds of a hospital when I felt as if I were going to pass out. I didn't let myself drift away. I never intended to die. There's a difference between crazy self-destruction and pining for that total, annihilating blackness, isn't there?

But why did I save myself? I'm not sure. It seems a kernel of hope lingered, remained. Was that spark divine? Did God save me? Did she reach down and deliver me for some reason, some infinite purpose, or is that just my ego suddenly expanding into a Hollywood epic? I mean, who would play me in the movie?

By the time I arrived at PFTL, I'd already had too much

neo-Freudian therapy, shock treatments, and medications. Eventually, I morphed into what I call a professional mental patient, a not-incredibly-rare breed. A careerist. When I was in the role of chronic guy, it was sad and bloody and depressing, and sometimes psychotic, but there was comfort in it. I knew what was expected of me, and I became quite skilled at it.

My early years were good and relatively carefree, save for a physically abusive older brother, but who doesn't have one of those, right? As an eleven-year-old, I also watched my dog get cut in half by an Amtrak train—I remember being shocked, fascinated, and terrified by the lack of blood on Jiggs. Truly, though, the years were good ones, playing little league sports and even being labeled the “friendliest” of my class in the high school yearbook. I left for Skidmore in 1984 feeling excited and anxious about school. Unfortunately, at college, I snuffed my intellectual curiosity with disaffection, marijuana, cocaine, and a little LSD. Hemingway and Updike rescued me at the end, but by the time I graduated in 1988 with an English degree, I was clinically depressed and predictably cynical. I worked at a paper outside Boston for nine months after graduation, writing about holiday decorations, aldermanic play-by-play, gargantuan potholes, and vandalized rose bushes. Just before the paper went bankrupt in 1989, I wrote obituaries, an ironic portent of things to come.

“Hello,” I'd say in my formal voice, as I dialed neighborhood morticians. “I'm calling to enquire about the life of a current client of yours?”

I started mutilating myself in May 1989 after living alone, losing a girlfriend and the job. Mutilation was something I'd never heard of and it came upon me quickly, a thrilling discovery. The first evening I did it, Michael Jordan was hitting a clutch jump shot against the Cleveland Cavaliers. I was watching it on television with the sound turned off. Fats Domino was singing “Blueberry Hill” on an oldies station and I was rereading an old break-up letter from an ex-girlfriend. There was butternut squash with Smucker's strawberry

preserves waiting to be put in the oven. Without much forethought, I sat down at the table and took apart a disposable Bic razor. Then I brought my right hand quickly down on my arms, shoulders, chest, and belly. I did it carefully at first, almost with civility. I didn't want to cause any trouble. Then I started spastically moving around in circles to the music, wiping the blood onto the letter and speaking in a level voice to the invisible girl: “This one's for you, hon.”

Thirty minutes later, relatively at ease, I sat in the bathtub, watching the water grow rosy. My skin stung but I soaped away the mess, cleaned up, and went to bed. That evening, I dreamt of three dung snakes devouring my insides, but the next day, I felt calm, less tense. *I can do this*, I thought. *I can keep this secret to myself*. I wandered through Copley Square for a few days, going to matinees and then coming home and self-mutilating.

I crumbled when I returned home to Guilford for a weekend visit two weeks later. After my father asked me how life was going, I found myself trying to eat my parents' couch in the living room. I remember thinking that if I could just get the whole couch inside my mouth, I could muffle the screams and stop that terrible sound from emerging. It's peculiar what comes back, the tiny things, but for me it was the slightest touch of my nine-year-old sister Julie's hand on my back. “Why is he so sad?” she said to my mother.

Later that night, I was in the emergency room at St. Raphael's in New Haven and the doctor asked me to take off my shirt and soon my father was saying, “Okay, okay now.” I remember the silence, that long pause as they both checked out my body with the various wounds. From there, I was hospitalized for a month and a half at St. Raphael's and discharged, followed by two inpatient stays in the summer and early autumn.

With each cutting spree, the wounds grew deeper and more serious and I grew more determined to damage. Incidents were followed by brutal shame and extra doses of self-loathing. For nine years, from Vermont to Kansas to Chicago, I tried halfway houses, top-tier hospitals, electroconvulsive therapy, and some mediocre

clinics. Eventually, I tried to live on my own back in Connecticut, but only lasted two months. I felt doomed, stupid, and embarrassed that I couldn't stop the mutilation, but at the same time, somewhere in my mind, it didn't feel so far away from beautiful. I was young and sick and I thought I could handle it. I was pretty wrong.

The night before I moved to PFTL in 1997, I sat in a Branford apartment and removed eight cheap Black and Mild cigars from a plastic case. I had started burning a few months before—it was less messy than cutting, showed more control, I thought. (Now available at stores everywhere: smokes! A new and improved way to wound without detection!) I hated smoke, even from pot, and felt the same about cigars, but I learned to enjoy the smell of my skin being singed. My burnt flesh smelled faintly of freezer burn, of danger and dead hair. I decided that ashtrays, generally, maintained good attitudes toward the whole smoking process. They didn't pull away but simply stood their ground.

The next morning, with suitcase and sleeping bag in tow, I rang the buzzer at PFTL with my feet and toes smothered in blisters and Neosporin. I was thirty-one years old and a social worker had recommended PFTL to me, which was a good thing. I didn't have anywhere else to go.

On one of my first days at the home, a large African-American staff person told me and six other men how important it was to scrub our crotches with Dial soap each morning. We had been rounded up and brought into a windowless office just above the kitchen and told how to wash properly. "There've been numerous complaints about malodorous males from guests and some female clients," he explained. "We've gone ahead and purchased soap and deodorant—please, take your pick and get to scrubbing." With that, he offered a collection of Dial and Right Guard deodorant products in a Rite-Aid plastic bag and we passed it around sheepishly. So concluded my first group meeting at PFTL, for daily living skills.

It was dangerous to have the world feel so distant, and all I did

when I first arrived was wallow. The staff tried to cheer me up but my cycle was simple: sleep, medication, therapy, eat, *World News Tonight*, *Wheel of Fortune*, medication. A damp, well-worn couch in the main room was all I wanted. Not a woman, or a book, or an autumn afternoon with rag sweaters and a football game at the Yale Bowl; just the spongy couch with the miniature pheasants scampering across the fabric. I remember lifting my face off that couch and gazing out the first-floor window into the real world zipping past seven feet away. There were honking city buses, cherry-red trolleys, tricked-out Lexuses blasting hip-hop, and untouchable Yalies with their ripe buttocks. There were homeless men in bug-eyed sunglasses and dirty dreadlocks, heaving themselves against broken grocery carts with chattering cans and bottles. Everyone moving right by, not even glancing over. Leaving me and the others behind.

The tricky part about describing my decade at PFTL is that good people—interesting, creative, and talented people—were overshadowed by the more acute, psychotic bullies dominating the place. Yes, there was camaraderie, warmth, and understanding of one another's wounds during my stay. But there were also folks who'd stomp into the main room and inform us that they'd just defecated on the back stairs or did bong hits across the street. (Granted, one might argue that I was just as disturbing to the environment with my self-mutilation.) One evening, during our snack time in the main kitchen, a very troubled, six-foot-three Syrian with wraparound sunglasses tormented a frail fellow from New Jersey.

"You little shit!" he screamed. "End the occupation! Leave Israel or we'll return you to the ovens!"

How do I not describe that? How do I not mention it? I have a great friend still living there, and there were some nights of defiant celebration over illness, some lively moments. But I can't lie. The ten years were excruciating, scary, and hard.

There was a very brave fifty-nine-year-old worker named Daisy, with a heavy Congolese accent, who screamed right back at the annoyingly disturbed when they encroached during meal times.

Bruce, a forty-nine-year-old client who hurt his shoulder attacking a state hospital worker years ago, repeated questions incessantly. One night, he wanted to be assured that his dinner was saved for him.

“They’re saving it, right?” he said, turning back and forth around the doorway. Doing spins on one leg.

“Absolutely, Bruce,” Daisy said, “but you can’t ask me any more—I got mouths to feed.”

“Saving it, right?” he said, twisting around the entrance to the kitchen. In and out, in and out of the doorway.

“You must leave the kitchen, you must leave my kitchen!” she hollered and Bruce, struggling with paranoid schizophrenia, stuck his tongue out.

“Bruce, please leave,” she repeated. Then: “GET OUT!”

At that point, Bruce, who stood several inches below six feet and weighed about 165 pounds, quickly ran across the room and threw a few roundhouse punches, catching Daisy in the side of the head. When she hit the floor, he kicked her legs, screaming her name. I looked around. My peers stared, openmouthed. The meal was burning—I think it was Sloppy Joes—and he was hitting her again. It took me about eight seconds to react but I eventually dragged him off Daisy and threw him on the ground. He quickly bounced up, cursed, and ran away. Ten seconds later he returned and shouted, “Save my dinner, please!”

Another client helped Daisy up, and she plopped down on a chair and held her face. “Ah, the pleasures of working with the infirm,” she said, trying to grin. Her ebony cheek was bruised, her hair as tight and gray as ever. Bruce ended up in the emergency room and Daisy went right on with her shift. We ate quietly that evening, all on edge. Other than the infirm comment, Daisy didn’t talk about it again. I thought that was pretty extraordinary of her.

They held art therapy in a finished, low-ceilinged basement on Saturday mornings. I’m exactly six feet and had to bend over in one section down there. It sometimes felt like I was going to be crushed,

like that subterranean world of despair and malaise had grown so heavy that the building was caving in on us. A crooked billiard table was set against the wall and clients’ artwork hung on a clothesline. Wild, abstract paintings, delicate still lifes of fruit and crucifixes, lonely figures surrounded by black-eyed Susans and bursting, purple daisies dangled from wall to wall. With the hues and shapes being crafted on those mornings, the room transformed itself into a beautiful refuge, a safe nook of color.

I think self-mutilators feel emotionally dead or numb and they hurt themselves to ease their pain, to see that they are alive. To feel anything. Or they have trauma in their past, and they can’t cope with strong emotion, so they wound. Emotional pain is the common thread. But each person’s wounds are specific, each psyche a mishmash of slights, memories, horrors. Some cut, some burn, some break fingers and bones, some punch themselves, some pick at themselves, some pull out all their hair. The list is lengthy.

Cutting and burning myself never brought me closer to that dreamy, brief fugue that I experienced the first time. It also isolated me from those I loved. An old therapist had said that most nonlethal self-injurers burn out of the habit by the time they hit thirty. They move on, they grow up. They find a mate, a passion, a life. I hung on until I was forty. Toward the end of my troubles, I clung to them desperately. It had been who I was for a decade and a half. Where was I to go if not to some new hospital, where I’d meet another collection of tragic, harried women (they were mostly women) who mangled their bodies like me? What would it mean for me to stop?

When they stopped giving allowance money at PFTL, I brought my used CDs to Cutler’s to get cash for implements. After several trips to the hospital with that funding, the home took away my music. When the tunes disappeared, I started trading my books; parting with Freud was a piece of cake but John Cheever and Kate Chopin were painful. I traipsed down to the Book Trader Café with *The Essential*

Book of Poetry beneath my arm.

“You sure you want to unload this?” the cashier said. “It seems like a keeper.”

“You know how the economy is,” I mumbled weakly, ashamed and unable to make eye contact. I have sunk to a new low, I thought, but quickly pocketed the six dollars and hustled over to purchase blades. Then I waited for the precise time to mark myself up.

A doctor with a white goatee and spectacles eventually reached me; a former English teacher, he was a reserved and bookish man who always dressed in linen and earthy colors. I had started seeing him just after the turn of the millennium, and he worked on basic things: my breathing, going for walks, remaining honest. I thought he was nuts.

“You are a blessed man underneath all that fat, medication, and sickness,” he said to me one day.

“Blessed?” I said. “I’m forty, women are repelled by me, I’m obese, and I’m surrounded by nonlinear conversation at dinner.”

“Perhaps, but you have the power to correct your delusions,” he said, leaning forward. “Many people are unable to do that.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to call you Duplicitous Dave for the deception you’ve practiced,” he said. “You’ve got to be aware of when you’re fooling others and when you fool yourself.”

“Duplicitous Dave?” I said.

“Watch how this works,” he said, standing. “You purchase the razors one week before you injure yourself, right?”

“Sometimes,” I said.

“In between that week and the self-mutilation, every time you see a staff member, every time you talk to family, every time you come see me, you’ve lied.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You must see this,” he said gently. “You don’t buy your razors

in a fit of blinding rage. You buy them with a plan. Perhaps you get nuts while you’re cutting, but it’s preventable.” He stopped and sat back in his chair. “Your healing is doable, if you stay honest. Call me about it. Pull aside a staff person and get honest with yourself.”

The last time was Halloween morning, 2005. I had gone to the Shell station several days before and purchased cigarettes. On the way to see my therapist, I stopped and sat on a bench outside of the Yale Law School. I quickly put two packs of Merits out on my forearm. As soon as the first cigarette touched my skin, I knew I was done. No relief or dreamy, stoned groove arrived; just shame, embarrassment. Quickly, for the fuck of it, I mashed the rest of them onto my arm.

Oddly nostalgic as I watched the blisters form, I studied the Yalies hustling to class. They looked determined, voluptuous, and vital. I wondered how many slip through the cracks. How many don’t make it? I got up and walked toward my appointment with my doctor, passing the Grove Street Cemetery. I looked up at the entrance and read the engraving: *THE DEAD SHALL BE RAISED*. A few senior citizens were walking through the cemetery, getting a tour.

It felt as simple and complex as unlocking a sliding, plexiglass door that I’d been trying to slam my way through for many years. As I walked down Grove Street to make the tail end of my appointment, I felt very aware of how rapidly time flew. How much was stolen from me and how much of it I’d wasted.

“You’ve lost another opportunity to right yourself,” my therapist said when he saw my arm. “You’ll have to wait until you’re out of the hospital to prove you mean business.”

He called the ambulance and we waited together for the EMTs. When they arrived, they joked about the Red Sox, quickly dabbing some Bacitracin on me. We walked through the hallway. People stared, then glanced away, ducked back into their offices. I wanted to explain that I wasn’t really a mess, that this wasn’t me. But they’d turned back to their lives, and soon I climbed into the ambulance.

A couple embraced inside a café across the street. The girl's breasts strained against her ivory sweater and the man laughed. They turned and looked my way.

"You having a tough time, pal?" the technician asked me as he strapped me into the stretcher.

"I've been worse," I said. I wasn't hospitalized again.

Positive things became possible, reachable. I volunteered at a neighborhood soup kitchen and then found a job counseling peers at Connecticut Mental Health Center. I moved to the apartment side of PFTL and acquired my own room. I began to shave alone for the first time in thirteen years, without a staff person observing. Taking the blade and using it for how it was intended felt, at first, lascivious, a panicked thrill. It was like I was betraying so many old friends with that act. It took a while for everything to turn, but things do take me a while. A year and a half after burning myself on Halloween, I started looking for new apartments.

I left PFTL on August 10, 2007 and I've only been back to visit twice. There's a feeling of crushing weight when I'm there. It tumbles onto me like a soggy wool blanket, so I stay away. They've fixed up the place nicely, given it a fresh look. Touched up the trim around the doors with periwinkle blue paint. There are new people, new staff, but the longtime folks remain. I have a fantastic friend living there, working through his own struggles. The bottom line, some would argue, is growth. Did I improve there?

"Stop your complaining, why don't you!" I imagine a staff member yelling now. "It worked for you, don't you see? You're out, you're better now, aren't you?"

So I am. Yes, I am.

Three Poems

Stephen Burt

The Soul

Easy to recognize in its costume
made up of Sunday puzzles and Scrabble tiles,

you can take it, but not very far.
Nor can you baste, drip-dry or evaluate

happily what's left when it's removed.

Respectable people have found it in a guitar.
Consider where it lives, or hides, in you.

Backyardigans

To stand in the shoes of a barefoot magenta
alien and a chocolate-snouted moose,
to go nowhere while going everywhere
with bells on, with antlers affixed
to the forehead, to go on a quest for a glass of juice,

to memorize proper and improper
names, Austin, Uniqua, and Tyrone,
as Homer could memorize Nestor
and hence create him, is not to delete
the imagination, but to find its use:

we welcome these musical entities for the same
reasons that we do not need them, because they belong
to the best animators we know, who know
just why the number seven has
exactly as many legs as the number one

and that our children will be leaving soon;
who ask for a plastic shovel and turn
it into a bassoon,
or place a white ball in a black
bowl on a rung inside a log and call it the moon.

Prothalamion with Laocoön Simulacrum

*for the marriage of Amanda Schaffer, science writer, and Dennis
Potami, sculptor*

Everything good is a challenge: your plastic casts
that tax the calmest model, a digital eye
you trained to read the plastic casts, the lithe
and programmed curves by which your software makes
apparent to our analog gaze the myth
of a prophet who told the truth and wrestled snakes.

Today is your handiwork too, and everything flaunts
its goodness for you: you have become your own
informative heralds, supernatural pair
empowered to move us by dozens, friends and aunts
transported where needed through country lanes and midair,
so that it is not even a breach of tone

to speak of you and wish you well past dark.
A marriage, like a body, can be made
in a cocoon or a frenzy, but yours
is not: it is a part-instinctive braid
of space and work that feels nothing like work,
elusive and durable like the dinosaur's

bone in *Bringing Up Baby*, whose principals wrestle
each other, timetables and claims for romantic love—
what it may do and how it might evolve,
how it can climb smooth surfaces outdoors
through microfine adhesions, how to live
as something more than psychological fossils,

advancing always the more persuasive news
that we create each other, works in progress.
So ligaments evolved for us to use
flirtatiously, as a lover might stretch a toe
to touch a lover under a notional table,
a secular altar made of skirts and glass:

there's more of you in love than we can know.
Say love is like a ligament, is able
to bind with more than chemical attraction,
to bend and turn, to take most sorts of stress—
so hard to model, shaped by such selection
to hold you together and take you where you want to go.

Where Writers Live

*The state of the artistic
community*

Mark Saba

One of the most amusing and entertaining books I read as a youth was Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. That Stein wrote someone else's autobiography never mattered in the least to her, for as she explains in the book's closing pages, Alice was far too busy taking care of the house, planning dinner parties, shopping, and gardening to bother with writing an autobiography. Therefore Stein, her soul mate and companion of twenty-five years, would write it for her. She joked that its title might as well be *Wives of Geniuses I Have Sat With*. Stein and Toklas had both sat with many of their era's geniuses: Aaron Copland, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, Henri Matisse, Isadora Duncan. Stein recorded her observations of this tumultuous Parisian artistic milieu frankly and astutely—the rivalries that developed and dissipated among painters and their disciples, the influence that her compatriots in her day-to-day life had in shaping the emerging literature of the twentieth century.

Reading the book, I wanted nothing more than to live in such a time and place, to drop in on a friend and discuss our current literary projects or the latest treatments in our painting. We could throw in a dose of politics, religion, and social problems; talk about how to live and then live accordingly. And indeed, I have been able to find circles of friends occasionally who behave this way, but in the end they had proven to be so eccentric to American society as to evaporate completely from her social fabric, leaving only dying sparks where flames might have been.

When I committed my life to writing, upon graduation from college in 1981, I was fortunate enough to find a place and time to write among friends in the south suburbs of Pittsburgh. Our house, an unkempt English Tudor, was owned by a middle-aged bachelor who had befriended us at our fraternity. He had frequented the

Greek houses to campaign for membership in an honorary organization, Omicron Delta Kappa. Many of our brothers at Sigma Chi became members because of our high academic standing. And so we paid either a very small rent or none at all to pass a summer full of practical jokes, beer, dinner parties, and endless conversation. My duties there (in lieu of rent) included, for the most part, cooking. I also worked evenings as a waiter in a nearby restaurant. Mornings, I wrote.

None of the others in the house wrote, painted, sang, or did soft shoe. One was an accountant; another a dental student. One had majored in psychology; another, in classics. One thing we had in common was laughter. But a group of artists we were not. For all the good times we had that summer and ensuing school year, I felt a profound loneliness living there. Many times during discussions I had with our mentor—a former lecturer in philosophy—I would pose questions about the ideas of beauty and creativity, intuition and knowledge. What I got in return was not a lively and challenging debate, but an eloquent (and very long) monologue of whatever he had been cultivating all those years in his academic head. Never did I find a shred of sympathy for what went on in an artist's head. He just didn't seem to get it. And for all the respect and admiration I had for him and his well-composed dictums, I found none of the solace I was seeking in souls that were more akin to mine.

These days I work as a medical illustrator at Yale University's department of Photo+Design, all day, five days a week. The work is rarely glamorous: Much of the illustration work has dried up due to clients' budget constraints. Pen-and-ink work is, for the most part, gone. The computer offers new creative potential for drawing, but the process remains costly. We spend most of our time printing out large-format posters that clients have produced themselves—many of them garish, unbalanced, and in immediate need of some (any) color scheme. We also produce logos, brochures, and PowerPoint presentations. How do we keep sane?

We are, all of us, artists. We've spent years studying the masters, drawing, painting, taking photographs, observing, reflecting, accepting deviants, being deviant ourselves, craving acceptance, accepting. It's no wonder that we often talk about art, either directly or obliquely, while sitting around the lunch table, walking out the door, or taking a break from our tedious work. Of course, we artists at Photo+Design are also busy all day making a living, a living that makes only tangential use of our talents and aspirations. Most of us have private projects cooking, lifelong pursuits that have lives of their own. Sometimes those pursuits are silent, sitting under a dark shroud in the corner of the attic; other times they consume us with their raucous energy, overcoming not only our lives, but those of our loved ones as well. It can't be helped.

I have never personally known a person whose art allows a fully self-supportive life. Some may be teachers; others have husbands with sizable incomes. Many are lawyers and doctors on the side. The truth is, every time I meet someone who has composed something brilliant from the bottom of his or her soul, I inevitably find out that there has been little monetary gain from it.

If a book has a plot that is the least bit familiar; if a painting has a look that places it somewhere within the Canon of Respected Works; if a photograph can be substituted for one of the many fine photographs on blank, black-and-white greeting cards, then these things may generate income. And within all categories of the familiar there is room to breathe, room for new twists, interesting treatments and brief illusions of originality. But works of true art have always been hard to find, and it's likely they are not all found. It's simply too great a task for individuals, who toil as editors, curators, theater producers, and the like, struggling to stay alive like the rest of us, and blinded by the manna-generating familiar. The great works, those few originals, must pass through many sets of numbed eyes and ears in order to get anywhere, let alone receive any modicum of public recognition. These works are like trick mirrors, pretending to show you what you already know while presenting

unique, multifaceted shapes that have never before been seen. It takes work—constant vigilance and the cultivation of an unaffected mind—to recognize them.

Where, then, might these works of art reside, even flourish?

In its fiction heyday, *The Atlantic Monthly* published 15 to 18 pieces of fiction a year. They received about 12,000 *unsolicited* manuscripts a year for these precious slots. If you think it may be a superhuman task to pick 15 outstanding manuscripts from a pool of at least 12,000, well, you may be on to something.

We are a nation of artists. We paint; we write; we write music; we paint baskets. We find people to paint little birds on our dining room walls. We throw pots, sew quilts, direct mini-films on our computers. And when it comes time to sort out all this artwork, to divide the serious, sacrificial work from merely self-serving entertainment, we find that a good chunk of it falls somewhere in the middle. Masterpieces currently lie hidden behind china closets or backed up on ancient floppy disks in someone's drawer. Who will ever mine them out?

Part of this responsibility, you might suggest, falls on the artist, who is expected to learn the market, to start networking, boldly crashing through one barrier after another with his manuscript, musical score, or painting in hand. How feasible is this? Let us imagine, for a moment, Emily Dickinson mail-ordering six or seven issues of various literary magazines in order to glean which one, if any, might publish poems akin to hers. Or how about Jackson Pollock interviewing gallery owners today, cheerfully holding up Polaroids of some of his works: "You guys show stuff like this?"

Still, you might easily cross paths with one of them. And you can do this quite easily without a marketplace. All you have to do is look for artists, and because they are everywhere, chances are you'll come across something oddly new and interesting from time to time. If you show a genuine enthusiasm and appreciation for the original, it will help propel it to the fore so that others may witness it too. An

artist's work can become appreciated even if the artist is unsociable, a drunk, psychotic, a religious fanatic, bipolar, boring, crass, or downright nasty. None of this matters. And no artist with even one of these qualities should be expected to network or learn the market. It's not gonna happen. Of course, many a contemporary artist will find success by being pushy, searching out influential people, granting sexual favors; but that artist will most likely lose those qualities that make an artist in the process: humility, subtlety, inclusiveness, perspicacity, love. And as a result of losing these qualities, the art will suffer and degrade. Thus no more originality, and certainly no masterpieces.

This difficult, firebrand artistic type is a more marketable commodity in Hollywood films and bestseller biographies, so we tend to have a skewed perspective on what great artists are like. If artists are everywhere, though, it is safe to assume that many are kind and unassuming; it's quite possible that most are. Cézanne spent much of his life in a quiet country home with his mother. Emily Dickinson also took care of hers. Van Morrison has called himself a loner. The list of performers who dazzle on stage but get sweaty palms at cocktail parties is endless.

My next-door neighbor is a composer. We trim the shrubbery between our yards, help each other carry air conditioners up and down steps, and invite each other to dinners, comparing the ethnic foods of our backgrounds. He has taught both of my children piano. Gradually we have come to know one another and our work—not just because we are acquainted with it, but because we appreciate each other's dedication, perseverance, and urgency in producing it. Such trust and camaraderie among artists does not come quickly. It cannot be forced, or orchestrated by a third party. Those involved in the business of creating art do not give up their time easily, and they cherish above all spontaneity and veracity. Human relationships can never be forced, lest they too lack these qualities.

One day I woke up and decided to make a poetry video. I have

never been known to be a movie buff, and others have mistaken the fact that I seldom watch movies to mean that I do not enjoy them. On the contrary, just about every film I've seen has affected me so deeply that I often become incapable of speech, and lose sleep, for several days following viewing it. I remember certain scenes as I remember lines from literature or experiences from my childhood, they have become so essentially a part of me. My decision to make this video rested on the realization that I am somewhat well-versed in both the literary and visual arts. Why not combine the two?

To complete this project, I needed help. Not knowing the first thing about shooting with a video camera or editing, I asked two friends of mine from the workplace, who did this sort of thing for a living, if they would be interested in the project. This was a big step for me, who had never before collaborated on such a personal artistic endeavor. I had asked them to take part not just because we hung out together at work, but because I knew them well enough to trust their genuine creative instincts. They said yes, though they too had never done anything like it.

Since there would be no dialogue in this visual representation of one of my poems, I deemed it necessary to include a soundtrack. At first I considered producing the sound myself, using my son's Casio keyboard, but then, quite wisely, I settled on asking my composer neighbor if he might be interested in getting involved in this thing. He also said yes.

Together, the four of us—a writer-painter, a photographer, a film editor, and a composer—produced a remarkable video that surpassed anyone's expectations by light years. One year after its completion, the young classical trumpeter who played on the soundtrack contacted me to ask if he might include the video in an arts festival he was organizing in Omaha. So there was my little whim playing to strangers in Omaha in August 2005. Through a connection with another poetry video artist I discovered via the internet, my video was shown in September of that year at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The video was named a finalist in a national short film and video competition in Dallas; it toured cities in India as part of the Sadho Poetry Film Fest. And the whole thing came about as a result of one early morning whim.

Art, it seems, will find its own way, regardless of how much, or little, human contact is involved in its journey. There is no controlling it or its inevitable path. Works that are propelled artificially will ultimately drop into the Canyon of The Forgotten, while those that have a kernel of authenticity will eventually be stumbled upon and archived by some stranger along the way who is as passionate as its composer.

Trouble is, we, as artists, need human contact. It is the only thing that informs our work. For while artworks are most often produced in solitude, they overflow with human emotion, emotion that is, as Wordsworth said, "recollected in tranquility." Simply being alive may provide this contact. If I had never fallen in love as an adolescent with a school mate, interacted with a host of characters in my extended ethnic family, witnessed the intricacies of power play at the workplace, or raised two children, I might not have anything to write about.

But we are all muddlers, creating a mess and then trying to get something out of it. The polished pieces that end up on shelves and walls are phonies, slick simulacra of their true messy selves. Living is a delightful mess, and those we bump into along the way of life provide even more. This can be overwhelming for artists, who tend to think and feel in overdrive. We prize spontaneity, but we yearn for some kind of order to sort through so many stimuli. And though many of us must keep to rigid schedules in matters such as day jobs and raising a family, these do not provide the deeper order we crave.

This order is somewhat mystical and fleeting; it is not easily recognized. It has nothing to do with schedules, responsibilities, or appointments. It has more to do with how we uncover mysteries;

how we paint, sing, or write about them. We find this order in the things we create. But we might also find it in interacting with other creators.

The number of artists working in various media these days is astounding and, I assume, continues to grow. And just as the number of humans (and therefore artists) has increased dramatically over the last two centuries, so have our methods of communication. Horse-drawn carriages, telegraphs, cars, telephones, television, and now e-mail and cell phones have allowed the vast human family to be well connected. At this point in history some may even feel too connected. Watching the news has become a theatrical event; e-mail bombards us with hastily written notes, as well as spam; texting is too often a nuisance. For those who think and feel too much, quality communication is prized. We like, occasionally, to have a conversation, face-to-face.

During the 1990s I met many writers at regular meetings in a room at one of Yale University's residential colleges. We came from all walks and corners of the university, young and old, novice and seasoned, quiet and talkative, tired and fresh. We were known simply as The Yale Poetry Group, and we met to read work, raise aesthetic issues, comment, or just listen. The meetings, organized by a professor in the Italian department, took on a Quaker-like atmosphere. The depth and breadth of conversation was determined by who happened to be present. The experience was similar to opening a book: You never knew what you were about to read, or how you might respond to it.

These were the days before Facebook and blogs, before e-mail had become rampant and telephone conversations had been replaced by sporadic texting. Once arrived at a Yale Poetry Group meeting, the only distraction was the conversation that ensued. The group no longer meets, but I have often wondered what gifts it offered, or how that experience differed from, say, the digital discourse of blogs. A blog is by nature a random method of communication.

Tune in, tune out. Follow along or reject. Stumble upon or come directed by a third party. Sounds like the Yale Poetry Group, right?

Hardly. It is difficult to harness writers into a group. We are a diverse bunch; we come individually chock-full of unique life experiences and perspectives, and these influence our writing to such an extent that there can be little common ground. We also think, speak, and behave differently in one another's presence. Could it be called manners? Civility? We take more care when relating our thoughts face-to-face. We use our craft as wordsmiths more wisely, more humanly. Perhaps we become better writers from the experience of devoting real time to meeting other real writers. If we write because we have been so deeply affected by our interactions with others, why not recognize that a gathering of writers, or artists of any kind, will deliver us to even greater depths? We may reach out to one another via many new electronic means, include everyone if possible, but then we should set aside time to cultivate our own ateliers, ateliers with doors always open; conversation fluid, random, and enlightening; free of expectations, but full of the human interaction that engenders art.

Masterpieces may take generations to unearth, but we don't have to wait that long to help each other make them.

Zoning for Clash

*What New Haven can
teach New York*

Alec Appelbaum

Until recently, if you asked me what I did for a living, I would say that I wrote journalism about how to avoid climate change or how to prove that it's real. On the Tuesday after July 4, 2009, I was in New Haven playing hooky from publicists who wanted me to write for the *New York Times* about the Manhattan borough president's upcoming seminar on "How Going Green Can Save you \$\$" and about how some corporate execs had wrangled a deal to install low-wattage bulbs in lampposts near a Manhattan boat basin. Such things are academic now. I knew as I pedaled uphill from Union Station that I was there to address a more elemental question: Now that climate change is upon us, how should we live with it? How can we rig our cities and serve the people in them so that we act more fairly and live more happily than we otherwise would?

The answer is by constantly forcing ourselves to confront what doesn't work in our society, and using this confrontation to take honest whacks at new solutions. This means cramming people on top of each other, inserting proof of civic failure into the view of luxury apartments, putting parks where nothing else can profitably grow, making organic food a pump for creating jobs and limiting sprawl, and forcing people to walk and dance in public whether or not they want to. In other words, by intensifying our cities.

New Haven always registered intensely in my brain—when I walked College Street in September 1989 as a college freshman, and again seven years later when I drove to a rental apartment on Orange Street where movers had already arranged my furniture, on my parents' dime, so that I could pursue an MBA. From the Green you see the storyline the whole city wants to sell: brisk commerce downtown, potent public institutions from the hospital to the train station, academic dignity up Prospect Hill. From Orange and Whitney you see the favors the government gave to Yale by allowing it to eat up a large block with an ugly parking garage in order to advance

the study of science. And you see the failings of all these approaches to lock in equity or growth.

And you could have seen me pedaling through a noisy breeze in July, gliding past 99-cent stores on lower Chapel Street and high-rises on Howe, sensing that a return to New Haven's grid would help me imagine how we can tune our cities' zoning and taxes and politics for climate change.

Stipulate that the world is growing more urban (it is) and that urban forms provide the scale that makes it possible for energy-efficient innovations to succeed (they do). What else can we generalize about how cities "work" that considers their disparities in class, education, temperament, and age? Only that at the margin, each of us changes after seeing things we didn't want to see. And that an environment that forces us to confront those things can make us sharper and fairer and, in the end, happier.

I was in New Haven not only to shuck publicists but also to dispose of a wraith I'd carried for too long: the ghost of an urban planner and guardian angel named Jane Jacobs. Jacobs's 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*—the most revered book ever among urban planners—made it an article of faith among city planners that neighborhoods succeed when a "ballet" of cooperation emerges among people who share a block. The thesis knocked back the onslaught of expressways and severely ugly construction projects in the 1960s. But it failed the bullshit test every day I walked to work. I lived in a cluster of "soulless" brick towers, yet I'd found warm and resourceful community there. And my daughter played with equal affection with her friends in our enclosed playground and in city-owned swimming pools. She and I benefit from being close to people or activities that teach us to be more patient and more visible.

Jacobs associates urban proximity with amusement—"the point of cities," she writes, "is multiplicity of choice." Not so today, if ever. The point of cities has to be survival amid climate change. My neighborhood

stirred me to teach my daughter about charity and patience not because my neighbors and I watched out for each other. My neighbors are a hodgepodge of hipsters, Hasids, public housing tenants, and immigrants from eastern China. I see my daughter's eyes opening as we pass stores selling knockoff dolls and steamed buns and passport photos. It's not adorable. It's hard—but possible—to understand, and it screams with inconsistency.

Jacobs famously recast shopkeepers as "eyes on the street" that twinkle in service of the author's peace of mind. And this notion floats over most civic progress in my hometown: It guided city planners to overlay a pedestrian mall into Times Square and it lets people spurn hospitals or shelters that violate a sense of ballet. Jacobs's name helped kill plans for a tall building the condo sales of which would have financed a new nonprofit hospital near eight subway lines.

When I walked around a New York where rich and poor withdrew to iPods and massages, I felt intensely that a trip to a less cosseted, less adorable city would teach me how brittle Jane Jacobs's thesis had become. To show why her premise has passed its sell-by date, let her speak for herself about migration: "People are accommodated and assimilated, not in undigestible floods, but as gradual additions, in neighborhoods capable of accepting and handling strangers in a civilized fashion."

Our world is and will remain one where your choice in undigestible floods entails whether to surf or soak. In our world, undereducated people are leaving farms and rushing to cities by the billions. Some of the luckiest come to America, where schools and public health services can barely absorb them. And deceit and duplicity now obscure how multinational oil companies and utilities are reaping and wasting fossil fuels in ways that will change all our lives and deaths. Our world is one of undigestible floods, except that the affluent (wearing their iPods) can't hear the waters rising. Immigrants are not a "service," as Jacobs says, but a bloc of people

trying to survive. Urban joy will be a massive ad hoc construction project, not a street-side dispensation of “gradual additions” like so much milk and cookies.

At the time Jacobs wrote *Death and Life*, a screed was probably a wise counter to the monstrous force of Robert Moses. But as the climate changes, Jacobs would need to bargain with Moses. The dictator and the didact would have to collaborate to compel people to use resources efficiently enough to adjust to climate change. To understand how, I wanted to see a city that had not reinvented itself according either to Jacobs’s ideals or to architects’ excesses.

So I sent myself back to New Haven, to face some of the clash that I now think makes cities live.

When people learn to constantly face things they don’t want to see and show things they’d rather hide, the forced confrontation of everyday living impels their common living to become more ingenious, fairer, and happier. Now, I have no scientific support for this contention except this: *The Economist* ran a story over the summer documenting how people in studies turn out happier when they know more kinds of people. And the emerging field of behavioral economics shows repeatedly that people have a sense of what’s fair and try to match what other people do for them. But mostly, this idea resounds with my experience of cities: Developers and governments forcing confrontation are also creating kinds of housing and zoning and policy that seem well-poised to survive and even grow with a changing climate.

How can a city’s policies force exposure? Visually, educationally, spatially, economically. Zoning can oblige people who buy swanky condos to look at factories from their balconies or to walk past soup kitchens (even though Jacobs would call this kind of zoning imperious and a downright bummer), rig schools to cram together kids of different incomes and to cram kids into a space that adults might want to restrict to themselves, tune the tax code to force people who live

differently to live near each other, and place the production of food in the middle of the zones where people consume it.

Due in part to history, in part to zoning, New Haven does, or comes close to doing, many of these things.

Riding around New Haven last July, I coursed streets that would not always pass Jacobs’s muster as “good streets”: they are long stretches at the borders of all neighborhoods, with the Yale campus dominating how the city can flow. This does not create the sort of ballet that made Jacobs’s heart swell, but it forces the exposure I consider vital. You don’t walk out and see the cherubic butcher sweeping the sidewalk while he whistles “O Sole Mio,” but you walk out and see a housing project where nobody should ever have to grow up. You’re awake then. (I don’t mean to glorify the project, only to say that if it exists, it shouldn’t be an island.) The city’s zoning sets small parks rippling through all kinds of landscape, and its aggressive program to build new public schools and renovate the old ones has produced sleek monuments to education in rough neighborhoods. The long boulevards and compact grid force people to confront each other.

For example, by East Rock Park, one of the famously rebuilt public schools anchors a block where a power plant squats on the other side: homely, investment-repellent, but eloquently reminding all merry rowers about how patchy our electricity is in this country, and how it feeds back to the carbon cycle. This power plant reminded me of two ways a city can force confrontation. The first involves how it sustains democracy. A government, if it retains faithful civil servants who work, in place, over decades on principle rather than political instinct, can keep a reliable bead on civic input. And if it invests in savvy citizen-input forums, like New York City’s 311 complaint/question hotline, it can distinguish true citizen griping (the schools need gyms) from industry-funded advocacy for green puffery (the schools “need” wind turbines on their roofs).

New Haven looks like it might do this second bit. Karyn Gilvarg,

the city's long-time planning director, told me: "A decade or two ago, we used to hear from people in neighborhoods about a problem in this or that neighborhood, and we're now hearing from groups of neighborhoods. We're now having quite a lot of activity about how to tame cars, coming across economic lines—from a largely Spanish speaking neighborhood in the Hill and from East Rock."

At the top of East Rock on the day I visited, an African-American family stood without a picnic or balloons, in a tight cluster: A man showed two children where West Rock, West Haven, North Haven, and East Haven bubble up from the ground. "New Haven is big," he said. And it is, but it's not secretive. Everybody knows there's a creek at East Rock and at West River, and that made me feel less like an inductee into a secret club when I crouched beside each one.

A city can also force confrontation by demanding that odd-sized chunks of land remain green. Apartments within walking distance of parkland have sold for premium prices since Central Park was a stable. Today, parkland soaks up carbon, so smart cities put it on top of dead industrial sites. They use nature to spike high real estate prices and to teach people about infrastructure. New Haven is compact enough that everyone can know about the marshes and greens and rocks that define the boundaries.

The killer app of forced confrontation with the natural world involves showing people the costs and inputs of what they eat. City administrator Rob Smuts told me that a vocal local-grub movement has built an infrastructure of farmers' markets and is infiltrating school-lunch policies. I learned much later that New Haven, unlike New York, has purged à la carte junk food from all its grade and middle schools—a hint that kids will have to work harder on understanding where food grows and rots, especially if they're hungry. As I biked, I cared less about godly pizza than about all the evidence I saw of crummy diets, in rich neighborhoods and struggling ones.

My first visit to New Haven set me up for a second, in late January 2010, when I visited the sparkling Christopher Columbus Family

Academy, one of the public schools refurbished through a statewide bond issue. Here was a school a publicist had promoted to me for its beauty that I was visiting in part because of its proximity to bail bonds and phone cards on the streetscape. Faux reliefs represented four winds on the exterior, and inside was a double-height inner courtyard. Columbus seemed like an oasis. School administrator Mike Golia told me the courtyard works as a pedagogical stage: Since the parks department can't "dictate what happens there," he said, it's home to a butterfly garden in the corner, a vegetable garden along the sides, and library and art sessions in good weather.

Yet as I left the building, other buildings across the street broke the lie of refuge: the bail bondsman, the House of Pain tattoo parlor, a bunch of money-transfer places, and vacant lots greeted both the students who came here because they had to and the architecture tourists who came here because they wanted to. The street may have eyes, but it also has clues. It's a classroom for us all, too.

I walked through dainty Wooster Square back uphill on Chapel Street and through Yale's open Phelps Gate. Students were crossing the Old Campus's diagonal paths at 10:25, complimenting each other's earmuffs or questioning each other's reasoning. None of them was staring into an iPhone or tapping out messages with their thumbs. They seemed ready to look up.

We have an obligation to make our mayors, our landlords, and our engineers respond to changes in weather with more agility and collegiality. And that means we collectively have to swallow our fear or conquer it. To conquer it, we need training. We need to become tougher, and we need to become more merciful to the poor. How?

For starters, we can live in a situation that forces us to face our failings, hear our annoyances, relearn what we'd let get vague, and reconsider what we'd concluded. That's what cities have always done, and can do with electronic reach and enlightened design now.

So I believe we should zone for clash. Zone against energy waste by cramming all the schooling, reuse, job training, and living

you can into the areas closest to transit. You will end up with the downtown vibrancy that Jane Jacobs thought she could enshrine as “civilized.” And you may end up with new goods and services to fill the gap in our damaged economy.

Some of the millionaire architects I’ve covered might think I’ve lost my bearings, now that I look for social problems rather than sexy stairways. But others—including, I bet, the designer of Christopher Columbus—know just what I mean. One big-ticket architect told me the most important task his industry can perform is to deliver high-density places wherever transit access seems possible. I’d add the task to make people face what they thought they’d left behind.

Bob Charlatan

Deconstructing Dylan's Chronicles: Volume One

Scott Warmuth

The world luvv to be cheated, but they want to hav it dun bi an honest man, and not bi a hornet and then they never seem to git tired ov it.

—Josh Billings

When Bob Dylan's memoir *Chronicles: Volume One* was

released in 2004 it received overwhelmingly positive reviews.

Dylan's recollections came off as disarmingly personal; the use of language in his prose was said to be as distinctive and captivating as it is in his songs. But over the past several years, in loose collaboration with Edward Cook, of Washington, DC, I have been giving *Chronicles* a closer look. Ed is, among other things, an editor of *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*—deciphering and translating are his business—but he is also a Bob Dylan fan and blogger. In 2006, he first posted about borrowings in *Chronicles: Volume One* from Mark Twain, Marcel Proust, and jazzman Mezz Mezzrow's 1946 autobiography *Really the Blues*; later he posted about borrowings from Jack London and even Sax Rohmer, creator of Dr. Fu Manchu. And together Ed and I have found in *Chronicles* an author, Bob Dylan, who has embraced camouflage to an astounding degree, in a book that is meticulously fabricated, with one surface concealing another, from cover to cover.

Dozens upon dozens of quotations and anecdotes have been incorporated from other sources. Dylan has hidden many puzzles, jokes, secret messages, secondary meanings, and bizarre subtexts in his book. After many months of research my copy of *Chronicles: Volume One* is drenched in highlighter and filled with marginalia and I have a thigh-high stack of books, short stories, and periodicals that Dylan drew from to work his autobiographical alchemy.

To wit: Dylan borrows from American classics and travel guides, fiction and nonfiction about the Civil War, science fiction, crime novels, both Thomas Wolfe and Tom Wolfe, Hemingway,

books on photography, songwriting, Irish music, soul music, and a book about the art of the sideshow banner. He dipped into both a book favored by a nineteenth-century occult society and a book about the Lewinsky scandal by *Showgirls* screenwriter Joe Eszterhas.

In the fall of 2008, while researching what Dylan was up to in a song from his 2001 album “Love And Theft” called “Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum,” I discovered that Dylan has used phrases from the 2000 edition of a travel guide called *New Orleans* by Bethany Bultman. Phrases of Bultman’s, from passages such as “Food is served family-style, dripping in garlic and olive oil,” and “Bands can cost well over \$1,000, and the police escorts and parade permits cost over \$1,500,” and “They’re presided over by a grand female-impersonating queen in a multi-thousand-dollar gown” and more appear uncredited in “Tweedle Dee & Tweedle Dum.” The song alludes to a streetcar named Desire and it uses the Mardi Gras call “Throw me something, mister.” Bits of Bultman’s prose fill out the New Orleans atmosphere in a cryptic way.

Much of *Chronicles: Volume One* takes place in New Orleans and, remembering Ed Cook’s discoveries, I wondered if Dylan’s use of material from Bultman’s book extended to his memoir as well. My hunch was correct. In the memoir as in the song, a number of passages match passages in the travel guide. Dylan, like Bultman, sees “pigeons looking for handouts.” Bultman evokes “the chinka-chinka beat of a live Cajun band,” Dylan “the chinka-chinka beat of a Cajun band.” As a courtesy I sent an email to Cook regarding my findings, since it was his writing that had given me the notion to compare *Chronicles* and *New Orleans* in the first place. His response began with, “I think you’re dead right!”

Early in 2009 an interview with Dylan appeared on his website to promote his album *Together Through Life*. Describing the influence that sideshow performers had on him, Dylan cuts up the sentence, “It is our practice to call someone’s dwarf ‘Atlas,’ his Ethiopian slave

‘Swan,’ and his bent and deformed girl ‘Miss Europe,’” from Susanna Morton Braund’s translation of the satires of the Roman poet Juvenal, and he recasts Juvenal’s characters as twentieth-century sideshow performers. Elsewhere in that interview he says, “Images don’t hang anybody up. Like if there’s an astrologer with a criminal record in one of my songs it’s not going to make anybody wonder if the human race is doomed. Images are taken at face value and it kind of freed me up”—another echo of Braund’s translation, another place where Dylan plays with the notion of what can be taken at face value.

I meditated on the fact that Dylan would engage in such interesting wordplay in something as ephemeral as an interview. There had to be more going on in other aspects of his work and I decided to see if I could find and decipher something that Dylan might have hidden somewhere else.

My methodology took a couple of routes. To sharpen my skills I studied cryptography and puzzle-solving. I explored techniques used by crossword-puzzle champions. *The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography* by Simon Singh I found to be a particularly useful entry point. I keyed in on how code-breakers look for patterns and anomalies, try to find a way in, and then build on their successes. Later I came across a passage in *Chronicles* where Dylan pities producer Daniel Lanois: “I know that he wanted to understand me more as we went along, but you can’t do that, not unless you like to do puzzles.”

Another path I took was to delve deeper into Dylan’s interest in sideshow, which goes back as far as an early interview in which he claimed to have been a carny. I spent months collecting and studying audio and video of sideshow talkers and pitchmen. I went through issues of *Billboard* from the 1940s through the 1960s, reading the columns on carnies, studying the ads. I read books on poker strategy and how to cheat at cards, and I saw how much the world of sideshow dovetailed with other arenas that Dylan has expressed interest in: the worlds of magicians, medicine shows, carnivals, minstrel shows, gamblers, and con men.

At first I didn't know how I was going to be able to apply what I was learning about cryptographers, carnies, and con men to the study of Dylan's work. A way in came when I saw that when writing about the current events of 1961 in *Chronicles*, Dylan calls Hanoi the "brothel-studded Paris of the Orient," using quotation marks but not attributing the quotation. I discovered that the line came from *Time* magazine, March 31, 1961.

A closer look revealed that articles in that issue provided entire passages in *Chronicles*. Dylan adds gags to lines he borrows, riffs off others. Strangest of all, a footnote to an article about Elijah Muhammad recruiting prisoners to join the Nation of Islam that includes, "The pig contains 999 specific germs, is actually one-third cat, one-third rat and one-third dog," turns up reworked as Dylan's snappy comeback to an insult directed at him at a party at Johnny Cash's house in the late 1960s.

When I initially read *Chronicles*, I had found that anecdote about being insulted at Johnny Cash's house to be one of the more compelling tales in the book, and I was amazed to learn how part of it was constructed. After I pieced that together I went looking for other things that might employ the same strategy and it turned out that the book is loaded with similarly constructed tales.

Several anecdotes that Dylan offers are barely disguised rewrites of stories from Gerri Hirshey's *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music*. His puzzling tale of watching Johnny Carson snub singer Joe Tex on *The Tonight Show* in the late 1980s—puzzling, since Joe Tex died in 1982; he last appeared on the show years earlier—was put together from comments that the singer Jerry Butler made, as quoted by Hirshey.

Sometimes what Dylan has done with material from other sources is witty, crafty, and sly. Other times it's just sloppy. For instance, he works in some delicate touches where he recalls his meeting with the poet Archibald MacLeish, incorporating phrases from MacLeish's poem "Conquistador." In the same passage, though, many remarks that Dylan claims MacLeish made in conversation are

lifted from MacLeish's introduction to *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, where Sandburg's own "Notes for a Preface" also appears. Dylan seems to have conflated the two, perhaps flipping pages and not realizing that MacLeish's words have ended and Sandburg's have begun, with the result that the "conversation" with MacLeish becomes a bizarre mix of the voices of both MacLeish and Sandburg.

A close read of *Chronicles* reveals this use of cut-and-paste to be thought-out and deliberate; Dylan demonstrates his knowledge of cut-up technique in the way he employs it. On page 82 of *Chronicles* he writes, "Both Len and Tom wrote topical songs—songs where you'd pick articles out of newspapers, fractured demented stuff, some nun getting married, a high school teacher taking a flying leap off the Brooklyn Bridge, tourists who robbed a gas station, Broadway Beauty being beaten, left in the snow, things like that." These "songs" are actual cut-ups from newspaper headlines ("NUN WILL WED GOB," "TOURISTS ROB GAS STATION," and "BROADWAY BEAUTY BEATEN") that John Dos Passos incorporated into his 1936 novel *The Big Money*, an early example of cut-up technique.

Dylan also states what can be considered a rationale for the inclusion of the appropriated material and his invented tales. In a portion of the book where he writes about an evening spent with Bono of U2 he writes, "When Bono or me aren't exactly sure about somebody, we just make it up. We can strengthen any argument by expanding on something either real or not real. Neither of us are nostalgic, and nostalgia doesn't enter into anything and we're gonna make damn sure about that."

He goes on to tell Bono that if he wants to see the birthplace of America he should go to Alexandria, Minnesota and check out a statue of a Viking. Dylan even provides turn-by-turn directions, telling Bono, "that's where the Vikings came and settled in the 1300s."

What Dylan doesn't mention is that the Alexandria's claim as the birthplace of America is based on a huge runestone discovered there in 1898. It was supposedly left by Vikings, telling the tale of their journey. The runestone turned out to be a hoax, but that is of

little concern to the locals. The people of Alexandria have embraced this story and continue to celebrate it, with both the Runestone Museum and the twenty-eight-foot-tall statue of the Viking. They've even made a nod to the tall tale by naming the statue "Big Ole," after the giant blacksmith from the stories of Paul Bunyan.

I previously referred to what Dylan is up to as alchemy and I believe that is apropos; he frequently takes found materials and turns them into gold. It was Dylan's use of the phrase "alchemic secrets" that led me to discover a hidden subtext regarding charlatan-ism in his memoir. My study of confidence men led me to discover that he too had been studying their tricks and gambits.

When Dylan writes about trying to resurrect his career at the end of the 1980s and revitalizing his music after a period of burn-out, he devotes a great deal of space to a mysterious guitar style and approach to music theory that he claims to have learned from the bluesman Lonnie Johnson. Many musicians have dismissed this part of the book as vague shuck and jive. Trying to actually apply what he writes about requires the broadest guesswork. "In reality I was just above a club act," he confides. "Could hardly fill small theaters. There weren't any alchemic shortcuts—critics could dismiss me easily, too, so I wouldn't be able to depend on them to tell my tale."

But I wondered: Were there any "alchemic shortcuts" that one could use? During my search for the phrase I came across an interesting sentence in Robert Greene's 1998 bestseller, *The 48 Laws of Power*, a modern version of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. His book includes this sentence in Law 27: "The charlatans had begun by peddling health elixirs and alchemic shortcuts to wealth"; that's the only other use of the phrase that I've been able to find.

Law 27 is "Play on Peoples' Need to Believe to Create a Cult-Like Following."

The subhead: "The Science of Charlatanism, or How to Create a Cult in Five Easy Steps."

As I read this chapter in Greene's book I noticed something amazing: Dylan had not only read the book, but had constructed

passages out of material from it, using far more than the phrase "alchemic shortcuts." Here is page 159 of *Chronicles*, in that odd section about music theory:

Passion and enthusiasm, which sometimes can be enough to sway a crowd, aren't even necessary. You can manufacture faith out of nothing and there are an infinite number of patterns and lines that connect from key to key—all deceptively simple. You gain power with the least amount of effort, trust that the listeners make their own connections, and it's very seldom they don't. Miscalculations can also cause no serious harm.

Compare that to this passage from *The 48 Laws of Power*, page 214: "It is often wiser to use such dupes in more innocent endeavors, where mistakes or miscalculations will cause no serious harm." Page 216:

Passion and enthusiasm swept through the crowd like a contagion.... Always in a rush to believe in something, we will manufacture saints and faiths out of nothing.... In searching, as you must, for the methods that will gain you the most power for the least effort, you will find the creation of a cult-like following one of the most effective.

Page 217: "This combination will stimulate all kinds of hazy dreams in your listeners, who will make their own connections and see what they want to see."

It had been ten months since I had passed on the info about the New Orleans parallels to Ed Cook when this started to unravel, and I figured he would be interested in these discoveries. He was, and he generously shared some other material that he had come across in the intervening months. Over the course of the next few months, Cook and I built on each other's discoveries and mapped out much of *Chronicles*. The list of passages drawn from Jack London's writing

alone is twelve pages long with dozens and dozens of examples. Of Johnny Cash, for example, Dylan writes, “Johnny didn’t have a piercing yell, but ten thousand years of culture fell from him. He could have been a cave dweller. He sounds like he’s at the edge of the fire, or in the deep snow, or in a ghostly forest, the coolness of conscious obvious strength, full tilt and vibrant with danger.” Almost every word there comes from London’s story “The Son of the Wolf,” cut, pasted, recast.

Dylan also uses material from London’s letters. In an 1899 letter Jack London wrote, “Thinkers do not suffer from lack of expression; their thought is their expression. Feelers do; it is the hardest thing in the world to put feeling, and deep feeling, into words. From the standpoint of expression, it is easier to write a *Das Capital* [sic] in four volumes than a simple lyric of as many stanzas.” On page 56 of *Chronicles* Dylan writes, “Ray had told me to read Faulkner. ‘It’s hard, what Faulkner does,’ he said. ‘It’s hard putting deep feeling into words. It’s easier to write *Das Kapital*.’”

While reading through London’s letters I came across a passage that touches on one of the issues that certainly might come up when considering Dylan’s free appropriation of London’s writing. In December 1906 London wrote a letter to B.W. Babcock of *The New York Times* that reads, in part,

I think the whole subject of plagiarism is absurd. I can conceive of no more laughable spectacle than that of a human standing up on his hind legs and yowling plagiarism. No man with a puny imagination can continue plagiarizing and make a success of it. No man with a vivid imagination, on the other hand, needs to plagiarize.

London’s own daughter Joan called some of her father’s rationale for lifting large chunks of other people’s writing whole hog as “lame indeed,” but the intervening century seems to prove his point—nobody remembers the people Jack London borrowed from and his works still stand up. In a 2006 essay for the Poetry Foundation, responding to my discovery of Dylan’s use of the words of the

poet Henry Timrod in the songs of *Modern Times*, Robert Polito addressed this topic, concluding that the borrowing “certainly isn’t plagiarism.” He calls Dylan’s samplings “among the most daring and original signatures of his art.”

These signatures abound, as elsewhere in *Chronicles* lines from H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The First Men in The Moon*, and *The Time Machine* make cameos, sometimes with hidden jokes accompanying them. On page 213 Dylan, recalling how he recorded the song “Shooting Star,” writes, “It would have been good to have a horn man or two on it, a throbbing hum that mingled into the music.” He’s echoing *The First Men in The Moon*, where Wells wrote, “Then began a vast throbbing hum that mingled with the music.” On the same page, about the actor Mickey Rourke, Dylan slyly comments, “The movie traveled to the moon every time he came onto the screen.”

At one point Dylan uses the exact same technique that he did in the interview I mentioned previously, where on the surface he was talking about sideshow performers while covertly talking about the poetry of Juvenal. Early in *Chronicles* Dylan writes about acts he had taken in at the Café Wha?: “Another popular guy wore a priest’s outfit and red-topped boots with little bells and did warped takes on stories from the Bible.”

I believe that what Dylan is doing there is writing in code about John Allen, a New York City scoundrel who died in 1870. Luc Sante’s description of Allen in his book *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* includes this passage:

His staff of twenty girls were arrayed in costumes consisting of low black satin bodices, scarlet skirts and stockings, and red-topped boots festooned with little bells. The house featured an additional wrinkle that contributed a certain piquancy: Allen ornamented his facilities with religious trappings. Three days each week he led whores and bartenders in a Bible reading at noon.

Right before Dylan mentions the priest with the bells on his boots he writes about “a guy named Billy the Butcher,” a probable nod to William Poole, a contemporary of John Allen’s, who was known as Bill the Butcher and was the inspiration for the Daniel Day-Lewis character in the film *Gangs of New York*.

Much of the detail regarding Dylan’s early days in New York can be traced back to other sources. There are the aforementioned chunks from Mezz Mezzrow’s *Really The Blues*, a quick flash of Willa Cather’s Greenwich Village from her short story “Coming, Aphrodite!” and many lifts from Kate Simon’s classic 1959 travel guide *New York Places & Pleasures: An Uncommon Guidebook*. Dylan alludes to this prismatic approach when he writes, “There were a million stories, just everyday New York things if you wanted to focus in on them. It was always right out in front of you, blended together, but you’d have to pull it apart to make any sense of it.”

While considering why Dylan might be doing these things I kept returning to a passage where he mentions reading the book *Secrets of Mind Power* by magician and memory expert Harry Lorayne. Dylan writes, “I thought that the book might help me to continue freeze-framing my image, help me in learning how to suggest only shadows of my possible self.” Lorayne’s book doesn’t include anything about freeze-framing, but there is a magician of a different stripe, also named Harry, who had touched on that topic: alchemist Harry Smith.

Smith’s 1952 compilation *The Anthology of American Folk Music* was conceived and constructed as a work of magic. Greil Marcus’s book *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* discusses the collection’s influence on Dylan at length. Dylan in turn mentions Marcus’s book in *Chronicles*. In a 2001 article in the *LA Weekly* Doug Harvey wrote that

some commentators attribute the entire range of social upheavals that marked the second half of the 20th century to Smith’s magic. The most archetypally resonant outcome is Dylan himself, his messianic role in

the counterculture suggesting the possession of some hapless son of a Minnesota furniture dealer by the daemonic entity conjured from Smith’s alchemical machinations.

Harvey adds, “Okay, maybe not” right after that, but I don’t think he was completely kidding. People who are interested in Smith’s work as a musicologist don’t tend to spend much time considering his extensive work in film. Much of Smith’s film work was animation, one frame at a time. P. Adams Sitney, in *Visionary Film*, quotes a 1971 lecture Smith gave: “Film frames are hieroglyphs, even when they look like actuality. You should think of the individual film frame, always, as a glyph, and then you’ll understand what cinema is about.” In a 1965 lecture at Yale, Smith expressed a belief in “an infinite number of universes, each possessing a similar world with some slight differences—a hand raised in one, lowered in another—so that the perception of motion is an act of the of the mind swiftly choosing a course among an infinite number of these ‘freeze frames,’ and thereby animating them.”

In reading *Chronicles: Volume One*, it may be worth ignoring the perception of motion and looking instead at individual frames as puzzles in their own right. While creating what is read as a narrative, Dylan, with all his samplings and borrowings, may have been seeking to freeze-frame his image and suggest shadows of his possible self.

The very first page of *Chronicles: Volume One* refers to *Beneath the Underdog*, the quirky autobiography of jazz genius Charles Mingus, a book that Dylan read from at length, once, on his radio show *Theme Time Radio Hour*. The very last paragraph in *Chronicles: Volume One* includes a chunk of material gleaned from Joe Eszterhas’s *American Rhapsody*.

There are hundreds of hidden hieroglyphs in between.

In the best cons the marks never have a clue that they’ve been played. They may be out a little cash, but they’ve bought into a really

good story and are none the wiser. Dylan's cons are pretty good; it's difficult to catch on to them and no one ends up a victim. I believe this hidden material was meant to be discovered. Now that I am aware of the cons I think of Dylan as a magician. Magicians do what con men do—except that the audience knows an illusion is being created. With *Chronicles: Volume One*, recognizing that illusions are being performed and finding the components and building blocks of those illusions are just the first steps. The real work involves appreciating how Dylan has made these effects magical.

One set of borrowings stands out for me because the subject is intensely personal and Bob Dylan is a very private man. Where he writes, with great respect, about musician Mike Seeger of the New Lost City Ramblers, he has constructed a couple of paragraphs from language in a book for men struggling with substance abuse: *Touchstones: A Book of Daily Meditations for Men*.

Chronicles: Volume One, page 71:

Nobody could just learn this stuff and it dawned on me that I might have to change my inner thought patterns ... that I would have to start believing in possibilities that I wouldn't have allowed before, that I had been closing my creativity down to a very narrow, controllable scale ... that things had become too familiar and I might have to disorientate myself. (Ellipses are Dylan's.)

Touchstones, August 8: "We change our thought patterns when we change activities." *Touchstones*, April 3: "What is faith? It is believing in possibilities." *Touchstones*, July 21: "Sometimes we feel ashamed or frightened by our imperfections, or we strive so hard to overcome them that we successfully close our lives down to a very narrow, controllable scale." *Touchstones*, June 12: "It tells us how to orient ourselves when there are no familiar landmarks and how to learn and grow from the experience."

For many years Dylan has walked out on stage after an introduction that admits he had at one point "disappeared into a haze of

substance abuse" and later "emerged to find Jesus." In relying on the language of *Touchstones* he hints that he has drawn upon Seeger the musician and serious folklorist and Seeger's performances—performances he viewed as "spiritual experiences"—for support in times of great need. I never approached *Chronicles* expecting to find personal revelations from Dylan, but he comes close in his tribute to Mike Seeger, telling two stories at once in a way that is cloaked in mystery, with a barely perceptible shadow.

The masterstroke in *Chronicles: Volume One* is that Dylan incorporated an initially invisible second book beneath its surface. There are jokes and nods, tip-offs to when he is blowing smoke, and commentaries on artifice and illusion. Occasionally he reveals secrets that he might otherwise keep to himself. He opens up about his influences and his methods. His singular, identifiable American voice is actually an amalgam of the voices of so many others.

There is no need to wait for *Chronicles: Volume Two*: It lurks inside *Chronicles: Volume One*.

Sippin' on Syrup

*Swanging and banging to
DJ Screw, Texas style*

Sasha Vliet

Outside Night

The first time I encountered the music of DJ Screw, I was working on an ethnographic project on the east side of a mid-size city in Texas during the early years of the 2000s. I had been spending time with a group of Mexican-American boys who were members of the Outlawz, a local gang, and who were also graffiti artists and breakdancers. For this particular session we had arranged to meet at Cisco's house so that I could accompany them on one of their graffiti nights.

Cisco, almost twenty-one, was a quiet and unassuming kid when I met him in 1997. I was his high-school English teacher. He was extremely smart but older than most of the kids in his class, and he was already losing interest in high school. Because he had been in attendance for my course, and wrote thoughtfully, he passed; but sadly mine was the only course he passed that year. The following year I only saw him in the halls occasionally. He would stop by my classroom when he had the chance, and I would see him at his home, when I dropped by for visits. After all of our concerned phone calls and exchanges, his mother and I had grown close. Weeks would go by that I wouldn't hear a word from Cisco, and then I stopped seeing him on campus altogether. He later explained to me he just couldn't do it.

"You know, Miss," he had said, "no one graduates from that school."

Early on I had been drawn to his talent. His folder for my class was decorated with colorful words, layered, stretched out, and angled in abstract shapes. I had seen some of the pieces he started in his art class but never had the chance to finish. I had hoped he would hang on to his interest in molding and shaping, design and craft, even outside of school. I thought maybe that art would get him

out of the east side, even though Cisco never claimed to want to be anywhere other than where he was—with his family and friends.

Cisco and I sat on the front steps of the house, waiting for the rest of the crew to arrive. One by one, the boys pulled up in their low riders and parked, making a line of color and chrome that ran the length of the block. They sat in their idling cars with the engines rumbling a bit husky. Heavy bass beats kicked out from the windows, topped by the droning, sliding rap vocals. I asked Cisco what they were listening to. I had heard this type of music coming from the cars in the parking lot of the high school where I had worked, but I had never been close enough to pick up on the distinct style of this particular artist. It had always just sounded like a blur of bass and mumblings—not like other rap.

“That’s screw,” Cisco said, “we be banging that shit all the time.”

Cisco got up and walked towards one of the cars, motioning for me to follow.

“Let’s ride,” he said.

I knew that they did their graffiti work in the quiet of the night, under the careful watch of friends who paid close attention to the headlights of oncoming cars and unfamiliar sounds of the street. The sun was going down. It was time to get started.

Cisco walked over to a group of boys standing around one of the cars and gave each friend a single-armed hug. After each quick embrace the boys put their fists out and Cisco bumped the top of each one with his own. He introduced me to Tony, the driver of one of the cars, and I nodded at the rest of the boys, some of whom I knew from previous meetings. Cisco’s cousin Santos, his brother Fredo, and I were to ride along with Cisco and Tony this night. The other boys hung back as we climbed into the car, standing in Cisco’s yard with their jeans hanging low around their waists, the pant legs covering the tops of their shoes, their white shirts stark and vivid in the twilight. They gave their wave as we pulled away, their forefingers and thumbs curved into an *O*, their other fingers jutting out straight, linked like *Zs*.

In the car, Tony turned the music up loud enough that any attempts at conversation were futile. We drove for a couple of hours before Fredo and Cisco were to paint, stopping every so often in parking lots or in front of homes, the boys exchanging greetings with others at each place. I sat in the back in between Santos and Fredo, who were slouched down low in their seats with their legs opened wide and their knees pushed up against the backs of the front seats. Tony and Cisco were in the front seat, passing a two-liter bottle of purplish drink back and forth. Each of them took small sips from the bottle and held the liquid in their mouths for several seconds before they swallowed. Cisco pulled two Jolly Ranchers from his pocket, unwrapped them, and dropped them into the bottle.

The music, by DJ Screw, was rolling around the inside of the car like a thick molasses, slow, heavy, punctuated with a lazy bass line. It sounded like a record played on the wrong speed—off, warbled, almost morose.

“What’s up with his voice?” I yelled to Fredo early on in the night, referring to the rapper.

Fredo smiled sleepily, reaching toward the front seat for the blunt that Tony offered. He took a long, steady drag and held his breath for a time, making half-sneezing noises from the back of his nose.

“Ahh, shit,” he sighed, letting out his air in a cloud of smoke, “ain’t nothin’ wrong. That shit’s just screwed up.”

His Own Way

DJ Screw, also known as Robert Earl Davis, Jr., was, according to writer Michael Hall, “one of the most influential musical figures to come out of Texas in the last decade.” DJ Screw was not a musician, exactly, but until his death of a codeine overdose on November 15, 2000, he was an artist—using turntables and samplers to bring together bass lines, melody, hooks, and raps from other artists, to make a slowed down and manipulated new product. He recorded

these songs onto cassette tapes and CDs and sold them himself to thousands of people. Fans would drive hundreds of miles and park outside of his house in Houston just to buy the newest version. And what began as a small basement project turned into a social and musical phenomenon.

If rap and hip-hop are postmodern forms of music, bringing together elements of several genres and eras of musical tradition to create what hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose calls a “tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural and political issues in contemporary American society,” then DJ Screw’s music could be defined as a post-postmodern musical form. It is a running together, a breaking up, a transformation of a music that was built on a commingling collage of black cultural expression, to create a distorted, redefined essence, one that takes away the catchiness and predictability of the original form.

In an article in *Texas Monthly*, Hall describes the way in which Screw’s music derails the “flights of beat fancy” of rap and hip-hop. Screw’s music forces the listener to stop anticipating the movement of the music and to sit back and let the music unwind in its slow and strange way. It is almost as if Screw gives the listener permission to stop thinking, moving, feeling, and allows them simply “to be”—present, in a disengaged kind of way. To DJ Screw’s fans, the opportunity to be in this state seems to be a most desirable one. In this way, a delicate and trusting relationship between the listener and the DJ evolves.

Many of DJ Screw’s fans are young black and Mexican-American males who feel they can relate to his background. They value him for his do-it-yourself mentality and the way he built his own empire and achieved the fame, success, and money they so desire, under his own terms. They recognize in his words some of their own stories and struggles and feel he represents them through his music. And maybe what they liked most of all, according to one Texas fan I spoke with, is that Screw created a way to “slow down time—he had found another world.”

In order to connect with his listeners through methods beyond the words in his music, DJ Screw started a new language in the South, specifically in Texas, that was built on his name and the music he created. There was the proper noun: DJ Screw himself, artist and technician, or screw, his specific music. There was the verb: *to screw*, the process of slowing down and stretching out already popular rap and hip-hop songs. And then there was the adjective: *screwed*, the state of a song that has been slowed down and stretched out. This new language allowed more people to speak the same language and ignited a wave of musicians who adapted the Screw sound. The Screwed Up Click (SUC), a group of artists and rappers who worked with DJ Screw, brought new artists such as Lil’ Troy, Lil’ Flip, UGK, Zero, Ghetto, Lil’ O, and Hawk to the scene.

Syzurp

The feeling of being inside of warped or slowed time, one of the most remarkable responses activated by DJ Screw’s music, is amplified by sipping codeine syrup, an activity commonly engaged in while listening to DJ Screw, and one that Screw recognizes in song titles such as “Syrup and Soda” and “Purple Sprite.” In much of Screw’s music, the listener hears the glorification of using syrup—or “drank,” “lean” (what the syrup actually causes the body to do), and “barre” (short for the pharmaceutical company and active ingredient in cough syrup, Barre promethazine)—to establish a slower pace. As the lyrics to one of DJ Screw’s songs go: “Who knows the feeling, how it feels to lean? It’s cough syrup or Barre promethazine.”

According to an August 2009 segment on NPR’s *All Things Considered*, with the popularity of DJ Screw and other screwed music, beginning in the late 1990s, the use of codeine syrup skyrocketed in Houston, Austin, and other parts of Texas, spreading across race and class lines. Syrup houses, where one could purchase the codeine for up to five hundred dollars a pint, popped up in several cities. In Houston alone, officials seized one thousand gallons of syrup in

1999. The University of Texas found that in 2004 8.3 percent of secondary-school students in Texas had taken codeine to get high.

Back in the summer of 1993, Jim Hogshire wrote about the syrup trend in his article, “The Electric Cough-Syrup Acid Test”; he called codeine and over-the-counter cough syrup, which could be used as a last resort when listening to DJ Screw, the “poor man’s PCP.” Hogshire described what one experimenter called the “warping and folding of the body” caused by the syrup high, and he explained that he carried out an experiment of his own. While in the peak of his own high, he recalled, “My whole way of thinking and perceiving had changed. I had full control over my motor functions, but I felt ungainly. I was detached from my body, as if I were on laughing gas.... Looking back, I realize that I had already lost all sense of time.”

Hogshire’s experience was not unlike the experiences reported by my former students who drank syrup while listening to screw. There was no pain. No processing of unnecessary information. No fear. No worry. Just a smooth, slow flow from one movement to the next. Time slows down. Life slows down. Moments last.

During multiple interviews I conducted, fans explained that codeine was easy to obtain and users were able make a little bit go a long way by adding it to juice, soda, or wine. And because they both produced similar, time-altering effects, some believed the music and the syrup to be inextricably linked, the experience of one incomplete without the other. Without the music, the listener was lost in a codeine fog, and without the drug the music was simply screwed up, disjointed music rather than music that was screwed up.

Inside Night

It’s a cold and wet Friday night in November, almost two years since the last time we worked on a project together. We have met at Cisco’s new apartment to listen to DJ Screw under the appropriate conditions. Cisco, Fredo, Santos, and I are in front of the stereo.

The music is loud, the lights turned low, it’s dark outside and we are close and warm inside.

Since last meeting, Cisco has become a father, and his son, Junior, is four months old now, with the diminutive face of his father and a similar demeanor. It seems that he is a child who never fusses or cries and who seems ahead of the game a bit, able to assess a situation easily and find his place in it. He snuggles into the crook of his father’s arm eagerly, lifting his own head often to check who has entered or left the room, noticing how the scene has changed. He already holds his own bottle and moves his hands and arms freely, not in the jerky, stop and start way of some newborns. He doesn’t smile often, but when he does it’s with great gusto, a wash of delight spreading across his face. And his father is beaming and proud, saying more than once in this night, “Maybe he will do a better job than me.”

Cisco and his girlfriend Nini share this place of their own, with the one small front room, the galley kitchen, and the half-size bed and bathroom in the back. When I arrived, Nini came out of the bedroom to show me the baby. Cisco and Nini are easy together like they have already figured out this parenting thing, and joke openly about her mother who had visited earlier in the day, saying she couldn’t come back until she brought their boy some gifts. Then, after I feed the baby and pass him back to her, Nini disappears into the bedroom and I only see her reemerge one other time this night, to heat a bottle for their Cisco, Jr.

The boys, almost grown men now, are taller and broader, more serious and less shaven than the last time I saw them. They are all sporting gold pieces or bracelets and tease me for not showing off the gold myself. They are soft-spoken and patient, in easy moods, down to earth and almost shy. A few friends stop by throughout the night, but for the most part it is just the four of us sitting in a circle wrapped in marijuana smoke and the sounds of DJ Screw.

After a few minutes of catching up, Cisco takes out a tray and begins rolling a group of oversized joints. As he finishes each one, he

sets it on the coffee table, making a neat row along the edge, nodding his head to the music.

“It’s been a while since I drank the syrup. These days, it’s easier for me to get the herb, you know what I’m saying?” He lights one of the joints, takes a long pull and passes it to his brother. “But yeah,” Cisco continues, “when I was younger, me and Freddie be sippin’ that stuff all the time. I had more money then too, you know. No Juniors to feed.”

“Right?” Fredo says and laughs. “That shit’s expensive. The price isn’t worth it. Forty dollars for a deuce, a baby jar full? That ain’t gonna last you half the night.”

I ask what’s the appeal then, why so many people have taken to sipping.

“It’s the screw,” Santos says. “You ain’t gonna want to be listening to some fast-ass dance music on that shit. It’s the lean.” Santos gets up from the couch and walks around the room. “You be feeling like this,” he says, walking with his upper body tilted at a diagonal. “And the screw just fits. Makes you go with the lean, want to lean into it more.”

Santos had also been a student of mine, in the same class as his cousin, struggling with some of the same issues as Cisco: boredom, frustration with other teachers, failures in several classes, and impatience with the system. It seemed that he, too, wasn’t made for the seven-hour school day and got anxious and antsy often, as if he felt boxed in. Loud, full of vigor, and excitable, he kept the class active.

Santos was a dancer. I had seen him practicing in the gym during lunch when the breakdancers would gather and at several B-boy competitions. When he danced he was nothing but energy and motion, and his friends would watch in awe and call out for more, letting him take turn after turn because nobody wanted him to stop. In the spring of 1998, Santos was kicked out of school for possession of marijuana and for excessive absences. Since then, he had been dancing on Tuesday nights at a local recreation center and filling the rest of his days by smoking weed and hanging out with his cousins.

“Weed is a bitch,” he had said to me. “It screws you up so you can’t breathe as deep and last as long on the floor, but it keeps that style”—freestyle, the most spontaneous and creative element of breakdancing—“alive in your head.”

“Does the codeine work the same way,” I ask, “or is it more of an escape?”

Cisco replies. “Naw. You wouldn’t hear none of us say it that way.”

Fredo cuts in. “Yeah, plus, you could say that about any kind of drug use. Syrup’s different. It helps you with the shitty part of your life. Makes you just go with the flow more. Slows the shit down.”

“It’s the wet”—formaldehyde—“that helps you escape shit,” Cisco adds.

Santos interrupts, “Yeah. For ten bucks, you’re just trippin’. Wet? That shit gets you out of your world. With syrup, you know what’s going on, but with wet—you never know what’s happening. It hits hard, in about ten seconds, and then it holds for four to five hours. Sometimes, you be wanting to kill yourself on that shit. First time I did it, I knew I couldn’t go home. Not until the next day. Screw, he talks about the wet, too.”

They go on to explain how for them, now that they are older, the herb high is the better high for “bangin’ screw.”

Cisco describes the way they are different types of high. “Syrup just makes you feel asleep, but you’re awake.”

Fredo talks about the way you listen to music differently with each high. He moves his head to the music as he speaks, and bangs his fist on the coffee table to the beat. “With syrup, you’re just listening to the screw. Bangin’. With herb, you’re listening to the words—you got a mind to pay attention to the detail.”

Cisco lights another joint, the third one in an hour and a half. The boys stop talking and lean back in their seats, closing their eyes.

“This is Swisha now,” Cisco mumbles. “Sounds pretty much the same.” Fredo and Santos are both smiling, their eyes still closed.

They stay this way until one of them passes a joint. The other opens his eyes to take a turn. Even to me, now, the minutes are slower. The music doesn't seem quite so loud and off-sounding, the boys exhale more slowly, as if satisfied. The TV, which is on mute, seems somehow appropriate—the movements of the football players on the screen matching the rhythm of the music. And the outside on the other side of the wall is another world.

There is a knock on the door and Cisco gets up to answer. The baby cries from the other room and I hear Nini shush him, soothing him back to sleep. Two of Cisco's friends walk through the door and find a place for themselves on the couch. They ask what's up and Cisco tells them we're talking about Screw.

"Ah. That the nigga," one of them says.

I ask them if they ever sip the "drank." The entire group laughs and Cisco winks at me, implying that their last "sip" wasn't too long ago.

Chris, to my right, asks me what I want to know about syrup. I ask if many people who own low riders these days sip.

"Yeah. If they be bangin' screw. Anyone bangin' screw got something going on. Either they be on wet, herb, or syrup, I guarantee. Screw, without the mess, you don't really feel it that much. You're not bouncing your head, you know, like you do when you on mess."

Chris leans towards Cisco and passes him a wad of cash. Cisco hands him several bundles of marijuana-filled plastic bags and Chris tucks them into his inside jacket pocket. His friend, sitting on the arm of the couch, bounces his head to the music, looks at me and gives me a slow nod.

"I heard about barre from Screw," he says quietly. "Shit, that's how anyone knows about barre. The Screwed Up Click, they just started their own trend of drugs." He closes his eyes and I think he has finished, but he continues on, "Syrup makes you feel real mellow. You can feel yourself walking. Not each step. Just the feeling of moving along the ground."

Cisco lights another joint to share with the guests. After a few passes, the joint is finished.

Santos gets excited and jumps off the couch, "Right?" He walks around the room as he talks, stretching his legs out into long strides. "You don't feel that way on herb." He leaps circles around the room. "And syrup, you be doing all kinds of crazy shit and not caring. You know, like the old drunk dudes in Mexico who walk up and down the street, all crusty and shouting shit to people, calling people ugly and fat and telling their secrets. It's like no one can mess with you. And you don't worry about shit."

Chris and his friend get up and head towards the door. "Later," Chris says. His friend turns around and holds two fingers in the air, closing the door behind him.

Cisco shakes his head. "Sit the fuck down," he says to Santos. He looks at me and rolls his eyes. "Fuckin' idiot."

I ask if they think people get addicted to syrup and Fredo speaks up.

"I know a lot of people who drink barre daily, but I don't think you can fiend off barre. It's not like you can live your life. You know, get up early and shit, sip some syrup and clean the fucking house. You can't be normal."

Santos adds, "If there's anything to fiend off of, it's the taste. People get down on the taste. The sweet. If you have the money, I can see how that shit turns regular."

Cisco replies to Fredo's remark. "But lemme have the weed and I'll clean all that shit."

They laugh, having found a new energy, and light another joint. I ask them about DJ Screw again, wanting to hear from them what makes him such an idol to so many fans.

Cisco says he wants to answer first because he knows exactly what he wants to say. "He's great. Period. You know, like in the real sense of the word."

"Great." That's all you can say is 'great'?" Santos demands.

Cisco shoots him a look and continues on. "He's great because,

like we said, he started a trend. He united potheads and sippers. Blacks and Mexicans. Gangs who hated each other. Everyone is banging Screw. You want to sip with Screw. Get high with Screw. He got himself a nation of soldiers, the Screwed Up Click, and brought people together through music. You just want to chill with Screw.”

Fredo adds, “He started it. Ain’t no one else screwed it up until Screw came out and chopped it up. He was the originator and everyone else is just biters. Biters—you can tell. The real shit, there’s a stamp. A kind of sound that is only Screw. And he’ll put his pager number on the tape. Then you know it’s his.”

Fredo had been my student the year after Cisco and Santos. Fredo, too, had struck me with his creative nature. A more lyrical and fluid artist than his brother, his graffiti had become so familiar to me that I had begun to identify his work on the walls, canals, benches, and buildings in town. There wasn’t another artist his age, as far as I could tell, who had such an imaginative, progressive, and refined style of his or her own.

Cisco continues. “DJ Screw bought his own damn shit—did it all on his own. That nigga was always out of his trunk, didn’t want to jack nobody. And he told you about all the shit he got from himself. In his songs—explained the way ain’t nobody but him making the shit happen. And he had the gold and shit. And the people. And you just wanted to be like him. Like if he could do it, then maybe so could you. Know what I’m saying?”

“We listen to him whenever, too,” Santos says. “It feels like he know exactly what goes down with all the shit we have to deal with. And it’s like he be sayin’ you can get out of it.”

“Or if not get out of it,” Cisco says, “just cruise along with it, like it ain’t so fucking hard. You know, like maybe, ‘your baby boy’s gonna be a good man,’ or ‘life ain’t crazy like that.’ Like just a reminder that life rolls. It goes along. And you can either cruise with it. Or get all crazy and shit from it.”

Fredo reaches over and punches his brother. “Right?” He nods. “It’s like, really, the herb and wet and syrup and even throwing

choppers and shit’s cool, but really, the only thing you don’t wanna ever do without is the Screw.”

The boys stop talking at this. And lean back again, to give appreciation to the music. Cisco leans over and puts a new cassette into the stereo.

“I just got this from the Screw House this morning. It’s some of his new shit he finished right before he died.”

By now, I had come to almost enjoy the music. I didn’t have the relationship with it, certainly, that the boys had, but the bass lines are familiar and easy and I appreciate that the boys, the herb, and the music are *something*. I feel good. Seeing them look content as they listen could have been the reason for my newfound appreciation of the music, but it is something more than just a vicarious contentment. I find that even I, who had turned down all offers to get “messed up,” am bouncing my head to the music, feeling calm and worry free. The anxiety I often experienced over the boys and their well-being, their safety and future, and now their children and partners, is less pronounced. I let myself just enjoy sharing this moment with them. Certainly, for this night, in this room with the smoke-filled air and the words they had recently spoken lingering overhead, I can’t imagine any music more appropriate. We sat that way for several minutes. Not talking. Not moving. Not watching. And just breathing.

Back to Outside

As I drive home, the rain pounding the windshield, making a rhythm with the windshield wipers, I think back to that first night when I accompanied the boys on their night journey. Late in the evening, when the streets got quiet enough, we stopped and parked at the edge of an emptied-out canal. There were streetlights every twenty-five feet or so, most of which were burned out, but they made just enough light for Cisco and Fredo to set to work. Tony sat on the hood of his low rider, with the music, DJ Screw, playing just loud

enough to be heard, but not loud enough to disturb the darkened homes in the neighborhood.

Fredo, Cisco, and Santos climbed down into the concrete belly of the canal and I watched from above, sitting on the lip of the shallow bank so that I could see the work as a whole, as it was created. Cisco stood back to eye his stretch of empty space and paused a moment, assessing what wasn't there and thinking, I presumed, of what needed to be there. He shook the spray paint can and began, pressing the nozzle down with an expert finger, to create short and long bursts of paint, stretching and bending his body across the giant letters and designs that appeared. He threw one can down for another, paying no attention to the clatter it made when it hit the concrete. Before our eyes, sudden flashes of color washed onto the surface, contained by darker borders in blue, black and brown. With a nod, Cisco signaled to Fredo, who picked up a can of paint and began adding his own colors and shapes along the edges of Cisco's piece. The two brothers worked this way, side by side, for an hour or so. Pulling their respective designs together with letters and lines, jagged and smooth. Santos, several yards off to the side, was dancing his own type of dance, "pop-locking" and "freezing" to the music. He was building his own piece to DJ Screw, one movement layered on top of another, and another, breaking the music into pieces with his separate moving parts, faster and faster, until there were no separate parts and he was a body in one fluid motion.

And then I remembered watching Tony, sitting on the hood of a car that he had bought in its original state and that was now something new and different—a manipulated version of a previously made product, redesigned with chrome and paint on the outside, leather and wood-grain on the inside, resting closer to the ground now, hovering just inches above the road's surface.

Two Poems

Emily Moore

Cattails

My dad at thirty—rugby shirt and jeans,
his hair still wispy in the breeze—
rustles the tufted canopy
with windy, boyish ease.

I listen to the whirr of planes
that dot the ice-blue sky like stars,
breathe summer—marshland, gravel, hay—
as he snaps hollow, waxy stalks,

returning to the path with reeds
aloft—two freed-up feather flags
for us to wave all afternoon.

His legacy: cattails, balloons,
the memory of each fleeting gift
seed-light or ribboned to my wrist.

Vineyard Hospital, 1981

My father watched his father die
weekends when I was four.
He drove me to the hospital
three hundred miles North

inside a backseat blanket nest,
then spread crayons on the floor
of the gray-green waiting room
and I hunched down to draw.

My grandfather was fever sick,
my father scared and young,
like my classmate Sarah was
the year she lost her mom—

Sarah in her checkered dress,
beloved, hay-blonde, motherless.

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Emily Moore is a poet, teacher, and one-third of the all-girl, country-camp trio *Ménage à Twang*.

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