

[Jan. 16, 2012]



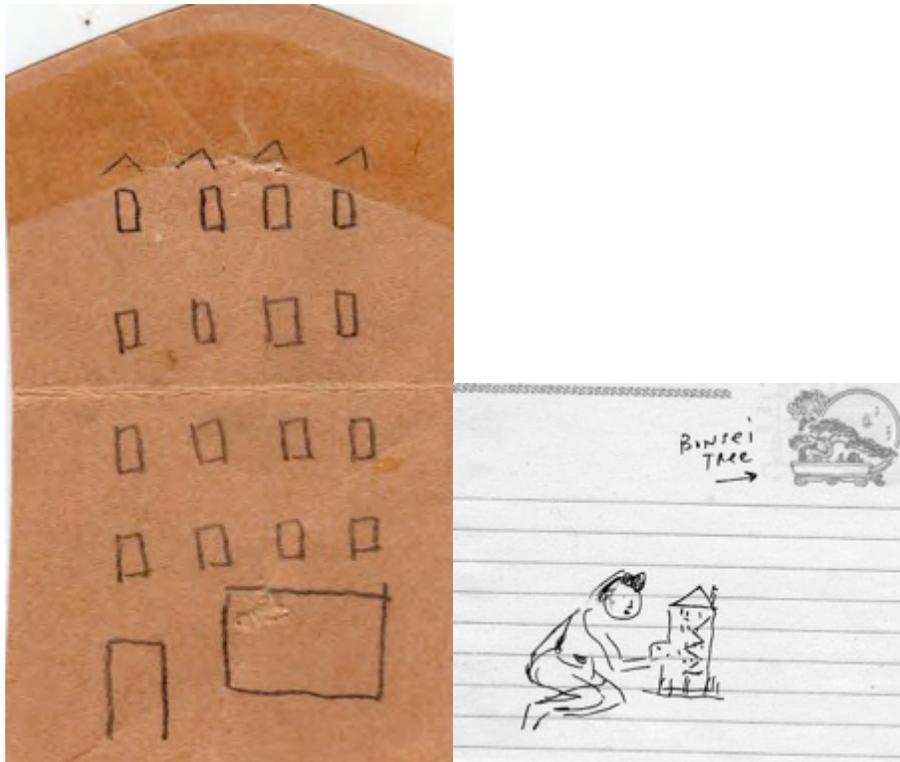
*Everything is Small Here*  
A little book by a little person about a little world

**Jane Freeman**

**SCALE FACTOR**  
~or~  
**VOYEUR TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEE**

I crowd at the back of the standing-room-only lecture room at Barnes & Noble, waiting to hear John Irving read. Wedged between two tall men, my view of the podium is flanked by two large ears, one brown, one pink, like mismatched velvet curtains. Between them, in my telescoped view, stands the author, tiny-remote, with his amplified voice. And bracketing him—posters of novels about smallness and enormity: on one side Moby Dick’s toothy maw engulfs a stunted *Pequod* (and Mr. Irving, who has just appeared); on the other, the hapless Lem Gulliver, lashed to the ground, guarded by a populace of Lilliputians. *The subject of the reading?* That too involved scale, of sorts: a BIG book on an oft-whispered subject: intimacy broadcast to the masses. In 2002 I wrote a book about scale, *The Art of the Miniature*. Ostensibly it is about creating miniature environments out of found objects, but in truth the subject is microcosms and macrocosms, and their relevance to human spiritual transcendence.

The subject of this book involves the perceptual shift of scale, as though looking telescopically through a microscope, at the contraction and expansion of space and time in one’s own mind, which means in one’s own life. One’s mind is one’s life. There’s a reluctant, universal human perception of being small, temporal and finite. We can use that viewpoint of limit to transport us to equal awareness of infinitude. We can look through a keyhole at the cosmos to move from small to great, and back again. One needn’t even open the door, for in the matter of spirit, peering is plenty.



## MICROCOSMIC PARADIGMS AND PRECEDENTS

The ancient Indian Vedas say that as Lord Vishnu sleeps, innumerable floating universes are generated that last as long as one of his breaths. Every day Lord Brahma, meditating on a lotus blossom growing from Vishnu's navel, opens his eyes and, looking around, creates a universe that disappears when he closes his eyes again. A thousand-year-old Sanskrit text, *The Doctrine of Recognition*, states: "Acquiring the power of consciousness, the aspirant assimilates the universe into himself." In other words, the Supreme (God, or Consciousness) is embodied within each of us.

Scale applies to space as well as time. One of the smallest microcosms ever conjured is William Blake's "world in a grain of sand." Once I saw some sculptures in a museum—figures the size of rice grains in scenes the size of a thimble. Hundreds of people waited in long lines for a glimpse through a magnifying glass. Miniatures always have been universally cherished; examples of and references to small worlds can be found just about everywhere. Seeing small is a way for us to order the world and understand our place in the cosmos. Relating to tiny worlds elicits uplifting and stimulating perspectives and feelings. About Queen Mary's famous dollhouse, the writer Clifford Musgrave says: "There is an extraordinary fascination and charm about smallness.... There is a special satisfaction in creating a tiny replica of any object..." This attraction to tiny worlds shouldn't be surprising, considering we ourselves are spiritual and physical microcosms. Our mystical correspondence with a supreme power is expressed in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century poem by Angelus Silesius: "*I am like God, and God like me. / I am as large as God, he is as small as I: / He cannot above me, nor I beneath him be.*"

Italian art critic and essayist Mario Praz wrote that we should "investigate the mysteries of creation in order to see, perhaps in this penchant of ours for the little things, the action of the Creator who amuses himself with His creature, made, naturally, in His own image, only smaller." And the Canadian comic-book artist Jacques Boivin wrote: "If we wish to understand the nature of the Universe we have an inner hidden advantage: we are ourselves little portions of the universe and so carry the answer with us." Physically, we contain all the elements of the universe. Salt water flows in our blood; our flesh is synonymous with earth; air fills our lungs, and fire our digestive tract. Science tells us that we are made of the same stuff as the stars.

It's small wonder that finding connections to the cosmos is both stimulating and consoling, and that human beings probably always have created miniature replicas of things. Art in miniature survives from ancient Egypt in an endearing house and garden, about 4,000 years old, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Such miniatures were buried with the dead for use in the afterlife, like packing a trunk for an ocean voyage. Tiny pieces of bronze furniture, indicating the existence of miniature houses in ancient Greece and Rome, are extant. For centuries, parallels have been drawn between the human body as microcosm and the universe as microcosm. Among the Metropolitan Museum's innumerable tiny works is a Flemish rosary bead from the Middle Ages. The carved boxwood bead, about three inches in diameter, opens to reveal intricately detailed scenes from the life of Christ.

Dollhouses began as cabinets to keep treasures in. In 1558, a Bavarian duke commissioned a dollhouse for his daughter, but when it was finished, he kept it instead as a display cabinet for precious artifacts. A trend for miniaturization in general had begun, signaled by the printing of tiny books. In *Troublesome Things*, Diane Purkiss writes: "Such productions offered to encapsulate the whole world in a small portable artifact through the principle that the microcosm reflected the macrocosm." As people began to get rich in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland, collecting small treasures became a fad. These objects were housed in

partitioned cabinets to suggest decorated rooms. Some historians believe that dollhouses originated in Italy because of their similarity to crèches.

While we often associate model trains, dollhouses, and sandcastles with children, small-scale replicas are not their exclusive domain. We can lapse into reverie before a fireplace, hypnotized by the miniature Armageddon within it. We're drawn to miniatures in snow globes and music boxes, altars and crèches, aquariums and terrariums, Fabergé eggs, Japanese netsukes, key-chain baubles, figurines, birdhouses, models of monuments, refrigerator magnets, toy theaters. In Japan, it is customary for businesspeople to begin the day contemplating a bonsai or minuscule rock garden before they leave for work, and the world "at large." People plant miniature gardens in window boxes, and toss orange seeds into clay pots to cultivate Lilliputian groves. *Gulliver's Travels* is all about odd-scale worlds, and there are many other stories on the subject, such as *Fantastic Voyage*, *The Borrowers*, *Stuart Little*, "Tom Thumb," and "Thumbelina," and the popular "Honey I Shrank the Kids" movies. It may be our own scale that we're transforming as we enter these alternate worlds. Even in the same world, in the same context, we enjoy surprises in scale, as in David Lodge's *Changing Places*, p. 12, describing Philip Swallow's point-of-view from high in a plane: "...the billions of tons of ice underneath him and the minuscule cube melting in the bourbon before him..."



Literature has many oxymorons and paradoxes concerning scale. Like Jonathan Swift, Lewis Carroll plays it both ways in *Alice in Wonderland*, in which an understandably bewildered Alice oscillates in size from HUGE to tiny. "What a curious feeling!" she says, "I must be shutting up like a telescope!" *The Annotated Alice* has something to say about her size-change, which becomes a sea-change, when the "pool" of tears she'd shed as a nine-footer seems like an ocean, into which she plunges, having shrunk to three inches small. Her size-fluctuation, according to cosmologist Alice-fans, may be a prophetic, dodgy Dodgson allusion to the theories of the expanding and contracting cosmos, which would not be formally posited until the twentieth century.

A cosmic metaphor resides at the heart of Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*, where the normal information you expect to see on an envelope is greatly extended: "Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe"; and ends with the ultimate address, "the Mind of God." And Shakespeare, who gave us the expression "mind's eye," also possibly relished the efficient trope of the miniature. (Come to think of it, "The Globe" is the perfect name for a relatively small platform on which to encapsulate the sweeping dramas of human life.) When Hamlet's

father is murdered by having poison poured into the “porches” of his ears, it seems to me those ill-starred anatomical piazzas become the world’s smallest crime-scenes. The eponymous prince laments: “Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.” (II, ii). That the tormenting dreams reside in the repository of his mind makes me wonder if the cranium can be interpreted as the rudimental (and rudely mental) container for everything real and imaginary.

That recalls a scene in *Jane Eyre*, when Rochester is looking at the new governess’s watercolors. The repartee goes:

R: Where do you get your pictures?”

J: “Out of my head, sir.”

R: “And does it have more furniture of the kind?”

J: “I should hope better, sir.”

And Walt Whitman sings: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes).” Lucretius: “The vivid force of his mind prevailed, and he ... traversed the boundless universe in thought and mind.” And Melville, in that magnum opus which has everything to do with scale: “O Nature, and O soul of man! How far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! Not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind.” (*Moby-Dick*, ch. 70)

George Macdonald wrote, in 1885: “The world and my being, its life and mine, were one. The microcosm and macrocosm were at length atoned, at length in harmony. I lived in everything; everything entered and lived in me.” Behind that expression of numinous truth is scientific fact; quantum physics reveals fantastic conundrums about the interconnecting nature of the cosmos. I was amazed to hear that the distance between the cells in our body is relatively as vast as the distance between the planets in our solar system...



E.F.R

## INFINITY AND THE INFINITESIMAL

As archetypes, miniatures remind us that everything in the universe is related, and that we little beings are composed of “star stuff.” Absorption in this kind of unity-consciousness is part of the creative process. Nature is filled with examples of reduplication: branches replicate trees, rocks imitate mountains, a patch of moss resembles a meadow; a fern leaf is composed of miniature ferns. Fractals, those computer-generated designs that create patterns of larger identical designs, reveal the “self-similarity” or “iteration” of forms in nature.

Of countless allusions to miniatures in the visual arts, one example is *The Arnolfini Wedding* by Jan Van Eyck, a 15<sup>th</sup>-century painting in London’s National Gallery of Art. A wedding is taking place in a lavish bedchamber that’s reflected, in its miniature entirety, in a convex mirror. This seemingly incidental background object is crucial to the meaning of the painting, for it reveals more than the information contained in the picture plane: the backs of the bride and groom, and two otherwise invisible witnesses standing outside the physical (if not the conceptual) scope of the painting. Just above the telltale mirror (a light-conducting miniature of the window), a Latin inscription attests Jan Van Eyck was here, identifying one witness as the painter himself. And so one can surmise that the mirror symbolizes the witness-status of the artist’s penetrating eye.

In the New York Public Library is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese watercolor, “One-Man Puppet Theater.” A pensive old man and a lively young boy are watching a play on an elevated stage that is balanced on the head of a curtain-draped puppeteer. Is it possible that the old man and the young boy represent the span of a single life, with the two puppets reiterating their life drama upon the miniature stage?

Art that deals with scale abounds in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Joseph Cornell outfits his eccentric boxes with cosmologies, human artifacts and natural history. A work that blurs the distinction between painting and sculpture, Max Ernst’s *Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale* (1924; Museum of Modern Art) is two- and three-dimensional at once, with a house of wood in a painted landscape and a 3-D gate swung open to rest upon the picture frame. A painting by another Surrealist, René Magritte, *Les valeurs personnelles* (*Personal Values*), 1952, portrays a dollhouse-like bedroom with walls painted to look like a cloudy sky. What makes us assume that the interior is a dollhouse are a gigantic comb, shaving brush, cake of soap, glass, and match. In *The Cicerone*, also by Magritte, a hybrid cannon-man supports three miniature houses. In *The Voice of Blood*, there’s a tiny house with lit windows inside a tree; in *The Wrestlers’ Tomb*, a huge rose entirely fills a room.

The effect of mixing scales is disconcerting and amusing, a popular Surrealistic trick. Giorgio de Chirico, whose visual wit anticipates Surrealism, composed human torsos of roofs and columns in both paintings and sculpture. He was fascinated by the conceptual ambiguities of interior, exterior, and scale, as in his enigmatic paintings *The House within the House* (1924) and *Temple in the Room* (1967).

Of the many artists working today in small scale, Charles Simonds tucked a miniature clay village, *Dwellings* (1981), into a stairwell at the Whitney. In 1972, Miriam Schapiro turned a dollhouse into a groundbreaking work of art. Just about every museum in the world includes art of or about miniature scale. The miniature compresses a salient moment of awareness in a few inches, just as haiku compresses a complete world in few syllables. The appeal lies in the universal human desire to yoke the finite to the infinite, the human to the divine, and the breviary moment to eternity.

**POSTHASTE TO STATEN ISLAND**  
(written years before 9/11 and the terminal fire)

I go to Staten Island by ferry, now and then, to experience the river more directly and to escape the geometric confinement of Manhattan. To get to the ferry, I walk down Broadway, and think of Walt Whitman doing the same. At the end of Battery Park, with its public sculptures and over-explicit war memorials, juts the vast curved wreck of the old terminal, whose arcing facade rhymes in shape (and once, in bronze-green color) with Miss Liberty's famed crown. Passengers wait below in the shadowy dank limbo of a holding room that vaults, through the twin black breaches of its slips, a shock of blaze-bright river.

The pitching, flat-footed ferry is the cadmium yellow of a taxi, or the inner yellow of a certain two-tone daffodil. I join the throng that streams aboard as soon as the wide terminal doors are slid open. Bikes and cars are stowed below. The boat gushes off with a horn blast (a kind of maritime grunt) and leaves the black-toothed pilings in a foam of wash. The air smells large, oily, fishy. The noises made by a shoe-shine hawker, amplified songstress, rap-rhythm battery salesman, beer concessionaire, and others, are engulfed by the boat's vibrant drone. I leave the pews and go out on deck where I hang over the rail and watch the mesmerizing water -- a stiff, steel-gray silk decked with frothy boas and furbelows. Vast old Brooklyn and penalesque Governor's Island glide by. The Verazzano Bridge, which resembles an eyelash, is etched faintly in the distance. Just ahead looms a hulking barge bearing a tonnage of boxcars. (After I adjust to the distance, nearby things seem huge.\*) The Statue of Liberty salutes as if in a dream. Aft, the city, with its dazzling tabletop clutter of chrome and brass and steel, dwindles into a utopian poster . . . then a post card . . . then a postage stamp. Enormous, shrill gulls ellipse and circumflex astern.

We dock at St. George. The ferry sideswipes the pilings, churns up the river like a steamboat, shudders gracelessly into its berth. The ark empties into a reverberant cathedral of damp gloom that, like the depot on Manhattan's side, has become a pigeon aviary.



About scale and distance, cf: David Lodge, *Changing Places*, p. 9: "In the sky the planes look very small. On the runways they look very big. Therefore close up they should look even bigger—but in fact they don't. His own plane, for instance, just outside the window of the assembly lounge, doesn't look quite big enough for all the people who are going to get into it."

## HONEST TO DOG

Caleb, Tracy and I can't walk down the street without passersby, in shock of recognition, squealing, "Lassie!" I have stopped trying to explain that these little collie lookalikes are neither collies nor "miniature collies," but a distinct breed called Shetland Sheepdog, or Sheltie, bred small in Scotland centuries ago, as Shetland ponies were. There were many advantages to being small – they ate less, lived longer, apparently were smarter, and, when stuck behind a flock stalled at an impasse, knew to leap onto the backs of the sheep and make way to the front to lead them out. Another inbred quality is their barking, not great in the city but desirable, on the North Sea coast, when they must be heard above the crashing waves of the North Sea.

The dogs and I live with two cats--Oakley, a big red male, and the jet-black, sloe-black, ebony-black, chortling, elusive Poe, who, someone once said, spends her time—at least all the time I can't find her--studying the *Tao*. Without leaving the premises, she's always going missing. The other day I rallied the dogs for help, for their species are great finders, and can detect a frozen wad of gum under three feet of snow. I said: "Find Poe!" and they shot off to prowl the rooms. In the farthest room, the studio, they pointed their noses into a deep shelf, and there was Poe, curled atop a miniature construction of the Temple of Dendur.



Caleb, who is on the aloof side of affectionate, once did something endearing at the Washington Square dog run. We were sitting side-by-side on a circular bench under a plane tree. I was gazing up through the leaves at the jigsaw pieces of clear sky. While my attention was diverted thus, Caleb pushed his nose under my triceps and flung my arm over his shoulders. I guess I wasn't being companionable enough.

He has his own way of retrieving. Most dogs will drop a ball at your feet to signal you to throw it again. But Caleb doesn't merely drop it; he wedges the ball between my shins every time. Someone told me about a dog who jumps on a chair, opens a cabinet, and purloins a bag of treats. That's remarkable enough, but then he shuts the door, wrestles the treats out of the bag, finishes off its contents, and then hides it to destroy the evidence.



## ECSTASY



In *Extasis*, a documentary about Glenn Gould, the great pianist mentions two ways to get out of the body – through entertainment and through ecstasy. He describes ecstasy as “a delicate thread binding together music, performance, performer and listener in a web of shared awareness, of innerness.” This idea got me thinking about the effects of those opposite approaches of transcendence.

In my experience, entertainment is often passive, vicarious, temporal, illusory, and, finally, tiresome. It involves diversion, digression and division from one’s self. The effect of ecstasy, on the other hand, is active, timeless, direct and invigorating. I am “beside myself” (ex-stasis) with joy – yet paradoxically united with the inner self. Rapture can be ignited by great art. Great art leads us from being scattered and burdened to an awareness of the charged being-ness of spirit.

Another vehicle for attaining bliss is meditation. “How are you?” people constantly ask. Taken sincerely, the greeting could be extended to mean, “How is your state at this particular moment?” Most of the time I haven’t a clue, but meditation lets me know. Contrast a night spent at a noisy party, with being around foghorns, waves, crickets. Compare the effect of the evening news with that of listening to Gregorian chants. Notice your energy after a day at the mall, and how you feel in a garden. Entertainment spins me outward and away, even as meditation, a practice of quiet ecstasy, spirals me home. A far richer nutrient than foghorns or forests ever could be, meditation erases time as it reveals the inner spaciousness, which is always within.

Many think it’s hard to meditate. Maybe that’s because meditation interrupts our preference to be distracted and to sleep. The ego likes to check out, cop out, and drop out, the opposite of what an effort to meditate achieves. It’s harder to stay in the middle than to pursue any extreme. Buddha awoke from his own drowse when he heard someone say that a musical instrument must be tuned neither too tight, or the strings will snap, nor too loose, or they won’t play—a metaphor for the middle way: right between ascetic and sensual. Meditation is both easy and difficult; it is natural, but I must sit with vigilance or I succumb to frustration or dreaming. My awareness must be constantly, subtly, lightly adjusted, like following the lead of a master dancer, to keep that relationship fresh, pure, and wild. It is indeed like walking a razor’s edge. Meditation involves search, not research.

Ecstasy is evoked through works of genius in all of the arts. A few examples that astonish me: Mozart's "Exultate Jubilate"; all of Bach; all of G.M. Hopkins; Basho's frog; paintings by Turner and Sassetta; buildings by Gaudi and Wright. Creativity is an ecstatic experience. And everyone can meditate to touch that bliss.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville says that it's "better to fail in originality, than to succeed in imitation." In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna advises, "It's better to do your own duty badly, than do another's well." Direct experience, with awareness—there's no substitute. As the world's mystics have been suggesting all throughout all time, we must drop our habits of busyness, chitchat, and constant mentation – shadowy surrogates for real life – and cultivate a preference simply to be. I take this hint from Walt Whitman:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.



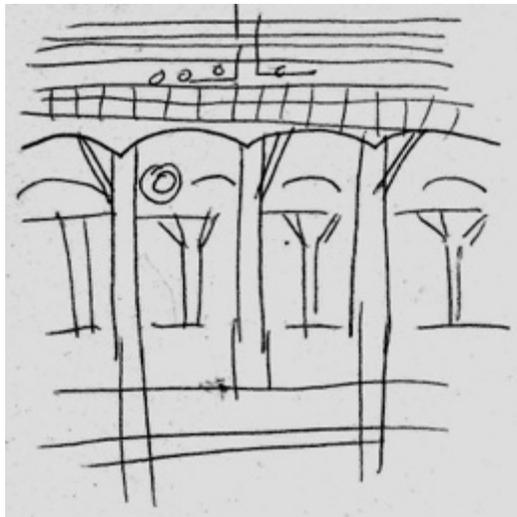
## A TINY MUSICAL OBSERVATION

The New York subway system, Beethoven, and *West Side Story* have something in common. Beethoven was deaf and subways are deafening, but that isn't it. The subway runs on the West Side, where *West Side Story* takes place—but that's not it. *West Side Story* immortalizes the rivalry between two gangs; when Beethoven penned this concerto, Vienna was under siege by France. But war isn't it either.

What the subway, Beethoven, and *West Side Story* share is a little tune of three notes.

For, when almost any subway pulls out of almost any station, you hear three enigmatic tones ... which sound exactly like “There's a Place [for Us]” by Leonard Bernstein. And exactly like – what I believe was the inspiration for Bernstein's song – five notes that come twenty seconds into the Adagio of Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto (which came to be called the “Emperor,” but not by Beethoven).

So every time I hear a train leave a station, I think of Ludwig and Leonard, two of the great “B” names in music. It goes without saying that those three notes sound on the L and B lines too.



**WRITE AS RAIN,  
HAPPY / RUSH HOUR  
and RAIN DOGS**



Rain – or at the very least, a steely, precisionist, congested sky – squires me into a writing mood. In such a mentally priapic condition, a letter may be launched of somewhat more interest than the ilk that begin: “Received yrs of the 15<sup>th</sup> with great interest / embarrassment / guilt” or “Hi there! It’s been a while!” or “Sorry it’s taken so long to reply. . . .” Or one of those puny, pithy, text-message swaps for the old-fashioned voluble epistle like this one. I prefer to letter-write on rainy days. However, the last time the streets were suitably amphibious—the trash baskets filled with skeletal, extirpative umbrella spokes (reminiscent of the species of dinosaur birds only nine-year-olds can name), and the streets glistening like a seal in a downpour—I was, as they say, “under the weather.” Now that I’m over being under, there’s neither inky rain nor chalky snow to spur me to write. The paper-white sky tempts, with its scribbled branches; and the sun shines like an oil stain on a page. But no rain. I turn to another condition for inspiration, which is twilight, which launches martini hour uptown, cocktail hour midtown, Night Train hour downtown.

Downtown, along Canal Street, derelict pubs are in full happy-hour gloom (have been all day, actually), as are the dank backrooms of auto-parts shops and in decrepit storefronts of brick & copper flashing with names like Pornomore, which sell \$3.99 triple-x videos, Rolexes, perfume adaptations, bootlegged Guccis and Vuitton knockoffs (and real ones, knocked off some truck). I visualize the creepy hotel bars of midtown at sundown. They must be brimming, by now, with businessmen engaged in the rush-hour ritual of postponed commutes. (Lincoln Tunnel, Metro North, Hoboken ferry, New Jersey Transit, Throgs Neck Bridge et alia will wait.)



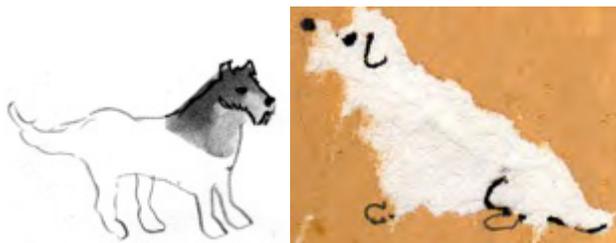
I envision Park Avenue, with its reassuring doormen and yawning awnings that span amenably from door to curb. (You can see people awning-hopping when it rains.) The genteel buildings resemble men's suits—muted plaids and stripes hung in double rows on either side of the street, which looks like a dimly-lit room-size walk-in closet. Suites as suits. I visualize flutes filling with fizz, rocks tumbling into tumblers, and in living rooms, Limoges lighters igniting cords of store-bought logs.

Such is cocktail hour all around town.



Living somewhere in the Triangle Below Canal, I occasionally visit midtown (for the hobby shops, MoMA and the Donnell), but rarely do I venture to that foreign country, the Upper East Side. There, in an atmosphere of elegant quiescence, eviscerated ladies spend afternoons on Madison – in summer, weighed down with cirques and torques of beaten gold; in winter, dwarfed by full-length pelts, which are good for smuggling into bistros and patisseries pet dogettes small enough to groom with an eyebrow brush or a moustache comb. Such privileged canines have personalized collars, pendants engraved with epithets, endearments and emergency numbers. I've seen handmade cashmere, mohair, Shearling sweaters and trendy hooded sweatshirts, slotted for leashes. Leashes studded with filigree rhinestone pinecones. Velcro-fastened leather booties for when the iceman or sandman cometh to salt or sand the walks. The barrettes, bow-wow bows and furbelows are prized especially by poodles, and that breed with long, straight, ash-platinum hair, those pampered Yorkies on York.

Au contraire, the poorer dog fanciers favor scarred Pit Bulls, scared Mutts, scary Rottweilers, German-Shepherd-Pinscher mixes, and a strange breed of ubiquitous stiff-fuzz, bald, bow-legged, gimp-pawed, goat-white mites with trickling Chaney eyes and mashed-in faces, a breed that looks the same coming and going. But rich or poor, haute or modest couture, uptown or down, most New York dogs do sport some sort of raingear when it rains—whether the London Fog-Dog slicker, topped with smart tartan pom-pom tam and detachable bumbershoot . . . or garb fashioned posthaste from the *Daily Post*, shopping bags or plastic wrap.





The littlest canines look like wadded tissue, smudges, inkblots. This morning I saw a large bald man struggling with a small furball (contradicting the myth that humans resemble their dogs). The black-and-white confection strained at its rhinestone leash to meet my dogs, who yanked me over like cabs zooming in on fares. As the threesome pranced and sniffed, the resigned humans disentangled leashes.

I offered the customary gambit: “Girl or boy?”

“Girl,” the man said.

“Let me guess. Four months old?”

“Five.”

“Whatser name?”

“Espresso,” the man sighed, looking like he could use one.

“With that dash of white,” I ventured, “she looks more like a macchiato.”

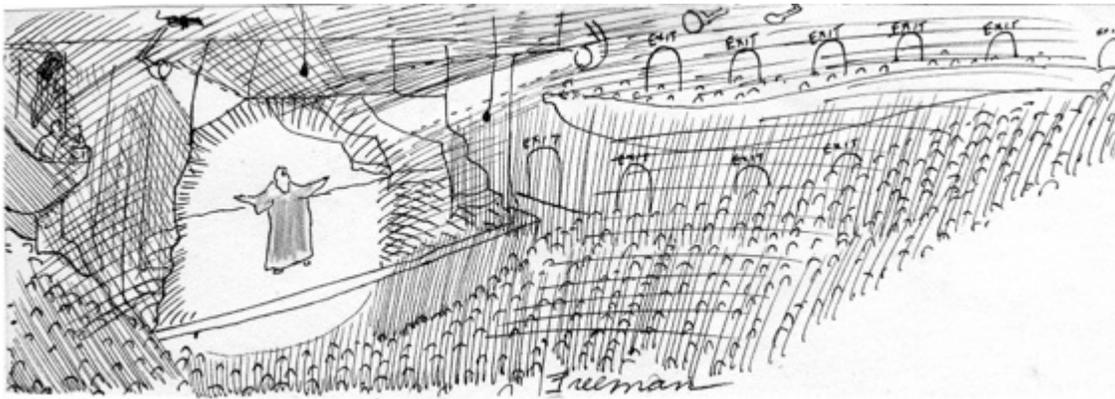
“Oh, no,” he corrected. “She’s a Havenese.”



## THE MAGIC FIDDLE

*Ladies in Lavender* (2004), a film with Maggie Smith and Judy Dench, is a fairy tale with archetypal parallels to Mozart's *Magic Flute*. Substitute a violin for the wooden flute: The flute had been carved by Pamina's father and given to Tamino by her mother, just as the paternal Adam (whose name implies "father") Penruddocke gives his violin to Andrea – both instruments proving the means of salvation for the respective heroes.

Both opera and film begin with a princely youth in trouble. Andrea, in his escape from the Nazis, is shipwrecked in a storm and rescued by two ladies, benign versions of the Three Ladies of the opera – who discover Tamino, having escaped a dragon, lying unconscious in the forest. (In the original staging, the monster from which Tamino is fleeing is a serpent; in "Ladies in Lavender," there's a scene about an hour into the film where a fisherman throws an eel at Andrea, who flinches in fright.) The eponymous ladies are Janet and Ursula, elderly sisters who immediately become obsessed with the handsome stranger and compete to take care of him. Andrea is released from their proprietary hold by the beautiful Olga, a Pamina figure, with whom, it turns out, he shares a language (German, no less). At the end of the film, Olga delivers him from the spell, as it were, of the sisters' clutch (Dench's clench?), straight into the Apollonian world of music, and to her brother Boris, a Sarastro figure of probity and renown. It is here that Andrea proves himself as a fitting successor to the maestro.



There are further echoes: the inappropriately seductive Dr. Mead, who is in hot pursuit of Olga, is like the Moor Monostatus who's always after Pamina; the buffoonish housekeeper Dorcas, a comic character often seen eating, is like the birdcatcher Papagano (she has a brief to-do with a magpie; and in one hilarious scene clumsily stuffs a chicken for dinner with meaty hands).

There's even an echo of Pamina's portrait—which appears at the beginning of the opera and arouses Tamino's love—in Olga's small painting of Andrea which, at film's end, lends a kind of wistful closure to Janet's possessiveness and Ursula's impossible crush. The penultimate scene is of Andrea's magnificent London debut. The full house and the conductor on the concert stage are reminiscent of Sarastro's golden realm—maestro, priests and devotees—into which Tamino arrives with great pomp. There's a final brief scene in each; in the film, the sisters leave the concert hall and literally fade away; in the opera, the Queen of the Night and her entourage dissolve, overcome by Sarastro's power. In both film and opera there's a sense of passing the baton, as it were, from master to disciple, and a righting of circuitous destiny.

## AUSPICIOUS BEGINNINGS, New Year's Day (2006)



It snowed this afternoon, a prolific preamble to New Year's Eve. Big, blossomy flakes, like drenched camellias, littered the dusky streets and splatted the sidewalks. The snow hushed the city until midnight struck, and suddenly hoots and cheers arose from all directions. The bar over which I live ushered in the year on a disco beat. And with everyone's mind on fresh starts, I begin this reverie on fictitious beginnings.

The first words of a great novel are as propitious as the dawn. Cicero wrote: "...in the beginning the world was so made that certain signs come before certain events." The beginnings of literary masterpieces encapsulate the stories to come. David Lodge, in *The Art of Fiction*, calls the beginning of a novel a threshold to draw us in. Someone else, I think, compared the beginning of a novel to the antechamber of a house.

*Moby-Dick* opened my eyes to great beginnings. The novel embarks on its road-trip-in-a ship with its famously ambiguous command: "Call me Ishmael." Simple, but maybe not so simple. An English teacher once asked, "Why did Melville not write 'My name is Ishmael'?" The implication is that Ishmael is a pseudonym. And who was the biblical Ishmael? An outsider who wanders the earth, as Melville's narrator wanders the seas, in a search for truth on many levels.

Hemingway's memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, plunges right in: "Then there was the bad weather." One can hardly stop reading there! Bad weather, hobbling mobility, introduces *Jane Eyre* with an insurmountable negative impediment "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day." This impediment foreshadows JE's marriage to Rochester, aborted on the wedding day. The theme of impediments, both of nature and custom, appears throughout this novel about a girl who starts life devoid of possibilities. As an orphan she is deprived of an identity, reduced to epithets like "liar."

A walk also begins Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*: "Gustav Aschenbach (or von Aschenbach, as his name read officially since his fiftieth birthday), on a spring afternoon of that year 19\_\_ which for months posed such a threat to our continent, had left his apartment in the Prinzregentenstrasse in Munich and had gone for a rather long walk all alone. "All alone" tags this as a story of isolation and loneliness; the name-change signifies

an impending crisis of identity; lack of self-knowledge in middle age that will set him up for infatuation and heartbreak.



Wry reference to a broken heart launches Barbara Pym's *No Fond Return of Love*: "There are various ways of mending a broken heart, but perhaps going to a learned conference is one of the more unusual." Like Jane Austen, Pym uses polite understatement and tongue-in-cheek as vehicles for social satire.

Dylan Thomas's great prose-poem, *Under Milk Wood*, opens in a somnolent little village, "at the beginning," in the awakening season of spring:

To begin at the beginning. It is Spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched, courter's-and-rabbits' wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea. The houses are as blind as moles (though moles see fine tonight in the snouting, velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in the muffled middle by the pump and the town clock, the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows' weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now.

*Alice in Wonderland* commences with the child feeling "sleepy and stupid," an inchoate, day-dreamy state: "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do; once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversation in it, 'and what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations?'" Boredom of the quotidian precipitates outrageous fantasy. (Alice's descent through the rabbit hole reminds me of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, which begins with a matter-of-fact description of Dorothy's one-room house, with ladder to the cyclone cellar, another birth-canal symbol, "a small dark hole.")

A mesmerizing, singsong sleepiness is evoked too by Hermann Hesse in *Siddhartha*. This mood, however, symbolizes not dreams or imagination but the deluded state of maya, or illusion: "In the shadow of the house, in the sun on the riverbank by the boats, in the shadow of the sal-tree forest, in the shadow of the fig tree, Siddhartha, the beautiful brahmin's son, the young falcon, grew up with his friend, the brahmin's son Govinda." And that Siddhartha will develop into the Buddha implies another beginning. The Sanskrit root "budh" means "to awaken"; it is the source of our word "bud."

Perhaps not surprisingly, sleep is a favorite subject of Proust. Three of the seven books of *Remembrance of Things Past* open in a bedroom. Marcel did, after all, write an awful lot in bed, in his famous cork-lined room. *Swann's Way* begins: "For a long time I used to go to bed early." *The Captive*: "At daybreak, my face still turned to the wall, and

before I had seen above the big inner curtains what tone the first streaks of light assumed, I could already tell what sort of day it was.” *The Past Recaptured*:

All day long, in that slightly too countrified house which seemed no more than a place for a rest between walks or during a storm, one of those houses in which all the sitting-rooms look like arbors and, on the wall-paper of the bedrooms, here the roses from the garden, there the birds from the trees outside join you and keep you company, isolated from the world – for they were old wall-papers on which every rose was so distinct that, had it been alive, you could have picked it, every bird you could have put in a cage and tamed, quite different from those grandiose bedroom decorations of today where, on a silver background, all the apple trees of Normandy display their outlines in the Japanese style to hallucinate the hours you spend in bed – all day long I remained in my room which looked over the fine greenery of the park and the lilacs near its entrance, over the green leaves of the great trees by the edge of the lake, sparkling in the sun, and the forest of Méséglise.



On the other hand, Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* jolts us, along with his protagonist, awake from page one: “One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug.”

James Joyce launches *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with baby talk: “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo. His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face. He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.”

Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* starts in mid-sentence: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.” This partial sentence mimes watery circulation and, in fact, begins at the very end of the novel: “A way a lone a last a loved a long the”. Is there a connection between this eccentricity and the classical epic convention to begin *in medias res*?

*David Copperfield*, the titular hero (whose initials, perhaps significantly, are the reverse of the author’s), begins, Ch. 1: “I am Born”:

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and

believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

Compare this with Laurence Sterne's comedic report of Tristram Shandy's infelicitous conception, in the novel of the same lugubrious name:

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;--that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;--and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost;--Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,--I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that in which the reader is likely to see me.

Speaking of how authors beget their books, the greatest literary curtain-raiser of all time, I think, is "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Genesis is most mysterious; a hint, as Cicero suggested, to notice signs and warnings before our acts effect untoward events.



## INSIPID, BUT LOCAL, COLOR

Not long ago I ventured to the environs of Madison Square Garden. Upon exiting the subway I was caught in a sudden freezing rain and I ducked into a Chinese fast-food dive whose staggering fluorescent lighting was intensified by the menu, a dispirited marquee of faded transparencies, whose choices all looked pretty much the same. At one table was a man bundled in rags, asleep in a plate of rice. I crept to the counter, squeamishly surveying the unsavory menu-marquee, and finally ordered “Mu Shu Vegetable” for \$3.95. During my seven-minute wait, I saw that the brick floor wasn’t brick and the tile walls weren’t tile. Maybe the food wasn’t food, either. On one wall was an improbably narrow door that looked like a prop. It was conspicuously secured by an over-scale padlock, and bore the sign “Rest Rooms,” though the plural seemed hyperbolic and the adjective spurious. Doubtless the meagerest plumbing dwelled therein, probably as unreal as everything else.

Presently a gray plastic tray was slid onto the gray MDF counter. I was acutely aware that Medium Density Fiberboard contains formaldehyde. The tray was heaped with rice, several small mu-shu pancakes rolled tight as tampons, a knob of viscous vegetables, and a thimble-sized plastic ramekin of brown liquid that approximated hoisin sauce. I bore the tray to one of several desolate deuces. A toothless woman materialized, like Papagena in cackling-crone disguise. She pointed to the pancakes and exuberantly yelled: “What kind of bread is that?” I muttered that it wasn’t bread, just as the tiles weren’t tile and the bricks weren’t brick. Then I offered her one, but she smiled and stumbled off, vigorously yakking to no one. I supped in haste, tossed my trash, recycled the tray, and exited gratefully into the chilly but heartening rain.



**[METRO] NORTH TO VALHALLA:  
THE COINCIDENCE OF LANDSCAPE AND MUSIC**

The moment the train sways into motion, starting its long roll through Grand Central's tunnels, the light is snuffed. But I sense after-image ghosts in the orange-black buttresses and arches, which are as colossal as Wagner sets. As if on cue, loud in my head, thanks to my Walkman, comes "The Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla." We rock in a measured fugue, pick up speed, and burst into the gloom of a midwinter noon. Snarled, grizzled skeins of bare tree vines veil the burned and eyeless buildings at the tracks. Just now, "Immolation of the Gods" accompanies a tragic passage through Harlem. A bit farther north crouch schist and granite gargoyles -- toothy, clawed, matted, shaggy, and damp -- which patrol the Braquish river palette. And now, with Siegfried's regal theme, there looms an elegant span of bridge, a fine arc of silver mead flung from one bank to the other.



## VERBAL COLLAGE AND A GIFT FROM YEATS

About a week ago, among the piles of paper set out for recycling, I found a stack of art magazines dating from the 1980s. Just think, it took someone over 20 years to discard them. Perhaps that person shares two contradictory compulsions of mine – to hoard, and to dispose of that which I have hoarded. A scavenger by nature, I hauled the damp, wrinkled and partly unglued magazines up three flights. I spread them on the floor and cut out images and fragments of art history. I arranged and rearranged the salvaged lines of text until they slid into a sort of surrealist collage poem:

### A Sort of Surrealist Collage Poem

Improbable encounters with pointless arrows –  
Images (books, boxes, paintings, and pots) –  
A row of blue light bulbs, a corridor:  
A train track leading into darkness.

Two small houses tucked among the beams,  
The circuitous mathematical maneuverings  
In her mind.  
Side by side with the Apollonian dwelt the Dionysiac,  
Joys, sorrows, doubts, and magical sensations:  
Intimate pockets of interior  
Space.



One can get poetry of accidental intrigue by reading the *Index of First Lines* of a great poet like William Butler Yeats. This, from the *Collected Poems*:

A bloody and a sudden end,  
A certain poet in outlandish clothes  
A crazy man that found a cup,  
A cursing rogue with a merry face,

A doll in the doll-maker's house  
 A man came slowly from the setting sun,  
 A man I praise that once in Tara's Halls  
 A man that had six mortal wounds, a man  
 A mermaid found a swimming lad,  
 A most astonishing thing  
 A pity beyond all telling  
 A speckled cat and a tame hare  
 A statesman is an easy man,  
 A storm-beaten old watch-tower,  
 A strange thing surely that my Heart, when love had come unsought  
 A sudden blow; the great wings beating still  
 Acquaintance; companion;  
 Ah, that Time could touch a form  
 All the heavy days are over;  
 All the stream that's roaring by  
 All things can tempt me from this craft of verse:  
 All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old,  
 Although crowds gathered once if she but showed her face,  
 Although I can see him still,  
 Although I'd lie lapped up in linen  
 Although I shelter from the rain  
 Although you hide in the ebb and flow  
 An abstract Greek absurdity has crazed the man,  
 An affable Irregular,  
 An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,  
 An old man cocked his ear upon a bridge;  
 And thus declared that Arab lady;  
 Around me the images of thirty years;  
 As I came over Windy Gap  
 As the moon sidles up  
 Autumn is over the long leaves that love us  
*(...and so on, to the last titles:)*  
 You ask what I have found and far and wide I go,  
 You gave, but will not give again  
 You say, as I have often given tongue  
 You think it horrible that lust and rage  
 You waves, though you dance by my feet like children at play,  
 You who are bent, and bald, and blind,  
 Your eyes that once were never weary of mine  
 Your hooves have stamped at the black margin of the wood.



## COLLAGE and ASSEMBLAGE



We encounter collages and their dimensional counterpart, the assemblage, all the time: any collection of stratified effluvia is a collage – the scruff in the weed-fields out the window of the bus; any superimposition of disparate objects or impressions perceived all-at-once. It may be homogeneous, like the ripped layers of advertisements that flake a billboard. Or the heterogeneous, a layering of ironies, incongruities: tranquil music behind violence in a movie.

A chorus is like a collage, as is a chord. Each successive moment of a symphony is an aural collage of layered sounds (but not the symphony as whole, which is perceived through time). Any moment of noise is a sound-collage. But most collages are visual palimpsests: an envelope pasted with stickers, stamps, tape; a manuscript scrawled with diacriticals, erasures, stains. A suitcase plastered in decals, tags, markers of identification. Scrapbooks are collages, as are bulletin boards. Industrial yards are collages composed of boxcars, scrap, cables, switch-plates: giant circuit boards soldered on patinas of gummy ponds. Scaffolds of bridgework pasted against a scudded sky, a collage of iron Xs: cross-outs, cancellations, kisses on brickwork, edges and ledges.

My mind is on collage because I'm conducting a class in same, for law and business majors at Baruch University. These first attempts at art-making are pretty amazing. At first, they were dubious and disinterested – then, amazed and so delighted that some changed their majors on the spot. I had them paste images from magazines, in wild abandon, without thought or design, on a large sheet of paper. Then I gave them small picture frames, to use as a sort of scope. They coasted over their collage-scape looking for an unmistakable flash (what some call the “aha moment”), the art amid the debris.

I took a bus out to Ikea for the picture frames. A trip, especially through industrial or maritime wasteland, yields a serial collage of impressions. Back in Manhattan, I found the subway station to be an elaborate assemblage. While waiting for the train, I read from ch. 134 in *Moby-Dick*, one of countless collage-like passages layered in allusions:

But at last in his untraceable evolutions, the White Whale so crossed and recrossed, and in a thousand ways entangled the slack of the three lines now fast to him, that they foreshortened, and, of themselves, warped the devoted boats toward the planted irons in him; though now for a moment the whale drew aside a little, as if to rally for a more tremendous charge. Seizing that opportunity, Ahab first paid out more line: and then was rapidly hauling and jerking in upon it again—hoping that way to disencumber it of some snarls—when lo! a sight more savage than the embattled teeth of sharks!” (ch. 134)

The train charged in. I found a place across from a month-old baby in a pram entangled with toys. Since thoughts (being linear) cannot be collaged (at least by me), I forgot about the white whale for the moment, and asked what the baby's name was. And wouldn't you know; it was Ishmael.



## IN FEBRUARY

At dawn I ventured into the empty, wintry park. The sky was pearly and silverfish gray. Both the sun and the moon were out. The gazebo glowed like a stage-set. The wasted gardens were in majestic decline—a tenebrous spectrum of inscrutable hues. I looked around, naming them: green-gray, brown-gray, blue-gray, pinkish-gray, yellow-gray . . . and became awash in an amplitude of those close tones.

A raven glided down, like an inkblot on parchment, his feathers swishing like satin. I thought of his country fellows, whom I'd seen posing in profile on dirt roads and at the apex of feathery trees. The raven strutted and cawed, then took off with much ebon-satin rustling. He flew into the hairnet skeins of branches, calling attention to a squirrel. Disturbed by my noticing him, the squirrel sprang clear to another tree. His leap and his landing brought my focus to a nearly invisible, static row of pigeons on a branch. They were puffed up and looked like a display of dusty ornaments.

A human being appeared, the young Ethiopian park keeper, who looked like Krishna. Instead of a flute, his arms held burlap bags. He struck up, as if in mid-conversation, a cheerful chat about the raven (whom he seemed to know). Naturally, I thought of Dicken in *The Secret Garden*. As it turned out, he was neither Krishna nor Dicken. "My name is Abel," he said, and shook my hand.

"As in Cain and Abel?" I said.

"Right," he chortled. "And if you see him, tell him I'm looking for him. That brother owes me!" He laughed outright, and I laughed too, mirth between strangers on an off-kilter morning of beautiful gray things, of small events that live beyond the outskirts of harsh light and perished dreams.

**WOW, MOM!**  
(Valentine's Day)

My mother died many years ago but I miss her with intense longing and ecstatic heartache. Every day I encounter tangible reminders of her jubilant presence, which was understandable since she had many enthusiasms, like calligraphy and pen nibs, Crane's stationery, Scrabble and crosswords, the *New York Times* (which she read daily in Miami), dictionaries and other word-reference books, literature, strong black coffee in a bone-china cup...

One Sunday, exactly nine months after her death (a significant span of time, considering) I wandered aimlessly in the flea market on Amsterdam. The parking lot was filled for the day with booths and tables. I thought: Oh, Mom, you'd love this handmade paper; this silver inkstand, these carved little boxes," etc.

In the middle of the lot a tall woman was tending a flimsy table that held a huge collection of miniature ceramic dogs, just about every breed. Automatically I looked for a collie and a standard poodle, like Mom's dogs. Yep, there were Heather and Beau. Among the figurines was a basket of miscellaneous dollhouse items, \$2 each, and only one of each item. And most of them were emblems of my mother's life – tiny crossword puzzle, dictionary, packet of Crane's, Scrabble set, leather-bound journals, a bundle of *New York Times*, Florida road map, *Pat the Bunny* (her stock gift to every newborn); *Jane Eyre* (she'd sent me illustrated editions all my life); a Superman comic (private joke: she never let me read comics as a kid); *Sherlock Holmes* (but she approved of my becoming a "Baker Street Irregular," at age 11); even a delicate white cup of black coffee.

With each familiar item I discovered, I felt my awareness shift further inward. I grew floaty and still. There was a buzzing in my head. All these items were specifically evocative, but I kept thinking: coincidence.

Then I saw the last two items. One was an exact reproduction of a poster in my mother's calligraphy studio, of butterfly-wing patterns forming the alphabet. How amazing was that! The last object, at the bottom of the basket, was a miniscule notepad. The inscription, in calligraphy, read: "Memo from Mom."



## AN UNPREPOSSESSING INDIVIDUAL IN AN INDETERMINATE SETTING

It's Friday or Saturday night. I sip wine on the balcony of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. An echoey string quintet, Schubert I think, accompanied by the continuo of palaver and applause, like the nattering of rain or the rustling of cellophane. In the overarching vaults, sounds bounce and ricochet, dueling and dueting inside a head bent on soliloquy. Alcoves of stone Romans, masonry balustrades and urns bursting with forsythia.. A long Mylar banner, Giotto-pink, shifts in the breeze, advertising an exhibition. Odd to see it from inside, rather than from the Avenue. It is punched with unobtrusive holes that keep it from billowing too much. Through the punches gleam bright azure crescents, hatched with charcoal trusses. It takes a moment to "get" what's shining through like glazed shards: the sky — not up, where heaven ought to be, but straight ahead, as if the sky were hanging on a wall.

A drop of wine remains at the bottom of my glass, a glittering cabochon. The other tables are in high spirits -- dressy businesspeople on expense accounts, tourists with shopping bags and street guides. A table of tawny Japanese, who raise flutes to their lips and turn the horizontal goblets into ships-in-bottles, the champagne resembling little Turner sea-storms: sun-bright seas beneath mercurial skies.

Beyond the carousing, Asian antiquities abide in airless vitrines. Bronze bird vessel, incense box, enamel jar, snuff bottle, cylindrical cup, porcelain pot, red lacquer cabinet — so many small containers and enclosures. A pocket-size Chinese monk grins from his lapis lazuli grotto, smug and snug: "an unprepossessing individual in an indeterminate setting," the description reads. Of course, Yeats is whispering: *"Every discoloration of the stone, / Every accidental crack or dent / Seems a water-course or an avalanche, / Or lofty slope where it still snows..."*

Close observation slows time.

Whatever one's eyes alight on, does tantalize. I squint to pare my vision to the thinnest possible crescent of light. Plate, goblet, knife, spoon — a tabletop assemblage. The gesso-white plate has become a palette of condiments mixed into an accidental landscape: an indeterminate setting of everywhere. In a teaspoon, my concave portrait shifts like sauce. At this stoppage of time, when microscope turns telescope and back again, when inner and outer converge, the oil-vinegar-mustard fusion of fugitive perfection is exquisite, as everything truly is to those who truly can see.



## A BRONTË PILGRIMAGE



The Intimate University of Patrick Bronte

On a trip to England some years ago, I spent a day at the Bronte Parsonage. I wandered on the unchanged moors, wool-gathering; also gathering bits of wool snagged in the heath, doubtless from descendants of Brontëan flocks. At the Parsonage, I learned that Charlotte's manuscript of *Jane Eyre* is in the New British Library, in London. The previous week my sister and I had been there, in the India Office, doing research.



Emily, Charlotte & Anne

So we got on a train at Leeds and returned posthaste to London, and to the Library, to see the manuscript. I asked to see *Jane Eyre*. A dour superintendent, who looked like Mrs. Danvers, explained (with more severity than I thought strictly necessary) that only for Very Good Reason is it ever brought out; it is among the most priceless treasures; it is in the class of *The Bhagavad Gita* and *Finnegans Wake*.

I stood my ground. With an air of suspicion she reluctantly handed me a request form, with four intimidating questions:

- 1. WHY MUST YOU SEE THE ORIGINAL?**
- 2. WHY WON'T A FACSIMILE DO?**
- 3. WHAT UNIVERSITY ARE YOU ASSOCIATED WITH?**
- 4. WHAT HAVE YOU PUBLISHED?**

I sensed that an answer to the first question like: "It's my favorite book" wouldn't suffice. So I wrote out the scanty truth, though without much hope:

1. I wish to see the original because Charlotte Bronte breathed upon the pages.
2. The facsimile is not the real thing. Charlotte never touched them.
3. I am not affiliated with a university.

- I have published a four-part essay, “*Jane Eyre: A Subjective Appreciation*,” in *The Brontë Society Newsletter*, which, though American, is sanctioned by its parent organization, The Bronte Society, in Haworth.

A day or two after my petition, I was informed that I might see the manuscript. I returned, posthaste. Mrs. Danvers frowned: “This title is in three volumes; Volume Two is in on display and not available; that being the case, would you prefer to see Volume One or Three?”

“Oh, Volume One, please,” I said, even as the opening sentence appeared in my mind’s eye: “*There was no possibility of taking a walk that day.*”

Coldly, Mrs. Danvers said: “Have a seat in one of the carrels and it will be brought out presently.”

I sat, dwarfed by the scale of the furniture and the heavy air of concentration in the room. The tables were burdened with medieval books and with the elbows of furiously intent academics who all looked the part. Each brandished a magnifying glass, and buried (with almost prurient absorption) a scholarly nose in the deep vellum cleavage of an ornamental tome.

’Ere long, a slight manuscript was put in my hands, small and plain like JE herself. Opening the cover, in precise penmanship, I read: “*There was no possibility of taking a walk that day.*” Turning each page, I perused the few changes (one, a substitution of “port” for “harbor,” the latter neatly crossed out). Two hundred fifty-five pages, a third of the entire, delicately scribed with hardly any alteration—a work conceived and produced as a whole in a short time. The scene where ten-year-old Jane is in a window seat, looking at Bewick’s Arctic wood engravings, on a dismal November day: “*At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast.*”

Charlotte wrote her immortal masterpiece in Manchester, where she’d taken her father for cataract surgery. Not a bad way to pass the time in a doctor’s waiting room.



**Charlotte and Branwell**

## GHOST COLONY



In 1999, spent a year, from January to January, in the Catskills. I'd wake to see that during the night, late-winter ice storms had painted a Chinese scroll on the panes. Faint, fog-colored patches spread across the glass in the shapes of distant hills, mountain grottos and ragged pines. Lost in reverie, I'd forget that beyond the accidental watermarks, stains and brushstrokes were actual hills, grottos and pines.

One warmish March day, I went walking in the woods. The snow clusters on the moist brown ground looked like coconut in its husk. I drifted farther in, following a remote noise like applause. I half expected an elfin ensemble tuning up in a woodland concert-hall. No concert-hall, but a rushing cascade, now quite loud, performing an entire sustained opus like an ovation.

I emerged from the woods onto an isolated, sallow field, over which languished abandoned lawn toys: whirligigs and swings on hummocks of yellow grass. The jungle-gym seemed to be endlessly waiting for life forms to appear. Good props for a creepy movie – rusty creakings, ghostly movement from the wind. Surrounding the field, a fringe of winter-waste was dominated by the wreckage of truncated trees, which looked like fallen dinosaurs, snapped in half by disease, age, or wind—natural forces whose malevolent effects cast a tainted tint upon the scene.

The playground belonged to a derelict camp colony: a group of careening buildings whose original sun-yellow paint had turned scrofulous. The structures were collapsing and gaunt, with sagging roofs like animals with broken backs. The peeling paint resembled the fungal growths on the felled trees that, moments before, I'd examined with a juvenile fascination and disgust. Every cabin threshold was rotted, threatened by my weight. The eeriest building, marked "NURSERY," stored ruined games. As I put a few blocks in my beret to carry off, I thought I heard a plangent protest. I left the colony, stepping from the allure of a bad dream into a safer one. It was colder, getting dark. As I picked my way across a barren garden, my purloined souvenirs rattled in my beret, like bones.

## THE MOON AS A DOORBELL, THE SKY AS A PAN



Having lived so long in the city, I don't feel quite natural in nature. Nature hardly even seems *second* nature, but more like a trope for elements of urban culture. For example, those purple crocuses poking up, now that it's spring, remind me of fluorescent neon in Times Square. When they open a bit to show their golden filaments, they'll resemble black-light incandescent (instead of flower) bulbs. Pastel impatiens and sweet peas make me think of wave-softened bottle shards known to beachcombers as sea glass. I remind myself they're flowers. Once I overheard a woman praising the beauty of the sunset. I muttered, "Smog makes better sunsets. More interesting colors." There was no leeway to discuss the illusive hues of sullied heavens that exemplify industrial sundowns, for my remark was met by a chilly frown cast from withering heights. Another time, I'd erred in comparing the shiny curving sky, silvered at dusk, over a horizon of dusky shrubs, to a stainless steel pan with a tarnished bottom. An offended pragmatist retorted: "And I suppose you'd compare the moon to a doorbell?" "Yes!" I laughed, raising a finger to press the celestial bell and wondering who might come to the door.

Early one morning I went walking alone in a rural lane. I couldn't help but compare the honking Canada geese to flatulent jalopies. The taut ground was covered with dew-frost, glittering like sidewalk mica. The crows were like milestone markers. Invisible critters in the leaves sounded like a faraway factory clacking mechanically. But the scent in the air was like nothing human-made. It was the smell of newness, but not like new-car leather, or Ivory soap, or just-poured concrete on a construction site. The air smelled simply new. Kind of like rain.



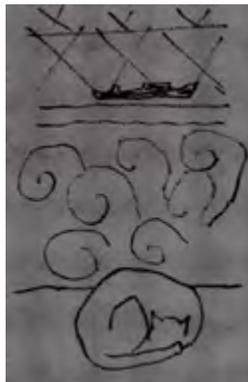
## THE CLOISTERS

You get to the Cloisters from Manhattan by taking the A train to 190<sup>th</sup> Street. Underground, you enter a large old elevator faintly lit by a flickering bulb. The door grates closed and the lift yanks upward, like a tired old Clydesdale heaving to its tired old feet. The ascent is slow and jarring, with plenty of time to observe the derelict cage. Hanging from a hook is a potted plant of indeterminate species, not exactly thriving. Its sparse vines sway listlessly with each lurch. The walls are covered with faded photos of baby animals from *Life* and *National Geographic*, which somehow contribute to the sinister gloom. There's a big, battered chair, whose cottony innards protrude from slashes in the dirty Naugahyde. Like the sullen bulb and the denatured plant, it too emits an indefinable air of despair. The chair, it seems, is the property—and persona—of the elevator operator, who bears a reified likeness to it (the way people come to resemble pets through entropic, almost conjugal association). The distressed upholstery's oozing stuffing resembles the operator's paunch, which peeps from the button-gaps of his brownish shirt. I imagine he lives here, in his semi-furnished elevator room, which for all I know may be an antechamber to an extended Stygian world of boiler closets, shaft-ways, and the remotest tracks of the underground. After a minute or so the elevator finally accomplishes a halt-gaited landing. With an audible shudder, it shimmies imprecisely to its berth.

Emerging from rank dimness into broad sunshine is a shock. The expanse of Ft. Tryon Park looks artificially green, the sky like a painted flat. After a longish walk, I spot the Cloisters rearing from its pediment, a craggy ledge as in Sassetta's "Stigmatization of St. Francis." Within are stained-glass rondelles, Gothic tomb slabs, sepulchral effigies of chevaliers, capitals carved with grotesqueries. The walkways are thick, dank and cool. In the Unicorn Tapestry chamber, I try to parse the symbolism of Christ's Incarnation. All the colors in the tapestries came from three plants. I examine the hues in the weave, and wondered who might have sat at the ancient loom.

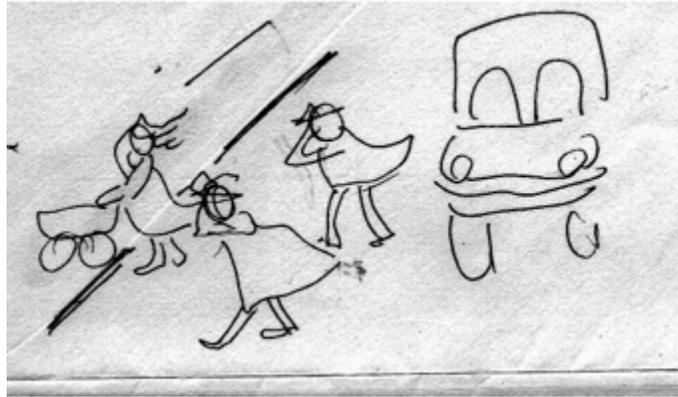
Outside, I survey the desultory Hudson, the gleaming bridge and majestic Palisades. In the colonnaded herb garden I play Hildegard von Bingen on my Walkman. All around are little wattled plots of pale-green herbs, and squat, gnarly quince trees, whose dwarfish proportions and fruit clusters look like illuminations in a Books of Hours. In the shop are books piled on a long wood table. I browse for a while, and when I glance up, the visitors across from me look just like the saints and apostles in my hands.

Time to find some java. I find a concession stand that's out of almost everything. But they do have coffee, which I sip on my pilgrimage back to the sepulchral elevator, with its clanging gate and shivering plants, which will ferry me by fits and bumps back to the present time.



## FLOWERS AND TOWERS

Today began drizzly, windy and chilly. An hour ago there was a brief snow of flakes like magnolia petals. Two minutes and a few seconds past one o'clock the time will be 01-02-03-04-05-06, a sequence that won't occur again for another thousand years. To herald this fleetest of seasons are flowering pear trees and other budders and bloomers. Dim green things, not there yesterday, today are poking up through pavements and in remnant potting soil. Restaurant windows display branches of quince and forsythia. Impromptu daffodils appear in coffee cans (or Steuben vases), glaring from smudged (or dazzling) windows in rent-stabilized walk-ups (or million-dollar lofts). The caustic yellow splotches outshine the red bulbs in elevator shaftways. This particular lover of rubble, at home in glass and steel, has renewed an incipient interest in nature. I appreciate every chance ailanthus emerging through sidewalk cracks, and curbside gingkos. I buy a sprout in a pot at the farmer's market. In a bookstore I leaf through gardening books.



From a damp wooden bench, I admire a prolix accretion of flower plots not unlike miniature graves. The wind duets with the hum of traffic and turns the small park into a self-contained and magical vortex. From a clutch of seed packets has sprung a miscellany of thready growth, jumbled like the wrong side of an embroidery. Come summer there'll be unwieldy, tremulous hollyhocks; peonies in tissue wads; day lilies & tiger lilies; marigolds, daisies with upward or downward petals. Rows of chartreuse wicks trussed to bamboo spindles. Purple alliums whose stems smell like scallions. Sunflowers big enough to stitch into quilts. Furry blooms in browns and violets: velvet-clad doyennes of matinees, petals drooping like downcast eyelashes. All infer indomitable fragility.

I wander to the viscous river, which flexes and ripples like a snail's foot. A girl hobbles by in a black nylon slip, one leg in a cast painted black. Flinty boys on skateboards arc wide, straighten, diminish, and vanish in the cycle of emergence and demise. New skyscrapers teeter like dinosaurs raising ungainly heads. The sky is gored with trusses, skeletal lifts, red cranes. I wander down to the empty marina, where, on Sept. 10, 2001, I had the thought: *One thing for sure—the twin towers will outlive me.*

## THE REMAINS OF THE BEAST

In Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, a cold-hearted butler in a great country house spurns the housekeeper's quiet offering of love. Eventually Mr. Stevens and Miss Kenton part ways. They meet just once more, years later, in the West Country, where Mr. Stevens has gone on holiday. Miss Kenton has capitulated to a nondescript marriage; she wistfully looks forward to grandchildren. When she asks what the future holds for Mr. Stevens, he coolly replies, "...there's work, work and more work"—as if work will guard his emotional oblivion into perpetuity. This is the portrait of a heartless man set in the landscape of a wasted life.

I once hankered after a similar sort of person, tried to paint him to capture his likeness, if not his love, but even his image was elusive. I scrubbed out the face, leaving a ghostly smudge, like Branwell Bronte's famous eradicated self-portrait. Was the struggle a subconscious ploy to keep my uncooperative subject both at large and at bay? What resulted was a study not of a man but of a relationship: the tracking of small advances and large retreats, the momentary gleams amid the obfuscations. Perhaps I'd conflated disparity with congruence, as when I failed to realize that while he was private but not secretive, I was secretive but not private. Multiply that misalliance a hundred times.

In the midst of this one-sided struggle, I reread "The Beast in the Jungle." With baroque subterfuge, Henry James drives the terror and tragedy of a theme that Ishiguro would use 85 years later in *Remains of the Day*. In "Beast," another woman stands by, also a kind of psychosexual lady-in-waiting. She too is silently devoted to a self-absorbed man who's both proximate to and distant from her life. John Marcher's sole interest in May Bartram is that she faithfully watch with him, year after year, as he waits for the Beast to spring—the Beast being whatever prodigious thing he's certain he's being kept for. He is as spiritually desiccated as March; she is as spiritually potent as May. She knows what it is but cannot tell him, nor can she save him from himself. Of course the "thing" would have been to love her. It would have been, as James says, "the chance to baffle his doom," just as the arid Stevens might have been saved (humanized) by Miss Kenton's love. In the end, Marcher's fatal oversight (or under sight) does spring at him, but too late, and he throws himself, in the horror of his realization, upon Miss Bartram's grave.

In trying to paint a portrait of this present day John Marcher, I wrestled with my own *bête noir*. With Jamesian irony the remains, the washout, the obscured effigy became a kind of inverse portrait. The thing that was to have emerged did emerge, the subject effaced, the erasure more telling than the elusive image I'd pursued. What finally sprang at me, in a shock-of-recognition, were my assumptions about a man I had imagined.

For John Marcher, Mr. Stevens and others of that ilk, an apt epitaph might be a caution from Seneca: "*Man's fear of his fate is often his fate. Leaping to avoid it, he meets it.*"



## COZY ZONES



What a sweet little, quiet little, provincial city Philadelphia is, compared to NYC. (I suppose anywhere one is NOT is bound to seem more peaceful than where one actually is.) Philly was big to me when I entered the University of Pennsylvania, in 1971. I'd grown up in sleepy 60's Miami when it was still tropically rural and slow. For culture, we'd drive out to the Tamiami Trail to watch alligator wrestling, or visit the Everglades to watch the swamps and egrets and vie with the mosquitos. I thought I'd stay in Miami for good, but to my surprise I went north to college. Sarah Lawrence was tucked in a Westchester suburb like a tranquil Tudor village. I rarely went into New York, as close as it was, for various neurotic reasons. After college I vaulted to Philadelphia for more school. It took a while to adapt to a municipal psyche: public transport, anonymous populace, lunch-meat buildings that ran the spectrum from liverwurst gray to olive-loaf green. Refuge is a state of being, but being in a raucous hullabaloo doesn't help one's quest for peace.

The University was a self-sufficient hamlet of picturesque old buildings: College Hall, on the quad, seemed a gothic movie set (the model for the Addams family manse; Charles Addams was a Penn alum). The art department occupied a cauldron-walled Romanesque fortress of red stone designed by Frank Furness, famous for his train stations. The campus architecture was both formidable and inviting. The scale was embracing, not alienating, as post-modern buildings can be. Center City and Rittenhouse Square had their muted charm. I would have settled in Philadelphia, but fate nudged me a couple inches farther up the map, in 1974, to an even bigger city.

In New York, provincialism is rare. You find it more downtown than uptown, more on the West Side than the East. For intimate nooks you borough-in to Brooklyn and Staten Island. In Manhattan, your options are fewer, but you can always peek through a fence at a churchyard lawn, or amble in a Village mews, or revel in some potted tulips on a loading dock. On Duane St., someone is cultivating weeds on the old metal overhang.

Finding cozy zones is challenging amid anonymity, noise, and colossal scale. Take banks, for instance. Old Miami banks were more like family rooms with indoor palms, stucco walls, sailboat-prints. The tellers smiled and knew your name. How different from New York banks—mausoleums of impenetrability, towering ceilings diminishing even millionaires, massive dusty windows filtering out sunlight, the dispiriting formality. Until recently, banks avoided colors other than black, white or gray, save the bit of red on a deposit slip. Things are changing, though. Financial institutions are trying a “user-friendly” approach, replacing bulletproof glass with armed security guards and painting the walls with heart-stopping geometrics. Happily, they're also replacing “NO PETS ALLOWED!” signs with bowls of dog biscuits. Despite such improvements, many banks retain an imperiousness meant to reflect the sere, serious tendering of money. But one grim bank sports an unexpected whiff of bonhomie. On a teller's bullet-proof window, a sign: “Beware Strangers Attempting Distractions By Squirted Mustard Or Catsup On Your Person.”

## TRAIN PASSAGES

The journey is the goal, say the sages. So, along the way, are new impressions. A train will float through landscapes of extraordinary imagery, inviting one to succumb to the paradox of transience and timelessness. I note – and then note down – passages like these:

### NY TO PHILADELPHIA (AMTRAK)

We hurtle out of Penn Station (NY). Tints are vivid and shadows rich. The westward sun smacks the factories. Under arched highways, weeds with palomino manes dance in quirky, gooseflesh ponds. The azure-and-ermine sky turns yellowish fish-eye gray. Spectral white oil tanks like World's Fair relics slowly wheel by... Newark... Metropark...Trenton, one by one flash gold domes and charred spires. Between cities lie factories; between factories, fossil-skinned houses, misshapen as pinch-pots. A pasture of new lumber, industrial plants, neat tense trees, black parking lots with chalked slots...

Spectacular wasteland. Chalice-shaped allsorts mounds (like sopping wash) reel out continuums of multiplicities: Mount PlasticGallonJug, Mount BlackRubberTire, Mount RustedIronWorks. Soutine-scribble of foliage: apricot, ginger, chartreuse. A glassine sky. Pollen-tawny leaves. A flash of madder-red fields, ridged as the roof of a mouth or the floor of an ocean.

So much forest whips by so fast, the colors bleed in spitfire foreground massacres. Through an occasional breach I see (as through a funnel or a tunnel) a farmscape rounding slowly in the distance, a charm reflected in deep wood, the hand-mirror belonging to Beauty's Beast.

### II. NY TO MATWAN (NJ TRANSIT)

Twenty-minute chug through landfill of yellow grass basted with green copper cables. Poles arranged in groups, like Calvary. An empty armature of dispirited billboard scaffolds propped against a newsprint sky. Power lines suture the ozone, intricate as Klee drawings or cat's-cradle twine. A tableau of gas-belching, combustible structures in stricken industrial cities: Elizabeth...Bethune.... Monstrous depopulated refineries with scum-lidded, multi-mullioned windows cracked ajar in dusty rhombuses, glinting in the glowering sun. Stalky white towers with spiral stairs like nobbed spines; knolls of shattered glass; car parts packed in scintillate cubes...

The black bridge skyway—leviathan roller-coaster, something from *Bladerunner* (antediluvian & futuristic)—cradles tonnage in surreal embrace: complex of black X's, galaxy of girders. We hang over a viscous river that's rife with effluvia, and ominously roiling in dun corrugations...

At Penn Station (Newark), we wait for the Matawan train. In the tracks: rusted stakes, spikes, lath. Birds clamor in riveted rafters. The next train scrapes in, chuffs us off through another linkage of idle, old, empty towns. On the pallid vista, acid-yellow forsythia imposes its intrusion of blooms. The willows, thinking about coming into leaf, trail sparse tresses like pickle-juice tearstains. Describo ergo sum. I sit back, lullabuoyed along hilly raillands; coast over Lilliputia; muse on what I might find in Matawan, to furnish a private micro-world of my begetting.

## SOCIAL LIFE



Tribeca, late '70s. Getting coffee at the bodega, I run into a painter named Roy. I know him to nod to; I sometimes see him with his shepherd, West, on West Street, or up on the West Side Highway: The truncated, disused elevation has become something of an unrestricted dog run, as has the land fill beach between the highway and the river. Roy apparently has forgotten my name, but he mentions, as an offhand invitation, a party tonight on Vestry Street. I give a “maybe I’ll drop by” shrug.

Around 9 p.m. I enter a big loft space. A throng of Isadora Duncans is leaping about in flapping Moroccan pantaloons, flying scarves and kurtas. The occasion, I learn, is a bon voyage for someone named Jacqueline, off to teach dance at the U. of Melbourne, in Australia. I head for a paint-encrusted trolley converted into a temporary buffet: Twin Gallo gallons (red and white), punch bowl, Jarlesburg, Triscuits, pretzels, chips; pastel dips shiny as rabbit-skin glue. Hanging around the food are poet-types in black and purple with faces like albino rabbits and bodies like Scandinavian flatware. The artists are in splotched jeans that have been half-devoured by turps. I’ve been so busy lately with my factotum non-career, I haven’t painted in two weeks, but dress the part: Pearl Paint t-shirt, watch cap, old denims, and spattered penny-loafers with subway tokens in the slots.

Averse to dancing and noise, I pour a Yellow Mellow Vodka and wander off to explore the rooms on the outskirts of the loft—partitions defined by raw sheetrock or paisley bedspreads hung from string. Art is everywhere—the gloomy first bursts of dubious potential relieved sporadically by Fauve and Nabis posters. Pinned to one quilt-partition hangs a row of postcards—traces of someone’s cross-country itinerary. Another cluttered makeshift space defines a sort of kitchen. Many of the books, in stacked crates, are in duplicate or triplicate—telltale signs of someone’s multiple relationships. The john is huge

and gray; jerry-rigged shower with a plastic drop-cloth curtain, strange toilet on a plinth. No sink: toothbrushes are in the kitchen, in a Bustello can.

Back at the refreshments, I swallow another Yellow Mellow. To my surprise, a guy beckons me to dance. It's too noisy to say no. Reluctantly I put down my cup and try to approximate the proximate arabesques and pirouettes. My partner shouts, "Are you a professional dancer?" revealing that either (1) he's drunk, (2) he has no sense of movement, or (3) I am faking it okay. His name is Gabriel (I think); he's an aspiring architect (I think).

Pretty soon the balance fluid in my inner ear is spinning like Blue Whisk in a Maytag. I keep losing him. When the music abruptly slows and the decibels drop, he pops in front of me and takes me in his arms. The song is "I Only Have Eyes For You," by the Flamingos. Suddenly I'm back in Miami, in seventh grade....

*When a mid-afternoon rain-shower surprises us out on the Phys. Ed. Field, we're usually sent to Study Hall for the rest of the period. Today, no such luck. We're herded into the gym, which is unctuous with humidity, trapped air and sweat. To our dismay, we're forced to dance. Above the groans and giggles, the desiccated Phys. Ed. Teachers (white Bermuda shorts and polo shirts, whistles on cords around crepey necks, faces like leather handbags) warn: If we try to skip, we'll get F's in Effort and Conduct.*

*The gym is rife with pubescent reluctance. I'm poised to fight-flight-freeze. Barely 5' tall at age 12, I'm paired with a huge, damp boy with oily black hair. We face off uneasily. A slow song scratches to a start over the staticky PA: "I Only Have Eyes For You." Mine are fixed on his yellow-checked, clammy, whale-like midsection. The boy wraps a log-like arm around my waist, engulfs my right hand in the Mazola-moist cavern of his left. He smells like Arby's roast beef. Awkwardly, in the malodorous atmosphere of Shenandoah Junior High, we begin to shift from side to side.*

*Then, he starts getting creative and his dips deepen. Who does he think he is, Ricky Ricardo? Now I'm leaning so far to the left that my right saddle shoe lifts high above the concrete floor. My foot dangles in midair, waving like a skyscraper-suicide with second thoughts. I am powerless. The boy is oblivious. The Flamingos croon on and on. I feel like a flamingo myself, wings clipped, blushing pink, teetering on one knobby leg.*

*I vow never in my whole life to go to another dance... but...*

It's not so bad, eighteen years later, shuffling anonymously to the same song, this time with both feet down. Gabriel and I circle about the crowded room and find ourselves in front of a huge wardrobe with missing doors. The shelves are crammed with wooden shapes and dusty-rusty tools which remind me of Louise Nevelson sculptures, which I'd just seen at the Whitney, where an entire floor was divided into three rooms painted one color each: black, white, and gold. The monochromatic sculptures, in their color-coded rooms, almost disappeared. As did I, dressed in black, lingering in guess which room.

Mrs. Nevelson arrived wearing gold and white, a wide-brim hat and her famous centipede-like eyelashes. A subdued hubbub lasted until 11, when she quietly slipped away. Hanging over the first-floor landing, I saw her climb into a long black car idling on Madison. She drank something in the back seat, with three dark strangers—studio assistants? Sons? Their faces glowed like embers under the streetlamp. One of them looked like a boy I had an unrequited crush on in tenth grade, who never knew my name. Now, come to think of it, I can't remember his.

## INTRUSIONS, RECOLLECTED IN TRANQUILITY

Night gathers in: a tented, cochlear quietude. A holiday has emptied the city. A rain has burnished the roads into shiny otter bodies. The animals sleep: cats curled in Celtic knots; dogs stretched out, gently twitching with dreams. Despite the classic peace, I'm still vibrating from the intrusive clangor of crush-hour.



Huddled masses on the platform, yearning to be gone, squeezed into the train. With no escape from bodies pressing all around, I took refuge in the subway ads. Such as:

PREGNANT? WE CAN HELP! DIAL 800-NOT-PREGS.

ANAL WARTS? LET US DO THE TRICK! DIAL 900-GET-DOWN.

TORN EARLOBE? NOT TO WORRY! DIAL 900-LOBEJOB.

HEMORRHOIDS? DON'T SIT THEM OUT! CALL US!

BAD SKIN? CALL DR. ZITSMORE. CONVENIENT MIDTOWN LOCATION.

LAWSUIT FRAUD? GUESS WHO PAYS? YOU DO!

TIRED OF THAT TATTOO? TOO BAD! BUT CALL: 800-REMORSE

Some may shun such ads as intrusive, and ward them off behind *The National Enquirer* or *Vanity Fair*. But seasoned New Yorkers are resigned to intrusions, whether physical, aural, visual or psychic. Printed on a security-company van is the announcement: "FREE INTRUSION DETECTION" – a bit intrusive in itself. The notion of personal space is relegated to the realm of mythology, or wishful thinking. Subways are the epitome of intrusiveness. You must endure ear-splitting rackets emanating from other people's Ipods. You get pushed and trounced. The average body takes up one-and-a-half subway seats (those negligible dips along the steel bench designed by diminutive Japanese), so you're apt to share your allotted indentation with the buttock and thigh of a perfect stranger, or two.

It's hard even for a reclusive type to avoid intrusion—as its victim and/or perpetrator. My habit of foraging is a case in point. Whenever I needed objets trouvés with which to perform bricolage, I'd hunt the streets at night. Decades ago it was easier; Soho and Tribeca, still industrial, were largely deserted after dark. Curb-clotting dumpsters were

often filled with surprises, like the contents of an entire building that was renovated or razed: 40 years of office furniture, curling brown ledgers, a lifetime of assiduous ciphers. No harm in appropriating desk drawers in which to build dioramas, but perusing someone's old records did seem somewhat intrusive.

Before the esplanade was built, I'd comb the landfill along the Hudson. One listless day, with no one around, I spied a junked electrical box, and tramped over rubble, wildflowers, tractor parts and lumber to get it. Just as I reached for my prize, a deep voice bellowed: "Ma'am! Oh Ma'am!" I swept up the box and kept walking. Doubtless eager for a breather from his guard-shack, the uniformed giant trailed me to the road. "You're intruding on private property," he called. "Who, me?" I gasped, purloined box in hand. He said, "I saw you take that thing from the site." I babbled: "It looks like garbage to me. Doesn't it look like garbage to you?" I must have taken the guard off-guard: his accusatory frown turned into one of curiosity. He took the box and examined it. Just a rusty old thing. He said, "This is Battery Park, lady, you can't just come in here and take things." I explained, "I make art out of found objects. What do you think? Is this trash, or someone's property?" Apparently stumped, he handed it back. "Keep it," he said drily. "Maybe I'll see it again some day...in a museum."

Once I found a stash of beautiful lacquered sticks in a refuse bin outside a shoji shop in Soho. I gathered as much as I could carry and returned the next night for more. But someone had beat me to it and was already at the furtive browse. Hey! I protested silently. Was he after what I was after? Filled with a proprietary sort of panic, I hoped he was a minimalist, and would take minimally. Then I saw him: a scratch-bearded, wall-eyed, filthy, crazed Dickensian wreck. My greed waned. Maybe he needed the sticks to burn in a trashcan, for warmth. Deferentially I said: "Any good wood?" Unfurling odors, he glared at me and roared, "Wood? What wood?" "Well," I said, "what *are* you looking for?" Squinting disdainfully, he snarled: "Gold, sweetheart! Gold!" So I backed away, loath to intrude on his hoard.



## SUNDAY REPORT

From Friday through Saturday a series of cinematic storms brewed, complete with lemony lightning and tenebrous skies. The thunder was in surround-sound. The rain spilled slantwise. Street signs clanked like wind chimes. Tugboats, pushing scows of scrap, churned in the fog. Today, Sunday, is as good as its word. The lily pond is lively under a boisterous waterfall. Brilliant colors: papyrus, brindled koi, emerald-necked mallards. Beyond the pond, a brick gazebo seems, as always, in a snit. I can't imagine what it's for, except maybe to weather in. Breezes make everything flap. The river is wrinkled and ruffled like an unmade bed. Sailboats puff and billow like linen on a line, or the Sunday Times aspread the unmade bed. Sails mirror kites flown by kids in the bottle-green fields. A gaff-rigged ketch tacks and leans.

Joggers, bikers, inline skaters. Many walkers: The young are looked over, and the old are overlooked. Readers on benches on the esplanade. One man with a highlighter marks a book on atomic structure. Another peruses a small-print, pictureless journal. Paperbacks from Trollope to Jhumpa Lahiri. Not one copy of *The DaVinci Code*.

In the glassed-in Wintergarden, the giraffe-like palms, like caged pets, emote an air of melancholy, as confined things do. (Their fronds, while not exactly crestfallen, don't look quite chlorophyllophilic enough.) Tourists come from everywhere to view Ground Zero. The New Yorkers are distinguished by their pallor. Also by the tentative quality of their perching as if, loath to relax even on a Sunday, they're wound to spring into rush hour, a mere twenty hours hence.



## READING FREELY INTO JANE EYRE: A SUBJECTIVE APPRECIATION

### **Part I: *Jane Eyre* and the Symbolic Landscape**

All of Jane's abodes are stifling, suppressive, stagnating. As an outcast at Gateshead, she's imprisoned in the nightmarish red-room. Lowood School is a Procrustes' bed of conformity: any natural self-expression, and body and spirit are racked and lopped. The name (low-wood) is reminiscent of coffins. Even spacious Thornfield Hall seems stultifying when Rochester is away. Moore House is a haven, but more house than home. "I never had a home," she tells St. John; she must vacate the premises at once when he pressures her into conceding to a life with him, which would be anathema to her nature.

Jane does better outdoors. She jumps at the chance to get out and walk two miles in midwinter to post a letter; re-entering Thornfield, she is "loathe to quell...the faint excitement" her walk wakened, doubtless aroused by her chance first meeting with Rochester, which could have occurred only out-of-doors. Her initial impression of him is man-cum-animal. The dog-horse-man appears as a starting, rearing, heaving, stamping, clattering, barking, baying and cursing unit—the portrait of a satyr too large for any Hall wall. Returning to Thornfield she quells her "faint excitement," having no reason yet to associate the house with the man.

Later, Jane's three-day struggle on the moors, where she is as mythically unaccommodated as Lear, proves an ordeal almost too brutal to recount. But survive she does, demonstrating that her human nature is a match for larger Nature. Home is only with Rochester. After a temporary absence from Thornfield, she says: "I am strangely glad to get back again to you: and wherever you are is my home—my only home." At novel's end their home together is Ferndean, and the penultimate chapter ends: "We entered the wood, and wended homeward"—homeward and Edward being the same.

Landscapes of the imagination symbolize inner states. Ten-year-old Jane looks at a book whose pictures she will never forget. Years later she unconsciously renders them in paintings of her own, as primary, prescient images representing her inner self. *Jane Eyre*, page one. Hidden in a window-seat (the source of a lifelong habit, where she is not separated, visually at least, from plain air), Jane reads Bewick's *History of British Birds*, illustrated with wood engravings of Arctic landscapes. Bewick's introductory pages serve as introductory pages to *Jane Eyre*. The inner visions of her inner life are born here, nature images later reinvented as cathartic self-expression: "The solitary rocks and promontories...; the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space—that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice...glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surrounded the pole, and concentrate the multiplied rigours of extreme cold." Her commentary: "Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own...The words...gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking."

Eight years later, three watercolors painted at Lowood particularly attract Rochester's interest. One is Jane's depiction of the "half-submerged mast" of a wrecked ship upon which lurks a "cormorant, dark and large," holding in its beak a jeweled bracelet snatched from the "frail frame" of a drowned corpse. The cormorant is a Bertha-image: "...up in the locked attic: the voice of...a carrion-seeking bird of prey." As Rochester says, "When I think of the thing which flew at me this morning, hanging its black and scarlet visage over the nest of my dove..." Bertha snatches Thornfield and Rochester's intended gifts from Jane. The "wreck just sinking" foreshadows Jane's wandering self-exile. The wrecked ship hints of the incinerated Thornfield; the cormorant on the mast is Bertha on

the rooftop. Moreover, Bewick's "object of terror" to young Jane is "a black, horned thing seated on a rock, surrounding a gallows"—which augurs Bertha on the roof, her execution by breakneck fall; the madwoman as nemesis or albatross on her husband's back.

Another watercolor, depicting a "pinnacle of an iceberg piercing a polar white sky" is a subject plucked right from Jane's Bewicked imagination, "a head—a colossal head" resting against an iceberg—the very image of Rochester "cushioning his massive head against the swelling back of his chair," with light thrown on his granite-hewn, prominent brow, like one of Bewick's "solitary rocks and promontories," a "rock standing up alone." The eye in Jane's picture is "hollow and fixed, blank of meaning, but for the glassiness of despair," and above the temples "gleamed a ring of white flame" which is prescient of blinded Rochester, whose hollow eye expressed only despair, whose "cicatrized visage" bore his white badge of courage, a fire-scar. And the thin, supportive hands in Jane's drawing work out to be none other than her own, as she supports Rochester, body and soul, from beginning to end. "Each picture told a story," Jane says of Bewick's *History*. Indeed. She remembers: "With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy; happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption." Eight years hence, Rochester asks Jane, "Were you happy when you painted these pictures?" Jane replies, "I was absorbed [read "uninterrupted"], sir: yes, and I was happy."



## Part II: Reed-Rivers-Rochester: Miss Eyre's Three R's

Throughout *Jane Eyre*, character foils display correlative psychological types that lace together a rich and patulous plot. They operate like a system of repeated musical motifs in a story of Romantic wildness—passion, rage and madness—which are set like gems in a narrative as solid as a crown.

Two pastors bracket the book. The Reverend Robert Brocklehurst, of the Lowood Orphan Asylum, is as brimstony and sadistic as the Reverend St. John Rivers is glacial and prohibitive. Ten-year-old Jane first sees Brocklehurst as a "black pillar": "the straight, narrow, sable-clad shape standing erect on the rug: the grim face at the top was like a carved mask, placed above the shaft by way of capital." St. John, by contrast, is likened to a Greek statue: "Had he been a statue instead of a man ..." with a Grecian face "as colorless as ivory ..." St. John Rivers is a foil to Rochester, as well. Just as St. John is moral, religious and forbidding, slim and blond, Rochester is amoral, exhibitionistic, undisciplined, broad and dark. St. John, in fact, is the callous, icy, Apollonian opposite of Vulcan-like Rochester who, along with his epithetical animals, is the quintessential Dionysian, pre-spiritual man.

Unlike the bracketing pastors, Bertha Mason and Blanche Ingram are foils who coexist in time. They may be read as latent aspects of Jane Eyre herself; symbolically, they are one character projected as two stages of regression—Bertha is a vampire, who sucks her brother's blood; while Blanche is a gold-digging vamp, sans ire. The roof from which

Bertha jumps at Thornfield is foreshadowed by Jane's description of returning to Gateshead, where her aunt is dying, in a passage redolent of spiritual transformation:

On a dark, misty, raw morning in January, I had left a hostile roof [Gateshead] with a desperate and embittered heart—a sense of outlawry and almost of reprobation—to seek the chilly harbourage of Lowood: that bourne so far away and unexplored. The same hostile roof now again rose before me: my prospects were doubtful yet; and I had yet an aching heart. I still felt as a wanderer [Rochester's frequent epithet for her, as: "go up home, and stay your weary little wandering feet at a friend's threshold"] on the face of the earth; but I experienced firmer trust in myself and my own powers, and less withering dread of oppression. The gaping wound of my wrongs, too, was now quite healed; and the flame of resentment extinguished.

The wicked siblings at the start of the novel—John, Eliza and Georgiana Reed—are Jane's cousins, and the odious counterparts of a second set of benevolent cousins, again two sisters and a brother: St. John, Mary and Diana Rivers. As a child, Jane is disowned by the Reeds. As an adult, she claims the Rivers as family and fellow heirs and shares her inheritance with them. Rochester's ward, Adele, possesses Jane's innocence. Governess and charge were both abject because unloved as children, but Adele is materially spoiled, where Jane was deprived. The story elaborates the contrasting minds and educations of the two. While Adele is irritating, solipsistic and demanding, it is she who brings Jane to Rochester in the first place. She symbolically manifests Jane's burgeoning, if tacit, regard for the illusive master, her sexual awakening, and Adele's adoration is as clamorous as Jane's is checked. Scorned or ignored by her guardian, the little French girl complains mightily, occasionally deflects her affection onto Rochester's surrogate, the dog Pilot, and persists in vying for the attention of her evasive father-figure. Her flagrant physical coquetry is antipodal to Jane's witty ripostes. The child's premenstrual-pink dress, which she "disembowels" from its gift box, contrasts with Jane's severe governess togs. But the two merge, as when Adele unknowingly promotes Jane's inchoate interests regarding Rochester. It is she who brings Jane's watercolors to his attention, unwittingly inviting him to explore Jane's soul.



### **Part III: Domination & Independence**

Though Edward Rochester is master over his "paid subordinate," Jane Eyre is authentically independent in spirit. She transcends social convention, cannot be captured, and Rochester is equally attracted to and bemused by her singularity. The two constantly exchange ripostes and silences, and watch and vex each other. They impose absence on each other as well. Rochester is apt to gallop off (his horse is named "Mesroure," "pleasure" in Arabic) at any moment, causing Jane great anxiety. "Will he leave again soon?" she frets. Later: "Journey!—Is Mr. Rochester gone anywhere? I did not know he was out," followed by a resolve to keep her "raptures" and "agonies" to herself.

But she makes an abrupt departure herself, returning to Gateshead and to the odious Aunt Reed, who is dying. Here she learns of her uncle John Eyre's will and of her inheritance, the source of financial independence. Rochester can come and go as he pleases, but he does not want her ever to leave him. He prolongs the good-bye, resists and abhors it. In the end, he exacts a pledge: "Promise me only to stay a week" (an archetypal

span, as in Creation story of Genesis, and as the Beast begged Beauty, called home to her father's deathbed, to stay away no longer than one week). For her journey he gives her more money than what he owes her for her salary. She protests that she has no change; he says he wants no change, but then reconsiders and tries to turn her stipend into collateral. "Better not to give you all now; you would, perhaps, stay away three months if you had fifty pounds. There is ten, is that not plenty?" Yes, Jane says, but now he owes her five. "Come back for it, then," he enjoins. Now he regrets giving her the means of independence: "I wish I had only offered you a sovereign...Give me back nine pounds, Jane; I've a use for it." But Jane throws the ball back handily:

"And so have I, sir," I returned, putting my hands and my purse behind me...

"Little niggard!" said he, "refusing me a pecuniary request! Give me five pounds, Jane."

"Not five shillings, sir, nor five pence."

"Just let me look at the cash."

"No, sir; you are not to be trusted!"

"Jane!"

"Sir?"

"Promise me one thing." [This makes two things.]

"I'll promise you anything, sir, that I think I am likely to perform."

"Not to advertise; and to trust his quest of a situation to me. I'll find you one in time."

But he cannot lord it over her entirely. She will not be dominated, though his style of courtship verges on the sadistic. When they become engaged, Rochester wants to dress her up, possess her, chain her with jewelry; but Jane stands fast, will accept neither jewels nor domination, insists on her identity. Still, she manipulates him: "I knew the pleasure of vexing and soothing him by turns; it was one I chiefly delighted in, and a sure instinct always prevented me from going too far; beyond the verge of provocation I never ventured; on the extreme brink I liked to try my skill."

One device of seduction is that of looking: the askance glance; the penetrating gaze; secret observation back and forth. From the start she scrutinizes his face, which arouses his curiosity about her; as, "with a single hasty glance [he] seemed to dive into my eyes"; or, "He seemed to devour me with his flaming glance." Jane is often behind some curtain, secretly watching—or stealing away from a potential encounter. From her window-seat she thinks: "I am not looking...yet I see him enter...No sooner did I see that his attention was riveted on them, and that I might gaze without being observed..." She thinks he hasn't noticed, which stimulates her: "He made me love him without looking at me." The day after she rescues him (from fire this time), she thinks: "I both wished and feared to see Mr. Rochester on the day which followed this sleepless night: I wanted to hear his voice again, yet feared to meet his eye." His deliberate evasiveness contrasts with his cold scrutiny of the beautiful, conniving, conventional Blanche, with whom he is constantly on guard—with Jane examining the whole show.

Back and forth Rochester and Jane describe and analyze each other. From her point of view it is she who is doing the observing while Rochester remains aloof. But he has, of course, noticed her from the start: "I observed you—myself unseen—I could both listen and watch." ... "I was...stimulated with what I saw: I liked what I had seen, and wished to see more." He follows her when she slips from the room (she thinks unseen); he observes that she is "getting paler...as I saw at first sight." He has been aware of her all along, and even maneuvers her responses by caprice. But perhaps Jane knows that he knows, and is playing along all the while.

Thornfield symbolizes Rochester's mystery (to Jane he seems an unexplored room; he holds keys to forbidden chambers, "mystic cells"). In the middle of one night she barges

into his chamber to save him from fire. An intimate call is sanctified by a symbolic baptism as she drenches him, along with the flames. (The fire-and-water trope appears often in myth; cf. Tamino's initiation by fire and water in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.) The night Bertha mauls her brother, Rochester appears at Jane's door to marshal her aid as co-conspirator. He sends her twice to his room, to rummage in the drawers of his wardrobe for a phial containing some illicit crimson tincture.

Jane's innocence cloaks real insight, unrealized by Rochester, who takes pleasure in toying with her. The novel reads like an elaborate courtship ballet in which the two alternately present and revoke themselves in an ever-building cat-and-mouse parley. Nor is it always apparent who is predator. In their first encounter, she arbitrates their roles as master and dependent, roles that are ultimately reversed. Having helped him limp to his horse after the icy skid, Rochester asks who she is. "Ah, the governess!" he says, without revealing his own identity. He uses the occasion to fish for information, or to tease:

"Whose house is it?"

"Mr. Rochester's."

"Do you know Mr. Rochester?"

"No, I have never seen him."

"He is not resident, then?"

"No."

"Can you tell me where he is?"

"I cannot."

Later, disguised as a gypsy, Rochester uses the same ploy to discover Jane's feelings:

"Is there not one face you study? You don't know the gentlemen here? You have not exchanged a syllable with one of them? Will you say that of the master of the house?"

"He is not at home."

"...A most ingenious quibble!...Does that...blot him, as it were, out of existence?"

Jane's dawning awareness is triggered not by the intellect, but by her gifted feeling. Rags and soot do not prevent the usually vigilant Jane from falling into a kind of trance, a hypnotic swoon. "Where was I? Did I wake or sleep? Had I been dreaming?" she wonders, realizing that the gypsy had "wrapped me in a kind of dream," involving her in a "web of mystification." Jane Eyre hits the "nail straight ton the head" in guessing that Rochester is slyly drawing her out—or in; and leading her on.

As has been suggested, they lead each other on. "I do not like to walk at this hour alone with Mr. Rochester in the shadowy orchards." Jane may not like it, but out she goes, protesting too much. "No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like...Here one could wander unseen..." Her panic at his appearance seems almost disingenuous. "I must flee...I see Mr. Rochester entering...if I sit still he will never see me...I can slip away unnoticed." But Rochester, his back to her, begins a conversation; as she is "sheepishly retreating," he entices her to stay "while sunset is thus at meeting with moonrise," a redolent innuendo worthy of Coleridge.

The moon appears again shortly after Rochester alters Jane's fate (temporarily) by his proposal. The blood-red disk passes between the fissure of the rent chestnut tree. (A suggestive romantic image, a la Coleridge: "All in a hot and copper sky, / The bloody Sun, at noon, / Right up above the mast did stand, / No bigger than the Moon.") The stricken tree is Rochester's namesake and pagan twin. It is "a ruin, but an entire ruin," just as Rochester becomes a ruined man, yet somehow intact. When Jane says, "I faced the wreck of the

chestnut-tree; it stood up, black and riven,” she foretells of Rochester at the end: “His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour...his port was still erect, his hair was still raven-black...” The wounded tree (its circular bench symbolic of a wedding-band) portends Rochester’s suffering. Only when blind does he become inwardly sighted, like an Oedipus, Tiresius, or Gloucester. And in this state of humility and insight Rochester is finally the equal of his counterpart.

#### **Part IV: Jane, Cordelia and Cinderella**

From once-upon-a-time to happily-ever-after, Jane Eyre is an elaborate fairy tale involving equivalent factors of wicked stepsisters and stepmothers, lost fortunes, found relatives, superhuman journeys—even a castle surrounded by thorns. The novel is particularly close to the Cinderella story. Jane and Cinderella are deserving and pure, but degraded and humiliated by cruel relatives. In the fairy tale, the Prince searches for the elusive owner of a tiny glass slipper that had been lost at a ball. All the eligible girls are urged to try the slipper, but none can squeeze her foot into the glass shoe. The Prince learns of a poor, obscure girl who has been overlooked; the shoe fits; the match is set. In Jane Eyre, Rochester, disguised as a gypsy, sends his footman into the drawing room to invite the eligible young ladies to have their fortunes told. Blanche and Mary Ingram and the Eshton sisters, haughty and silly, emerge from their interviews displeased and rattled. The footman [the footman in Cinderella is a crucial messenger as well] says: “The gypsy declares that there is another young single lady in the room who had not been to her yet...” So Jane takes her turn. Rochester finally reveals his identity, and only to her, establishing an exclusive intimacy between them: she alone is fit to confide in. According to Bruno Bettelheim, the Prince’s act of slipping the shoe onto Cinderella’s foot is a betrothal symbol, as a groom slips a ring on his bride’s finger. Perhaps Rochester’s revelation is an equivalent spiritual betrothal, as is the circular bench around the chestnut tree under which he proposed.



Jane Eyre is essentially sublime in character, as is Lear’s youngest daughter Cordelia. Jane’s cruel cousins Eliza and Georgiana Reed are versions of Goneril and Regan. Jane calls them “selfish” and “heartless.” Cordelia (whose name means “heart”), like Jane, is the heart’s desire (and both are called “spirit”) of a flawed, larger-than-life tragic hero. Each girl defends her integrity against the temptation of excess. Cordelia won’t eulogize her father or bow to his arrogance; Jane won’t succumb to Rochester’s seductive games. Both heroines remain taciturn rather than condescending to showy conversation. Pressured, Jane says nothing. This pregnant “nothing” dwells in both Jane Eyre and King Lear, a significant metronomic pulse. Truth needs no description, fanfare, or apology: it is “the shape which shape has none,” as Jane says. Rochester tries to talk her into talking:

“...It would please me now to draw you out...therefore speak.”

Instead of speaking, I smiled; and not a very complacent or submissive smile either.

“Speak,” he urged...

Accordingly I sat and said nothing: “If he expects me to talk for the mere sake of talking and showing off, he will find he has addressed himself to the wrong person,” I thought.

“You are dumb, Miss Eyre.”

I was dumb still. He bent his head a little toward me, and with a single hasty glance seemed to dive into my eyes.

Lear and Cordelia have a related interview:

Lear. ...what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sister? Speak.

Cordelia. Nothing, my lord.

Lear. Nothing?

Cordelia. Nothing.

Lear. Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

Cordelia. Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth.

I love your majesty according to my bond; no more nor less.

When Jane discovers Bertha Mason’s existence, she goes to her room and endures a lone and mighty moral struggle, to which Rochester laments, “You shut yourself up and grieve alone!” When Cordelia learns of her sisters’ treachery and father’s madness: “...away she started/To deal with grief alone.” Jane faints in Rochester’s arms; Cordelia dies in Lear’s arms. Though the one embrace ends with departure and the other with death, the dramatic effect is parallel.

Gloucester, an echo of Lear, achieves insight only when blinded, like Rochester. Gloucester’s lament: “I stumbled when I saw” relates to Rochester’s: “Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see.” Gloucester must “see feelingly” as does Rochester, and their exclamations are virtually identical: “Oh! I *cannot* see, but I must feel, or my heart will stop and my brain burst” (and Edgar says, Viii: “O, that my heart would burst!”). Rochester cries, “Whatever, whoever you are, be perceptible to the touch, or I cannot live!” Gloucester, yearning for his son, says, “Oh, dear son Edgar.../Might I but live to see thee in my touch,/I’d say I had eyes again!”

Rochester’s world reflects his hellish state: “To live, for me...is to stand on a crater-crust which may crack and spue fire any day.” How like Lear’s mad inner world, reflected by the storm on the heath: “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!/You cataracts and hurricanes, spout.../You sulphurous and thought-executing fires.../Crack nature’s moulds...” [III:ii:1]. Though Cordelia does not survive the world’s madness and man’s duplicated errors, Jane prevails, retains faith and self, and emerges to lead Rochester, re-formed through remorse and repentance, and who can finally meet her all the way.



## A LUST FOR (LITERARY) LISTS

Safe to say that most humans like making lists, and that itemizations appear throughout literature. Take the biblical inventories (the Creation story is an elaborate series of lists; the vertexes of “begat” passages; the Ten Commandments, etc.; in the NT, the list of Jesus’s lineage; list of Beatitudes, etc.). Homeric catalogues inventory ships and weaponry. More modern writers concoct lists too, as the nautical lists in *Moby-Dick*. F. Scott Fitzgerald penned this famous sartorial list in *The Great Gatsby*:

...he opened for us two hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits and dressing-gowns and ties, and his shirts, piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high... He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. ...shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue.

Fitzgerald again, from *Tender is the Night*:

...She bought coloured beads, folding beach cushions, artificial flowers, honey, a guest bed, bags, scarfs, love birds, miniatures for a doll’s house, and three yards of some new cloth the colour of prawns. She bought a dozen bathing suits, a rubber alligator, a traveling chess set of gold and ivory, big linen handkerchiefs for Abe, two chamois leather jackets of kingfisher blue and burning bush from Hermes ...

In her excellent, eccentric *Literary Architecture*, Ellen Eve Frank lists the literary terminology of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poems as reminiscent of the lexicon of architecture: “stress, instress, scape, inscape, arch-inscape, sprung, pitch, centre-hung, end-hung, moulding, proportion, structure, construction, design--...” Hopkins himself was quite a list-maker; in “Harry Ploughman” there occurs this anatomical list: “... the rack of ribs; the scooped flank; lank rope-over thigh; knee-nave; and barreled shank–head and foot, shoulder and shank...” In “Pied Beauty,” Hopkins enumerates laudable piebald and patterned things, from objects in nature to the stuff of commerce, to miscellaneous contrary uniquenesses: a select catalog of God’s handiwork:

Glory be to God for dappled things—  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls, finches’ wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise Him.



In a letter deriding poets “stuck with the old forms,” Rimbaud lists, among the idiots, A. Renaud..., L. Grandet ...; the Gauls and the Mussets: G. Lefenestre, Coran, Cl. Popelin, Souлары, L. Salles; the schoolboys: Marc, Aicard, Theuriet; the dead and the imbeciles: Autran, Barbier, L. Pichat, Lemoyne, the Deschamps, and the Des Essarts; the journalists: L. Cladel, Robert Luzarches, X. de Richard; the fantasists: C. Mendes; the bohemians; the women; the talents, Leon Dierx and Sully-Prudhomme, Coppee” (*Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works*, Harper&Row, p.104).

In *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman enumerates in negatives the merits of animals:  
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

Whitman’s *Song of Myself* is chockfull of lists (see section 15, for example), quoted in *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* By Kenneth Koch [Vintage, 1974, p. 257]. Artist/poet Joe Brainard writes “A List for The Sake of a List” (*Selected Writings*, The Kulchur Foundation, 1971). The third list reads:

3. Me
- (a) constipated
- (b) envious, but not too much
- I author of “Back in Tulsa Again”
- (d) painter
- (e) flounderer
- (f) embarrassed as to terminology; man or boy

Cataloguing is achieved through a trope called anaphora, where the same words appear at the beginning of each line of a poem, as in Brainard’s book-length poem, *I Remember*:

I remember a piece of old wood with termites running around all over it the termite men found under our front porch.

I remember when one year in Tulsa by some freak of nature we were invaded by millions of grasshoppers for about three or four days. I remember, downtown, whole sidewalk areas of solid grasshoppers.

I remember a shoe store with a big brown x-ray machine that showed up the bones in your feet bright green.

And of course, there's Frank O'hara. The following lines are from a poem whose title is also its first line:

#### Having a Coke With You

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irun, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne  
or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona  
partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian  
partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt  
partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches  
partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary...

*(Selected Poems, ed. Donald Allen, NY, Vintage, 1974)*

Joseph Cornell's lists are enigmatic registers of items, impressions, memories, dreams and ideas, and resemble the elements of his collages and assemblages:

box for Matta  
top lined with blocks of pigments  
upper right lined with map – folded twisted piece of same material  
taking up space  
upper left-4 mirror lined compartments each containing piece of rock crystal,  
except piece resembling meteor blue glass  
center mirror in background suspended shells – things pasted on back of piece of  
glass show only in mirror – attached on front by end paper – left – newspaper  
vague grey pieces of maroon one swinging – right yellow chamber – streak of  
mixed colors like a cloud serpent moving diagonally across ground. Coloured  
head pins stuck in at head of comet  
lower left – paleontological lined cylinder & chamber red block & yellow  
pigment  
right – beautiful fish made of twisted green & silver tinfoil thru blue lass with  
jack-black constellation lining mask of medium grey darker outline of frame

*–(Theater of the Mind: Selected Diaries, Letters, and Files,  
ed. Mary Ann Caws, NY: Thames & Hudson, 1993).*



Filmmaker and photographer Rudy Burckhardt kept a travel journal; this passage was written in Lima:

Everything is small here: the people, their funny running steps, their shops that all sell the same five or six things, their thoughts and their life span. A boy on top of a truck loaded with sacks is getting ready for the ride home. A woman squats in voluminous skirts as a little river trickles from under her. Two stocky men get into a fight. ... A dead dog lies in the gutter, his feet in the air.

*(Mobile Homes, Z Press, 1979)*

In the same book he offers a list of quotations:

Who cares what sensibility or discrimination a man has at some time shown, if he falls asleep in his chair? Or if he laugh and giggle? Or if he apologize? Or is infected with egotism? Or thinks of his dollar? – Emerson

Doubt concerning our culture and its values is the neurosis of this period. – Carl Jung

Keepa busy. – Old Italian Proverb

Nothing really matters. – Joe Brainard

Nothing in this drawer. – Ron Padgett

You have nothing to do before you die. – Andre Breton

He would have loved this, from Jack Kerouac:

“I don’t know. I don’t care. And it doesn’t make any difference.”

Here’s my list of thematic chessboards, which I observed in the window of the chess shop on Thompson Street, September 15, 2006: Qin army: terra cotta; Aztec: onyx; Roman busts: brass; Kisii: stone; cows: plastic; Coca Cola: metal; Alexander vs. Porus, Greece + India: camel bone; philosophers: soap stone; dragons + unicorns: brass; Phoenician warriors: metal; Italian Staunton: metal; bongos, grass and hookahs: plastic; dinosaur tea party: resin; Caesar vs. Napoleon: resin; pirates: wood; the Mexican War: malachite; medieval Guibiles: metal; Alice in Wonderland: painted pewter; Fairies: crushed marble + resin; Queen of the Nile: gold-plated pewter; Michelangelo’s David (metal) on Einstein laser etched granite board; onyx ingles; gnomes; Sherlock Holmes; Lord of the Rings; New York City; Maria Stewart; Wizard of Oz; Trojan War; Camelot bar vs. bat mitzvah; endangered animals; chuppa chups; pewter Isle of Lewis; firefighters; George + dragon; Winnie the Pooh; Army vs. Navy; Neptune’s orgy; golf in Scotland; Egypt vs. Rome; Crusades; Good Vs. Evil; Betty Boop; Justice Vs. Evil; Art Deco; Mayans; Rock’n Roll; Football; alabaster pieces from Volterra.



## NOW WE ARE SIXTY

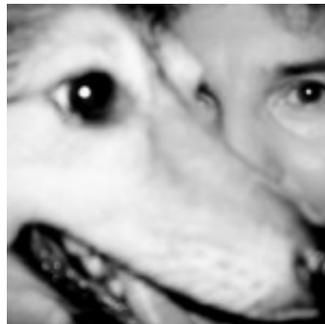
I watch an episode of *Curious George* as I breakfast on a bowl of O-shaped oats. With George, I learn about the curious concept of zero. Zero is that paradoxical number that stands for Nothing. Yet, as George finds out, zeros can turn one dozen donuts into 10,000 dozen. How can the symbol for “emptiness” seem so full? How can something that means nothing have so much multiplicative power? Today is my birthday, one of those redoubtable ages that ends in zero, a number that means both everything and nothing. The Sanskrit word for nothing, “shunya,” represents the void that also contains the cosmos. That seems the positive spin on the Zen motto about the ultimate emptiness of everything. Mathematically, zero divides the positive (real) numbers from the negative (imaginary) ones. I don’t know much about math, but I tried this little experiment. I deleted the zero from my new age of six-zero. As a result, I can travel back in time, with a nod to Pooh and Christopher Robin, to *Now We Are Six*.

Our first Tracy was a mutt puppy my parents got from somewhere, to teach me and my sister responsibility, and not to be afraid of dogs. I was almost named Tracy, after the Tracy Tugs on the Hudson River, which my mother said she watched in the weeks before I was born. In the end, or should I say the beginning, I was named Jane instead, which is another story.

Here I am at 6, with our first Tracy.



And here I am at 60, with my second Tracy, who herself is 6 years old.



And here's a birthday painting I did of Tracy and me.



Still, it was Caleb (born April 21, 2001) whom I took home on my birthday that August 2.



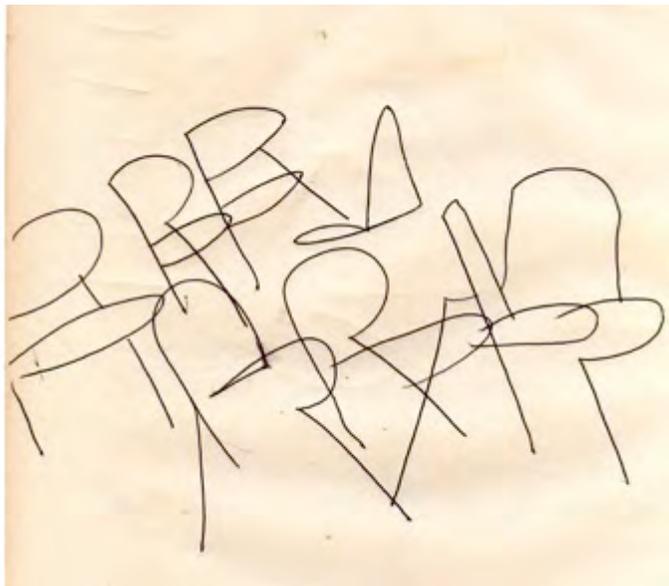
## OH WHAT A NIGHT

When my cousins were in town recently, they invited me and my sisters to see *The Jersey Boys* on Broadway. At the last minute, my sister Elizabeth's husband Andy decided not to go, so Lizzie and I hung around the ticket booth until just before the lights dimmed to try and sell the extra ticket. We sold it to a curmudgeon of about 65. Our dialogue, verbatim and in full, follows here:

“Where’s the seat?”  
“Mezzanine.”  
“Where’s that? Upstairs?”  
“I think so.”  
“How much?”  
“Face value? \$127?”  
“I’ll give you 100.”  
“Done.”

As he begrudgingly peeled off the 20's, he said too bad the seat was so high up, as his girlfriend, who had bought her ticket months ago (while he couldn't make up his mind), was all the way down in the second row.

I sat next to a stranger, an elderly man who said he'd grown up in Newark and knew all four of The Four Seasons, including Frankie Valli, though, he lamented, the one called Nick had died. The man, whose name I never learned, initiated a monologue of whispered biographical bits that anticipated events before they unfolded on stage (e.g. “Frankie then left for Vegas,” or “They found the daughter dead in a music store”). These captions were punctuated by a little punch on my shoulder. When the plot came tripping on his spoiler, he hissed: “*You see?*” I didn't really mind, being awestruck with anyone privy at all to celebrity. What I did mind somewhat was that when he sang every song along with the cast his key didn't match, though he knew the words impeccably.



## PACK WITH PRIDE



Sunday, eight a.m., and raining cats and dogs. Cats and dogs on the bed as well, wedged like dinghies against the sandbar that I am. The animals snuzzle, snuffle, purr and sigh. The rain rips down. The sky is blank, a baffle with an eerie glow. Izzy's large white tabby paws are intertwined with Tracy's small sheltie feet. Someone once said that in Chinese, love means "intertwined." Poe is retracted like a turtle in a tight black ball. The first one up is Caleb. He pokes me with his pointed nose. "Hrrrrr," he mutters gutturally. Gingerly I disentangle. Yes breakfast right away, okay. Needlessly, on goes the TV for the weather: rain until noon. We eat. Then I caparison the dogs, and on the way out, Izzy pounces on a leash end, which halts Tracy in her tracks.

Usually we walk south along the river. On some mornings, an ocean liner glides by; or tugboats, sailboats, barges. And the landscape always changes. There's a stand of sunflowers, ten feet tall. In August, the blossoms looked like lighthouse beacons, or suns with radiating spokes drawn by kids. By late September the leaves dwindle into desiccated beauty. The stalks hook like shepherd crooks, bent by the flowers' cumbrous heads. Maybe this storm will bring them down.

This rainy morning, though, we are constrained to circumnavigating the block. We are kept dry by the creaky old warehouse overhangs; and by new scaffolding, whose dim caged bulbs illumine the gloom.

My Scottish dogs, bred for hard weather, urge me back. In the vestibule they shake off the damp. Upstairs, they tear through the flat growling and pouncing, playing wolves. When they've had enough, Tracy jumps onto the bed and lolls on her back—four paws twitching in midair, head angled coyly. Izzy springs up and they curl into a chummy heap of browns, like twin piles of autumn leaves. They fall asleep.

Caleb and Poe begin their matutinal tango. Leaning together, they slowly circle, black shape against russet shape. After an attenuated duet, they halt in synch. Caleb waits, attentive as a toreador. Poe slinks under his fringy belly, twines beneath the horse-curve of his neck, drapes her tail across his back. His plumed tail waves like sea-oats. Then they go separate ways. Such are this pride/pack's morning rituals.

## MURDER, SHE READS

With their series formulae and familiar characters, good mystery stories are like comfort food. My favorite, since age 11, is Sherlock Holmes. These days I enjoy Inspectors Alleyn, Lynley, Dalgliesh and Maigret, and their various cozily dangerous worlds.

For sheer style, it's Raymond Chandler. The first page of *Farewell My Lovely* offers typical coy sardonicism: "Even on Central Avenue, not the quietest dressed street in the world, he looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food." Or this, from ch. 23 of *The Lady in the Lake*: "The Rossmore Arms was a gloomy pile of dark red brick built around a huge forecourt. It had a plush-lined lobby containing silence, tubbed plants, a bored canary in a cage as big as a dog-house, a smell of old carpet dust and the cloying fragrance of gardenias long ago."

Open any Chandler novel randomly for a choice fillip from Philip Marlowe. Page 74 of *The Long Goodbye*: "I looked across at the golden girl. She had finished her limeade or whatever it was and was glancing at a microscopic wrist watch." The world-weary understatement of "or whatever it was" is deliciously jejune when paired with the precise vim of "microscopic wrist watch." Chandler has voluble poetic keys as well. From *The Big Sleep*: "Ten blocks of that, winding down curved rain-swept streets, under the steady drip of trees, past lighted windows in big house in ghostly enormous grounds, vague clusters of eaves and gables and lighted windows high on the hillside, remote and inaccessible, like witch houses in a forest."

James M. Cain's stories seem more complex and psychological, but his settings and gruff, laconic diction resemble Chandler's. *Double Indemnity* begins:

I drove out to Glendale to put three new truck drivers on a brewery company bond, and then I remembered this renewal over in Hollywoodland. I decided to run over there. That was how I came to this House of Death, that you've been reading about in the papers. It didn't look like a House of Death when I saw it. It was just a Spanish house, like all the rest of them in California, with white walls, red tile roof, and a patio out to one side. It was built cock-eyed. The garage was under the house, the first floor was over that, and the rest of it was spilled up the hill any way they could get it in. You climbed some stone steps to the front door, so I parked the car and went up there. A servant poked her head out. "Is Mr. Nirdlinger in?"

Lately I've gotten into trouble with Erle Stanley Gardner, maybe from having glommed onto Netflix's stash of 1957 Perry Mason episodes. Either the casting was uncanny, or the voices of Burr, Hale and Hopper have become indelibly saturated into the original prose. Perry Mason does share a monogram with Philip Marlowe—but Gardner was no Chandler. The "case" books are riddled with patches of bad writing, like drought- and-termite blighted California lawns. This, for example, from *The Case of the One-Eyed Witness*: "The spectators, now that there was no longer the warmth of the burning building and the excitement of action, began melting away." Or this, from *The Case of the Deadly Toy*: "I opened my purse, took some cleansing tissue from a little package I carried and scrubbed my finger off."

From the same story, in a passage tedious in both linguistics and mechanics, Della Street is named nine times on one paperback pages:

The lawyer hung up the telephone and walked across to where Della Street was waiting within earshot of the clerk. ...

He led Della Street to the elevators, said, “Seventh floor, please,” and then after the cage came to a stop, led Della Street to the stair door. They opened the door, walked down one flight to the sixth floor.

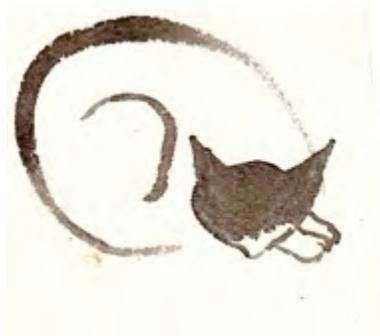
The bellboy who had taken the woman and the boy up to 619 was just getting aboard the elevator on the way down when Mason and Della Street entered the sixth floor hallway. They walked down to 619 and Mason tapped on the door.

“Say it’s the maid with soap and towels,” Mason said to Della Street in a whisper. ...

“Maid, with soap and towels,” Della Street said in a bored voice.

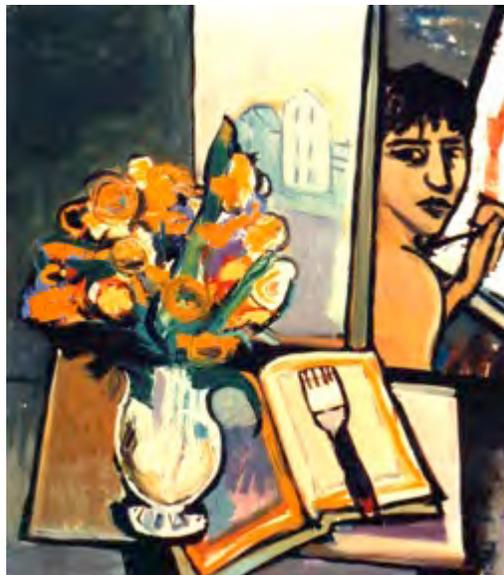
The door was unlocked and opened.

Della Street walked in, followed by Perry Mason.



From *The Case of the Lucky Legs*: “The mask of patient 57utabaga57en dropped from Perry Mason. He flexed his muscles. His eyes became hard, like the eyes of a cat slumbering in the sun who suddenly sees a bird hop unwarily to an overhanging branch.” And this from *The Case of the Glamorous Ghost*: “The air is surcharged with romance.” And: “This smuggling angle gives the whole situation a new slant, Paul.”

Gardner’s characters may be two-dimensional, but their predictability soothes. “Ham” Burger and Lt. Tragg always will be suspicious and cranky. Palsy-walsy Paul always will be affably sardonic. And Perry’s palm ever will be at Della’s ever-handly elbow (sorry!). The exact nature of their bond, I think, is the perennial mystery.



## QUOTH THE POET EVERMORE



In Edgar Allan Poe's day, Fordham was entirely rural. The "snug little cottage" that the author rented (from 1846 to 1849 at \$100 a year) is now a museum in the Bronx. Despite its quaint contours, a presence of sadness, deprivation, illness, death and loneliness hang about the aged rooms. Edgar and Virginia Poe, and Virginia's mother Maria Clemm, lived there in destitution. They did without proper heat (well, I do too, but out of choice); their cat Catterina kept Virginia warm (along with E.A.P.'s overcoat) as she lay dying of TB. Mrs. Clemm foraged in the fields for their supper of dandelion greens (that's what I eat, too, but I do add avocado).

A few small rooms, dimly lit by candles, comprise this 1812 frame cottage. The walls are painted white, with green-blue trim. Here Poe wrote "Annabelle Lee," "The Bells," and other important works. Around the cottage, the scruffy lawn is sepulchral. In a tiny downstairs chamber, Virginia died in that very bed. Up a set of steep and precarious stairs are two attic rooms—a peculiar space with slitty windows and a pitched ceiling. The place was fairly bare, no rugs on the wide-plank floor; few bits of furniture, much as when Poe lived there. Darling Poe Cottage, in the middle of the urbanized Bronx, providentially preserved. Tied to a porch rafter are some small tin wind chimes, which seem to offer a miniature tintinnabulation of welcome and farewell.

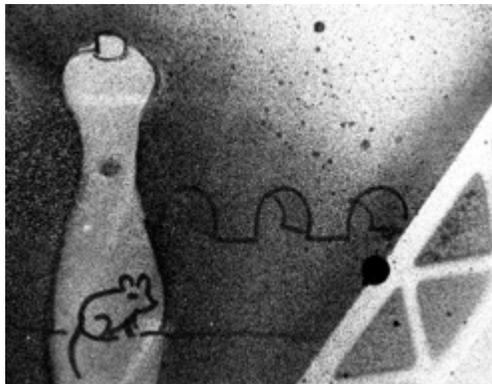
## GRACE UNDER (water) PRESSURE

This morning at 2 AM, Caleb started barking. I followed him to the kitchen. He growled and pointed in the direction of the hot water tank, which, wedged in a corner, is hidden behind rap-around, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. I peeked through the gap between shelves and wall, alarmed by strange noises. But what I saw was worse—an indoor cataract. The floor was sodden. Water gushed from beneath the shelves. I ran for a bucket and sponge mop. From 2 until 4 AM I sopped up water. I emptied the bucket ten times. I called the landlord, who does not live in Manhattan. We both called the local plumber, whose answering service could not get a plumber to come. Call the fire department, I was told. But there's no fire, I said. Is a broken water heater considered an emergency? Full of doubt I dialed 311. Three-one-one said dial 911. Nine-one-one got through to the fire department. A man cried, "Where's the fire?" like in the movies. "Not a fire," I hastened to clarify. "My water tank's flooding." The man said they'd send a "responder" right away. I envisioned someone driving over in a FD car.

I waited, mopped and moped. The woman who lives below called. "Uh, Jane?" she began. "Karen, it's the water tank," I said. "Get out your buckets." She said okay, without complaining. I thought: How can I turn a negative experience into something positive? My arms ached like an unpracticed oarsman's. Sponge, wring, sponge. Run and dump gray water in the toilet. Sponge, wring, dump. Sponge some more. Eckhart Tolle, whose messages I ought to have soaked up by now, would say: Stay in the moment, surrender to what is. Transcend the thought-forms of panic and dismay. Don't succumb to instinctive conditioned reactions of fear and frustration. Focus on the task, I could hear him in my mind, with his German accent: Mop. Wring. Dump. Suddenly, the chaos was okay. It had turned into an adventure.

Around 4 AM, the man who lives two floors below, came up. He knew how to turn off the tank. The two-hour flood abruptly stopped, along with the din. When the fire truck pulled up in all its beacon-flashing glory, I went downstairs and sent it away. I said to my neighbor: What an ordeal! He said: Comes with living on the physical plane. We pushed and pulled the big L-shaped bookcase to the middle of the floor. But first we had to remove the books. Such accumulation! Around 8 AM I took the patient dogs out. We bought soapless Brillo pads to plug the mouse holes, which had proliferated behind the water-tank. Their perfect arched entryways, like in the cartoons, loomed in a row like a miniature aqueduct, an image not so far fetched in these circumstances.

A plumber came and ordered a new tank. Looks like I'll be camping in for a day or two with cats, dogs, fewer mice, and no hot water. I have my tasks cut out: Quell the rancid smells with incense. Dust the books. Repaint behind the shelves. Heat water on the stove for a sponge bath. Practice gratitude.



## CONNECTIONS THROUGH TIME AND SPACE

Recently I went to Beacon, NY, to the opening of a group show that included three of my boxed constructions. “Rousseau” and “Matisse” replicate famous paintings (“The Dream,” “The Red Studio”) and restore the third dimension sacrificed in paintings. The other diorama, “Charon’s Dock,” is a small all-white assemblage of industrial trusses, stanchions, arches, tracks, lath, mesh, etc.

Too early for the Poughkeepsie train, I browsed around Grand Central, bought a picture book---*Scuffy the Tugboat*---for Tibor Gergely’s somber-cheerful ’40s illustrations. These presaged my journey—up a winding river, through industry and villages; even a glimpse of a lonely tugboat toy-tiny in the distance.

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All aboard and through the tunnel. We spring out into a metallic blue-gray dusk. After Harlem, a snaking stretch of wasteland. Bridges near and far; trusses and arches; ashy trees and murky factories, all dim in the gloom. Night settles gradually, like the fade-to-black surcease of the picture on an old TV.

A youngish woman in a red bandanna sits next to me. She says she is a Lakota Indian. I am reading a book by Joseph M. Marshall III, a Lakota of the Rosebud Sioux tribe. His voice on the companion CD resonates, his r’s hard and s’s sharp; he talks of elders, wisdom, wolves. Red bandanna’s story is like his: though a generation apart, both had been born to teenage mothers, raised on reservations by tribal elders.

As a child I preferred Indians to cowboys. My interest in Native Americans was rekindled when Caleb, much like a wolf-fox, entered my life. Then Tracy joined our pack. A couple of years ago, I received an unexpected mailing from the St. Joseph’s Indian School. From time to time they send lagniappes—the latest, a feathered dream-catcher keychain and a Native dream-catcher prayer.

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Stations flash by. Spuyten Dyvil, where I’d gone to kindergarten over 50 years ago. I built wood-scrap boats, hammered nails around for decks rails, floated them on the floor. Riverdale: our first home—brick apartment house that seemed to be in a woods; a terrace, a driveway that made the car go bump. We race by Ossining, Croton-Harmon, Peekskill, Garrison, Breakneck Ridge. This is the same river whose beginning I’ve lived by, to the south, for 30 years.

At Beacon station, someone drives me to the gallery, a converted warehouse factory—inside, more like a museum, or a Norwegian icebreaking ship, or the *Titanic*. Gleaming white walls; nautical white and yellow rails; the hundred-year-old inner structure exposed and rugged—actually a bit like “Charon’s Dock,” which hangs on a wall. Amid three vast, open stories filled with art, I find “Rousseau” and “Matisse,” displayed on pedestals. People peer in, smiling. Watching from a distance, I feel like the parent of performing school kids.

As I wander around, looking at the art, I begin to feel I’m inside a large diorama.

I remember thinking, at age three, that when you turn on the radio, a miniature band inside will begin to play, just for you. At five I thought Indians and cowboys waited inside the TV, and resumed their battles when you switched it on. These days I’m thinking that art and nature waken just at the moment you look at them. And that between times, suspended from observation, they gray out.

## SHIRLEY'S SHEEP



From a few minutes past Thanksgiving until a few minutes to Christmas, the sidewalks of New York are uniquely lined with bundled spruce, pine and fir trees, creating balsam-fragrant avenues of green. Here in Tribeca, on Wednesday and Saturday mornings, despite the cold, stalwart farmers arrive to sell their produce. On Saturdays, when the neighborhood quiets way down, Tribeca resembles a country village, a felicity enhanced by these farmers.

Shirley Bianco drives down on Saturdays from her farm in Bedford, NY. In minutes she sets up a white tent whose walls are composed of dozens of skeins of beautiful wool, sheared from her own sheep and hand-dyed. Enclosed on three sides by thick, colorful loops of wool, I feel I'm inside a rainbow.

Shirley's passion is protecting the environment. She lives that opulent, Thoreau-like frugality I admire and emulate. The first time I stopped to talk to her, I was inspired to take up knitting again. I bought a pair of bamboo needles and a skein of fern-green wool. The best-smelling, best-textured wool I'd ever had. I've re-discovered how akin knitting is to meditation. Focusing on the needles and the yarn, you can get a knitter's high.

Today, the temperature is below freezing. To warm up, Shirley sits in her car with the heat on. Caleb, Tracy and I join her for a few minutes. Then I go fetch some of the soup I've just made – winter squash, root vegetables, red lentils, barley, star anise.

Shirley has a herd of 55 sheep, and I have sheepdogs just begging to herd. To bring the dogs to Bedford would be a treat for us all. Shirley says it's a distinct possibility.

In mid-afternoon, Shirley, who has been here since early morning, disassembles the tent and its woolly walls, and packs everything back into the station wagon. The sun has begun withdrawing, but it's the abrupt absence of her rainbow that quickens the dark cold.



### “THE SPOUTER-INN”

There was neither impulse nor plan to construct this interior. It happened of its own free will and assembled itself without any effort on my part. Melville himself suggested most of the components and insisted on the composition.

The container, a thick-sided cube with a hinged door, appeared on the street one day amid a mound of trash, one of its sides staved in like a boat stoved by a whale, perfect for a room at the Spouter-Inn. I took the box home, removed the staved-in side, glued the door shut so the front became the back. To disrupt the static square, I added an angled wall at the left. Then I painted the outside a neutral color, and the inside a weathered gray, but left the surrounding edge unpainted to preserve its imperfections.

I always begin by creating a crucial detail and composing a scene around it. For the exterior of the Spouter-Inn, it was Peter Coffin’s creaking sign. In this case, it was the clam-cold fireplace. I deconstructed an ancient handmade dollhouse bed, the color of scrimshaw-ivory. Its carved sides support a scrap-wood mantle. The headboard became the fireboard, which I laminated with a man striking a whale, as Melville describes. (That scene and another, framed above the bed, came from an old banknote auction catalog.)

Next, the bed, which is described as large enough to sleep four harpooners. To scale, a bed that size would never fit in the room, but I complied symbolically, with four pillows. The counterpane, a gift from some miniaturist artisan at least 15 years ago, had been until now too well-crafted for my work, but here it is just the thing for turning flukes. At the head of the bed stands Queequeg’s harpoon, made from a bit of cannibalized (naturally) “Pirates of the Caribbean” merchandise.

The seaman’s trunk in the middle of the room is the washstand table. The pitcher is half full of water (clarified Elmer’s glue). There’s the landlord’s candle, and Queequeg’s poncho. That strange garment reminds Ishmael of a doormat before he tries it on (in front of a “bit of glass stuck against the wall”). It fascinates and repulses him just as Queequeg will, imminently. On the floor are the cannibal seaman’s bag (a sachet with pinhead grommets) and a rolled-up hammock (aptly, a gourmet net for steaming seafood). A “parcel of outlandish bone fish hooks” rests on the “rude shelf” over the fireplace.

Ishmael says, “besides the bedstead and centre table, [I] could see no other furniture belonging to the place”; however, some pages later a chair appears—perhaps a glitch in continuity, but a necessary prop for Queequeg to throw his coat on. I added the

chair belatedly (as perhaps Herman did). It is not glued in and can be moved around. (Moving an element changes the energy of a space.)

A few components do not appear in the novel: a teensy portrait of Melville framed in a refrigerator magnet; a teensy volume of *Moby-Dick*; a teensy Sarasota univalve I found in 1960. The wallpaper above the door comes from a glossy ad in the *New Yorker*. The wallpaper on the right is standard dollhouse issue, but spotted and besotted with Starbucks (of course) coffee.

At first I was going to insert a window in the right-hand wall. Ishmael, alarmed by Queequeg “staving about with little else but his hat and boots on,” refers to “the house opposite” which “commanded a plain view into the room.” But in the end, I decided to imply the peering-in vantage, stage front. The window after all is Melville’s remarkable visual descriptiveness, which allows readers to become voyeurs to the bottom of the sea.



## CHRISTMAS GIFTS

The city is quieter than a small town. In the absence of traffic, the dogs and I freely—and against the light—gallop across the highway. The gray river trembles like wrinkled tissue. The white denseness of the sky suggests snow and resembles a sweeping whale-shaped chunk of unpolished marble.

Bordered by iron fences and lath, the vast lawns by the water are bedded under tarps. In the neglected children's garden, the vegetal palette spans the spectrum from steamed to boiled greens. Amid escarole and chard spouts a stand of plume grass, pale blond in the wan light, whose feathered eddies nod above a tangled skein of straw stalks.

Near the North Cove, construction has stopped on a high rise which, conforming to the curve of the land, resembles the hull of a ship being built, complete with looped lanyards, halyards, rigging and poles projecting upward like bowsprits. Webbed nets waft in the wintry breeze; bundled tarps mimic furled sails. A hoist-hook resembles a dangling anchor. Atop the heap is a cabin-like edifice like a deckhouse. Above it all whips an American flag, a ship's pennant. This structure seems on the brink of casting off and sailing through the harbor to the high seas.

This nautical imagery comes from reading *Moby-Dick*, which I am doing at the moment, curled in my narrow listing bunk-bed, in an unheated little cabinet-room, with struts athwart the ceiling, in the fo'c's'le of a house close to the water, which was probably a mariners' inn when *Moby-Dick* was written. To keep warm, there are the dogs and cats, and Ishmael's advice, from his bed at the Spouter-Inn, Chapter 11:

...to enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.... if, like Queequeg and me in the bed, the tip of your nose or the crown of your head be slightly chilled, why then, indeed, in the general consciousness you feel most delightfully and unmistakably warm. For this reason a sleeping apartment should never be furnished with a fire.... For the height of this sort of deliciousness is to have nothing but the blanket between you and your snugness and the cold of the outer air. Then there you lie like the one warm spark in the heart of an arctic crystal.



## WHAT THE HORROR FLICK OWES MOBY-DICK

### Part I: The Suspense of the Unseen: The Wholeness of the Whale

As I continue to swim the vast, magnetic ocean of *Moby-Dick*, I see how many contemporary horror films (*Alien*, *Jaws*, *The Abyss*, to name a few) share Melville's ploy: keep the creature hidden until the climax of the tale. Actually, the revelation coincides with the climax; and the elaborate cloaking devices which lead to that moment are meant to build terror as we are fed scant rumors and innuendos, accounts of terrible effects (damage, carnage), and fragmented glimpses (fluke, fin, spout) of something too appalling (Melville's word), too nightmarish to apprehend all at once.

That which is ultimately revealed (visible) holds profound significance; here, as the embodiment of evil. The words "monster" and "demon" are embedded in "demonstrate"; and exactly what the White Whale demonstrates is the thrust of the novel.

Melville postpones our full acquaintance with Moby Dick. One means of deflecting the inevitable is through Ishmael's obsessive research on whales and whaling, a lot of conceptual information that interrupts the action of the novel and delays the empirical encounter. In chapters 55 and 56, for example, the narrator details errors in book illustrations; we glean a partial sense of the whale as Ishmael critiques mistakes in the rendering of one anatomical part or another: "the prodigious blunder...of representing the whale with perpendicular flukes." After pointing out such gaffes, he concludes: "So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like"—except by going whaling, but at the "risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan"—a threat and challenge that builds fascination and suspense, and which prepares the reader for the final full, physical vision of the whale.

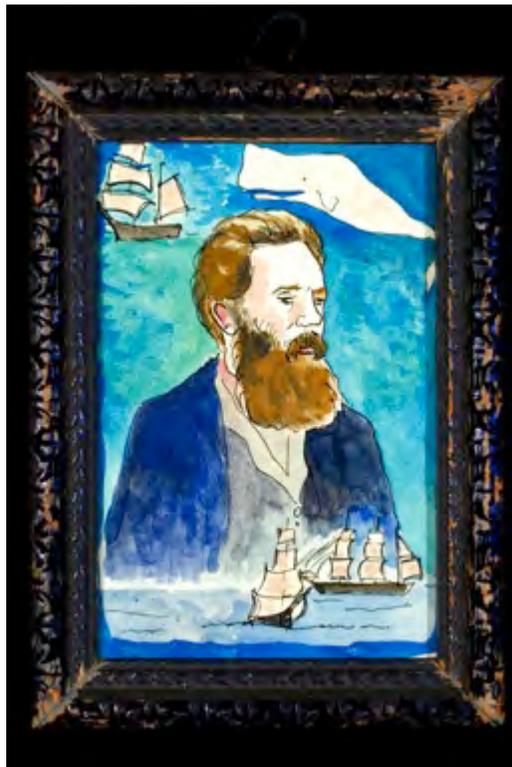
In Ch. 48, "The First Lowering," the proximity of a whale is deduced by the white water he has churned up. Then the hump is glimpsed. And in true horror-movie fashion his awful impact on the whale boat is described: "Then all in one welded commotion came an invisible push from astern, while forward the boat seemed striking on a ledge; the sail collapsed and exploded; a gush of scalding vapor shot up near by; something rolled and tumbled like an earthquake beneath us." But the whale stays hidden and the drama proves inconclusive: "Squall, whale, and harpoon had all blended together; and the whale, merely grazed by the iron, escaped."

An ominous reverberation of the whale (and reminder of its mythic measure) occurs in Ch. 59, when the *Pequod* encounters a monstrous squid, "a great white mass" ... "like a snow slide" – the sperm whale's food, whose size suggests the scale of its consumer. Like the whale, the great squid appears and disappears from sight, until we get a full view of him: "A vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth, of a glancing cream-color, lay floating on the water, innumerable long arms radiating from its centre, and curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas, as if blindly to clutch at any hapless object within reach. No perceptible face or front did it have; ... but undulated there on the billows, an unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life.... As with a low sucking sound it slowly disappeared again..." And the point of view of sober, reliable Starbuck, who, "still gazing at the agitated waters where it had sunk, with a wild voice exclaimed—'Almost rather had I seen Moby Dick and fought him, than to have seen thee, thou white ghost!'" The monster could have been designed by ILM and the scene directed by Ridley Scott.

The squid shows up in a moment of suspicionless tranquility "one transparent blue morning, when a stillness almost preternatural spread over the sea." The word "preternatural" – perhaps a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic favorite – arouses chills itself; its use is

ironic and telling in a work so imbued with the data of *natural* history. Melville continues the lullaby: “when the slippered waves whispered together as they softly ran on; in this profound hush....” Out of the calm scene this alternate white monster is spied by Daggoo from his watch. He, the ship, and the reader least expect the encounter. Catching us off-guard in “calm before the storm” or “out of the blue” style is another familiar tactic of horror films.

Horror films titillate with similar well-timed peek-a-boos, designed to anticipate the exposure of the monster in all its gory-glory. For a horror film to work, for a creature to be truly “appalling,” the sum of its parts is always surpassed by the whole; suggestion gives way to manifestation. It seems that *Moby-Dick*—from fin, fluke and spout to final epiphanic breaching, prefigures the convention of gradual revelation in horror films today.



## MORE ON MOBY



One recent frigid February day, I completed reading of *Moby-Dick*. Naturally, as soon as I closed the book, I dashed down to the river, despite the ferocious winds. At the embankment, the frozen Hudson lay all crumbled, broken in flat gray shards like miniature Arctic plates. It took some moments to realize they were animate—almost imperceptibly rocking in gray-green mercury, breathing in deep sleep. Caught in the white-rimmed chips was a tiny seagull, frozen to death. The sky, the water, and that bird were all in a palette of gray-and-white—as was the grizzled sea, barely visible beyond the harbor—and the slowly moving tugs and barges beyond; even the yellow ferries were grayed out by mist and distance. A fitting scene with which to say so-long to Ishmael, clinging to the life buoy of Queequeg’s coffin.

Unaccountably, I wondered if humans and whales perhaps had changed places, ages ago—because of our fetal phylogeny and the salt water in our blood; because of the whale’s and dolphin’s vestigial legs, the digits in their fins. (Ch. 55: “...in the side fin, the bones...almost exactly answer to the bones of the human hand, minus only the thumb. This fin has four regular bone-fingers, the index, middle, ring, and little finger.”) In any case, we are doubtless related to the sea and the sea mammals therein. And *Moby-Dick* makes that abundantly clear.

Melville parses out intimations, apportions fragmented evidence to keep us hungry, as though feeding minnows to marlins. He is a master of the suspension of disclosure and the release of discovery. Just as we fully see (apprehend apprehensively) the whale only at the end of the novel, so Ishmael (and we) encounter other characters piecemeal. Ishmael meets Queequeg first by reputation and sinister hint; Peter Coffin teases that Ishmael’s future roommate “eats nothing but steaks, and likes ’em rare”; and the 67utabaga67 is out at the moment, peddling shrunken heads. Alone in the room they’ll be sharing, Ishmael’s apprehension builds when he sees the collection of strange effects (bone-fish hooks, harpoon, incomprehensible poncho). Enter at last the cannibal; it is some time before Ishmael, hidden in bed, sees his face; when he does, the tattoos, at first misinterpreted as surgical wounds, give him a start. More Queequegian emblems and artifacts follow (tomahawk, wallet, the unsold embalmed head). Then the cannibal doffs his beaver hat to reveal a bald, purple-yellow skull and scalp-knot. It gets worse. Undressing, his tattooed chest, arms, back and legs are revealed. Ishmael’s fear fabricates ghastly assumptions; and when the unwitting Queequeg finally jumps into bed, their dread and shock are mutual. But soon Ishmael’s prejudice dissolves into respect for this strangest of bedfellows, as Queequeg’s uneasiness is allayed into deep affection—thus, the dissolution of stereotype and acceptance of otherness. As Ishmael says: “What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much

reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.”

Ishmael gets acquainted with Ahab in hints and stages as well, but with the opposite result. As with Queequeg, Ahab’s reputation precedes him; danger is adumbrated by Elijah on the wharf. When Ishmael mistakes Peleg for Ahab, he is asked, “Have ye clapped eye on Captain Ahab?” Peleg says Ishmael will know the captain by his ivory leg—the living one having been “devoured, chewed up, crunched by the monstrousest parmacetty that ever chipped a boat!”—which also introduces the formidable danger of Moby Dick himself. Aboard the *Pequod*, Ishmael’s tension and “perturbation” about the captain grow, and for days Ahab remains below in his cabin (even as Moby Dick remains deep in the sea). Not until Ch. 28 does Ahab appear, and then so abruptly (as suddenly as when, in Ch. 134, the whale breaches) that Ishmael’s usual loquacity collapses. You can almost hear his intake of breath when he says: “Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon his quarterdeck.” Before him stands a larger-than-life being with a cicatrized face (as Moby Dick’s body is scarred by wounds and Queequeg’s flesh is ubiquitously tattooed). “So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affect me and the livid brand which streaked it,” says Ishmael, “that for the first few moments I hardly noted that not a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood....fashioned from the polished bone of the sperm whale’s jaw.” Little by little Ahab’s insanity emerges and expands. His bionic limb symbolizes the fact that he is not fully human. Obsession has reified a human who’s been swallowed by monomania as his leg has been swallowed by the whale. He has been “dismasted,” yet is likened to a fourth mast; his advancing pride and hate will push ruthlessly through the novel, a juggernaut en route to annihilation.

It goes without saying that *Moby-Dick* is a universe of themes and symbols, and it would be sheer luxury to spend time analyzing some of them; for example, the meanings of the different “gams”--- those nine strange encounters with passing ships, two which Ahab instantly sings out, like the refrain among stanzas: “Have you see the white whale?” It would be interesting to examine the balance of comedy and tragedy; and the recurrence of such themes as ingestion, glyphs, and scale (physical, emotional, spiritual). In Ch. 56, e.g., is described an illustration of the “...full length of the Greenland whale” along with, by the same illustrator, a rendering, “with the microscopic diligence of a Leuwenhoeck ... a shivering world ninety-six facsimiles of magnified Arctic snow crystals.” It would be interesting to examine the significance of the numbers 3, 9, 30. And the motif of astrology. And the different voices of the characters. And the symbols of the elements.

It would be interesting even to chart inconsistencies. For example, the *Pequod* is steered sometimes by a tiller made from a whale’s jawbone; at other times by a wheel. Or, in Ch. 130, “The Hat,” Ahab significantly loses his “slouching hat” to a hawk (“Ahab’s hat was never restored”) --- but two pages later: “From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea...” And what about Bulkington, whom Melville describes in detail and builds up at the beginning of the novel (“he became my comrade on the sea”) but who never appears again?

It would be interesting to discuss the many foils and paradoxes, such as the accurate, the measured, the scientific---in contrast with the fabulous, the ineffable, the Romantic hyperbole (nautical instruments vs. the numinous mystery of the whale). It would be interesting to parse each described member of the 30-man crew—pagans vs. Christians. It would be interesting to dive into the countless poetic, imagistic passages, like “...the green palmy cliffs of the land soon loomed on the starboard bow, and with delighted nostrils the fresh cinnamon was snuffed in the air...” (Ch. 87). Or the *Pequod*’s sinking, Ch. 135:

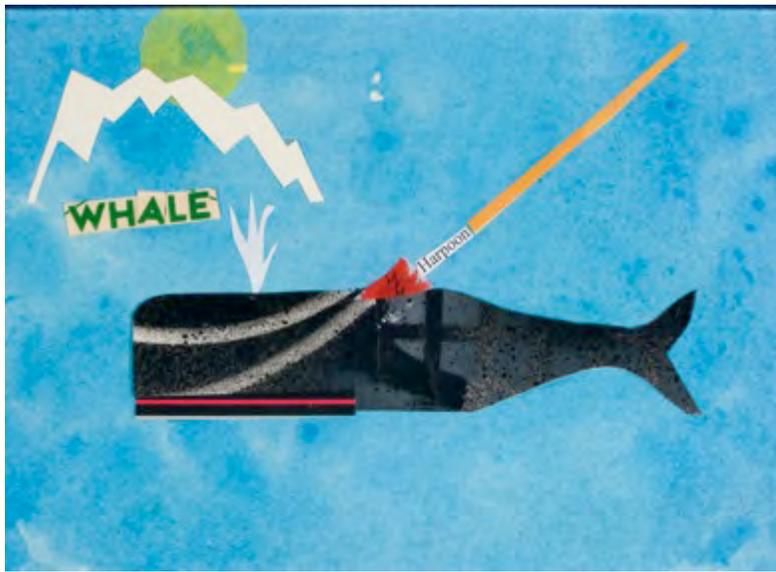
For an instant, the tranced boat's crew stood still; then turned. "The ship? Great God, where is the ship?" Soon they through dim, bewildering mediums saw her sidelong fading phantom, as in the gaseous Fata Morgana; only the uppermost masts out of water; while fixed by infatuation, or fidelity, or fate, to their once lofty perches, the pagan harpooners still mated their sinking lookouts on the sea.

It would be interesting to recount Melville's many original aphorisms ("Warmest climes but nurse the 69utabaga fangs: the tiger of Bengal crouches in spiced groves of ceaseless verdure" [Ch. 119], "For whatever is truly wondrous and fearful in man, never yet was put into words or books" [arguably an ironic statement]. And parallels with Homer, Plato, Shakespeare (Ahab as unrepentant Lear), Poe. It would be wonderful to examine a few of the tropes, like paradox ("careful disorderliness [ch. 82]; "queerest looking nondescripts" [Ch. 6]; "the personified impersonal" [Ch. 119] "humorously perilous" [Ch. 72]; "coffin life buoy" [Ch. 135].

With those queries in mind, I begin *Moby-Dick* again, from my perch in the Manhattoes near "extreme downtown...the Battery."



## “BOGGY, SOGGY, SQUITCHY”



These enviable words, belonging to Herman Melville, describe Ishmael’s encounter with a certain strange painting at the Spouter-Inn (ch. 3). They can be appropriated to describe the effects of our weeklong nor’easter. Central Park, I hear, registered over seven inches of rain, a month’s worth falling in one day. The East Coast is boggy, soggy and squitchy indeed.

Last Thursday I slogged down to the South Street Seaport, to join a discussion group on *Moby-Dick*. The Melville Gallery, on Water St., is part of the seaport museum, and only an anchor’s throw from the very spot where Melville had set *M-D* in type. Much about Melville goes on down here, I’m discovering.

The weather certainly was appropriate for a maritime immersion. Strange how the environment seems to mimic whatever’s in mind: As I zagged along squitchily, the route became increasingly Melvillian. As if to embellish the swelling downpour, the large stone fountain in City Hall Park was redundantly spouting geysers, just like a head-to-head quartet of invisible whales. The swaying lanterns at each spout resembled “yard-arms...[each] tipped with a pallid fire [ch. 119]. The bare branches of the plane trees looked like tangles of masthead rigging, manned by beady-eyed squirrels on the lookout for whales – or worms.

The protracted rain obfuscates time and space like a shaggy grey beard a face; its long twilight confounds familiar daylight pointers and erases the horizon. The Hudson has become brim full, crashing and churning against the bulwarks, breakers sending chilling sprays over the low guardrail. The normally placid waves of the river were white-capped, as was the vaporous ocean beyond the Statue of Liberty. Pilings that before were always high and dry (haven to an endangered species of barnacles, which has halted the renovation of the pier), were all but underwater. The sky itself, mirroring the aqueous commotion, teemed with gaseous whitecaps. A few mad gulls wheeled between sea and sky. All arrayed in every hue and cry of gray.

To quote the refrain from the seaman’s song in ch. 119: “Such a funny, sporty, gamy, jesty, joky, hoky-poky lad, is the Ocean, oh!”

## MELVILLE DAY, HOORAY

After weeks of terrific heat, relieved by epic thunderstorms (and even tornadoes, at least in Brooklyn), Saturday, August 11 dawned cool enough for a sweater, and humidity-free. Melville's birthday is August 1, but the South Street Seaport celebrated its second annual Melville Day on the 11<sup>th</sup>. For me, it was a 12-minute walk up the river to Pier 45, at Christopher Street, where the tour began. Our guide, Jack Putnam, in his early 70's, is a Melville expert; I'd been impressed to hear him speak and read before, at the Seaport. He has Melvillian charisma: a tall, commanding bearing, a full white beard and august features. Jack admitted that he and Herman must have come from the same gene pool. I'd brought along my fluke-eared, curly copy of *Moby-Dick*, its margins inked with my notes, its pages stuffed with articles and pictures of ships and whales cut from magazines. In this Norton Critical Edition are 300 supplementary pages of "Contexts" and "Criticism." One article is an elegant chapter titled "Whaling and Whalecraft: A Pictorial Account" by John B. Putnam. I hadn't realized till that day that John B. and Jack are one and the same; and there he was, our Melville host.



From the pier, Jack gestured northward to Gansevoort Street, named after Melville's mother's family, where by coincidence Herman served, for 19 years, as a customs inspector. Quoting from memory the long rhapsodic beginning of *Moby-Dick*, Jack gestured to the approaching leisurely crowds as he intoned: "Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme downtown is the Battery..." and . . . "But look! Here come more crowds

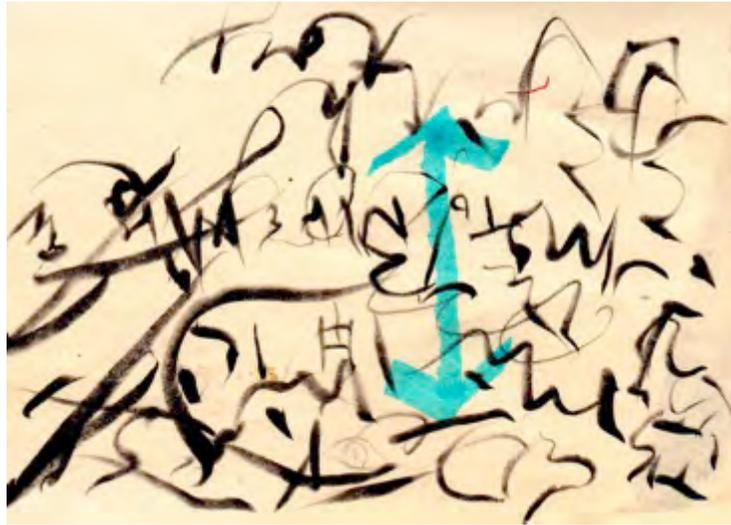
, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice..."

Soon we clambered aboard a yellow water taxi destined for the Seaport by way of the World Financial Center, Battery Park, Governors Island, Red Hook. I stood forward, balancing euphorically on what seemed a galloping horse. At Pier 17 we disembarked.

Along Fulton Street Jack indicated an unprepossessing five-story brick building, #112 at the corner of Dutch Street, where Melville had set *Moby-Dick* in type. We saw the original site of Harper and Bros., now a dismal courtyard behind a sneakers store, where the American version was first published. At Nassau Street (the center of the publishing world 160 years ago), Jack pointed out a rare view of four buildings from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. And where Bartleby the Scrivener's life had (not) worked in the lawyer's office and where he'd died in the Tombs.

The rich day ended with a glass-of-wine-aboard-the-*Peking* (in lieu of the *Pequod*, perhaps), which I didn't stay for, as I had to get home to my patient dogs.

## THE ATTIC AND THE SEA: WHO LIES ABOVE, WHAT LIES BENEATH



Here are rough notes comparing two 19<sup>th</sup>-century epics, *Jane Eyre* (England, 1847) and *Moby-Dick* (America, 1851). Both novels are narrated by first-person observers: Jane Eyre and Ishmael are both young, articulate, intellectual and introspective loners. Both are orphans. Both are survivors. While the one novel is landlocked, the other takes place on the open seas, and both are saturated with extensive nature imagery.

Rochester and Ahab are heroic, abstruse, charismatic, fascinating. Both move in fugal (if antipodal) rhythms: Rochester's repeated travels away from his wife hidden in the attic; Ahab's unremitting travels toward the elusive Moby Dick, both objects of hatred and perceived malice. Both men are larger-than-life, but while Rochester is a tragic hero in the classic sense, Ahab is not: Rochester undergoes change through the stages of hubris, peripeteia, and hamartia. His reversal begins when Jane runs away, and climaxes when Bertha sets Thornfield on fire. (Fire figures too in *M-D*, viz. the corpusants, in ch. 119, "The Candles.") He recognizes his error in cajoling Jane to be his mistress when marriage is no longer possible ["I did wrong" ch. 37]. His hubris, in the end, is humbled. But Ahab's arrogance lasts to the salty end: "from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee..." ch. 135].

Brontë's and Melville's protagonists are autocratic and dominating, both are older (38 and 58) than the narrators (about 18) but not wiser. Both men are missing limbs. The time frame from their disfigurement to the climax is one year for each. (While Ahab is already crippled when we meet him, Rochester is injured at the end of the novel, but both amputations are central, not incidental, to the plot). Both men bear lightning-like scars, and both are compared to lightning-struck trees.

In ch. 25 of *JE*, the chestnut tree (whose name is cognate to "Rochester" and "chest," or heart) is struck by lightning. *JE* address the tree "as if the monster-splinters were living things." She says:

I faced the wreck of the chestnut-tree; it stood up black and riven: the trunk, split down the centre, gasped ghastly ...vitality was destroyed—the sap could flow no more: their great boughs on each side were dead...a ruin, but an entire ruin... scathed as you look, and charred and scorched, there must be a little sense of life in you yet...[but] you will never have green leaves more...

The image is repeated at the end of the novel in Rochester's "73utabaga73e visage," "scorched eyebrows," and "crippled strength," his arm "a mere stump—a ghastly sight!" Jane Eyre says:

His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour as ever: his port was still erect, his hair was still raven black; nor were his features altered or sunk: not in one year's space, by any sorrow, could his athletic strength be quelled or his vigorous prime blighted. But in his countenance I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding ... dangerous to approach in his sullen woe.... "I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard," he remarked.... "You are no ruin, sir—no lightning-struck tree: you are green and vigorous.

The "scar of fire on [Rochester's] forehead" is similar to Ahab's scar. Compare the passage above with M-D, ch. 28:

He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness. His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus. Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish. It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom, ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded. Whether that mark was born with him, or whether it was the scar left by some desperate wound, no one could certainly say.

The reference to "cast Perseus" reminds me of: "[Rochester had] thought himself [Celine's] idol, ugly as he was: he believed, as he said, that she preferred his 'taille d'athlete' to the elegance of the Apollo Belvidere."

Other findings: Each virile hero sheds a tear at the end: JE: "As he turned aside his face a minute, I saw a tear slide from under the sealed eyelid, and trickle down the manly cheek." M-D: "From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop." (ch. 132). And while JE is very much about finding one's home, M-D is about escape from home. I'm going to contemplate an analogy between Rochester and his ward Adele, and Ahab, who becomes a father-figure to Pip. And here is a parallel communion between Rochester and Jane, and Ahab and Pip: *Jane Eyre*, ch. 23: R. to J.: "I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you...as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous Channel, and 200 miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly." ~~~*Moby-Dick*, ch. 125: Ahab to Pip: "Thou touchest my inmost centre boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings."

I may be reading too freely into this literature, but that's part of the fun of reading. I do understand the biblical significance of Ahab's name, but can't help forcing a Sanskrit/Latin analogy, regarding "A-hab" as "not-habiting." Maybe it's just as well I haven't a PhD.

## TRAINS, SHIPS, SPLINTS, KNIVES, WHALESONGS, AND THE POPE



People constantly ask “How are you?” and “What is new?” I know the questions are merely rhetorical, but I’ll reply anyway.

### *How I Am and What Is New*

1. Went to a lecture about five garbage scows lost in a storm at sea, in 1892, near New York Harbor. The meeting, for ship and rail enthusiasts, took place in an old loft on Walker St.----the nearly extinct kind: dusty, raw, over-scale, grey with age. The cavernous and unfurnished space was divided down the middle by a wall with a narrow doorway at center. The doorway was bisected at clavicle level by model-railroad tracks that ran in an oval around a thousand square feet of space. If, unawares, you poked your head through the aperture, an oncoming locomotive might flatten your nose. Someone switched the trains on, and the clamor of wheels on rails (miniaturized as they were) sounded like a sudden, violent rainstorm. Everyone gasped and automatically glanced up, as if expecting an indoor downpour.

2. A few Sundays ago in Soho, I tripped on an uneven chunk of sidewalk. Tangled in leashes, I went off-balance and down hard. Back home I went downstairs to the café to get ice for the damaged finger. One of the young waiters, also a lifeguard savvy about First Aid, probed, queried, and determined the finger probably wasn’t broken--more likely sprained or disjointed. (He turned out to be wrong. The finger was broken in two or three places.) Wrapping it in ice proved cumbersome, leaky and, yeah, cold. A little later I learned of a dancer’s remedy: wrap the injury in cold cabbage leaves, which worked better than ice. My hand felt as though it was in a baseball mitt. After 15 minutes the cabbage had wilted completely, sacrificing itself to my hand. I made a splint from a coffee stirrer and tape. But without a proper splint, the end of the digit still dangles.

3-A. On a recent Thursday at noon, on the south edge of Washington Square, two huge men with knives ran across my path, bloody and screaming, just about killing each other. No cops in sight, despite the big police trailer always parked there to dissuade drug

dealers. (Whether the trailer is ever occupied remains a mystery, for the windows are covered with newspapers.) As fast as they'd appeared, the thugs tore off to continue their mayhem elsewhere. *Then*:

3-B. The next week, on the same day, same time, same spot, I was swept up in some kind of Earth Day celebration. A sizable parade of (presumably) NYU students---girls in nothing but body paint (or less), and guys in Speedos (one gold lame')---appeared out of nowhere, chanting and dancing in the chilly sun.

4. On a Sunday during this same time, a three-masted, fully rigged clipper ship *Stad Amsterdam* dreamed its way down the Hudson.

5. Yesterday, went to a seminar on "Whales, Whalesong and New York City," at the 42<sup>nd</sup> St. Library. Speakers from Harvard, Princeton, NYU. Of course my favorite lecture was the one about *Moby-Dick*. I heard some fascinating insights, such as why Melville has Ishmael (and the novel) start off from Manhattan, rather than New Bedford. And why Melville, who knew better, called the whale a fish.

6. Outside P.S.234 on Greenwich Street is a story-bookish garden---probably home to gnomes and elves as well as pigeons and rats. Now in delicate bloom, the prima donnas are two cherry trees in fountainous pink-tulle ballet skirts. At one end of the garden, like a stage prop, is a roughhewn, clapboard birdfeeder that looks like a forgotten camp shack in the Catskills, and the frilly flowers are like characters out of Gilbert and Sullivan County.

7. This morning the Pope and entourage arrived at Ground Zero, an event that silenced all of Tribeca and Battery Park City, as thoroughly as if humanity had been erased. The West Side Highway, usually an inexorable rageway, was so quiet you could hear the click of canine nails on asphalt. You could hear traffic lights change. Half an hour later, the world started up again, like a crowd of movie extras responding to the cue: "Background! Action!"



## FULL CIRCLE

It is Christmas Eve. The landscape is empty; its colors, orchestral: a touch of brass, silver, ivory, ebony. Faint clouds smudge the sky like fingerprints. The north meadow is covered with widespread tarps—protection from frost. Like drying sails, they're a luminous sea-glass-gray and luff ominously, mimicking in color and movement the river beyond. Earlier, the tarps were dotted with hundreds of seagulls, skating to a muted duet of mournful foghorn and train horn. The birds, keening mightily, rose in unison, their whelken whiteness merging with the fingerprinted sky.

Each branch and twig stands out in folk-art clarity, as though painted with a tiny brush. In one tree clings a passel of sparrows like brown leaves. At the roots grumbles a flock of puffed pigeons. Canada geese bask on the lawn like freighters. The koi in the pond have taken refuge under a plywood shelter disguised with stones, where they'll stay hidden until spring.

My mind is on *Moby-Dick*. I built two miniatures of the Spouter Inn this week. One is the rain-damp façade of the Spouter-Inn in New Bedford

. Ishmael describes how he saw:

... a dim sort of out-hanging light not far from the docks, and heard a forlorn creaking in the air; and looking up, saw a swinging sign over the door with a white painting upon it, faintly representing a tall straight jet of misty spray, and these words underneath – “The Spouter-Inn: -- Peter Coffin.”

The other is a replica of the clammy room where Ishmael and Queequeg stayed, before setting sail on Christmas Day.

When Barnes and Noble opened in Tribeca, my first purchase was a pop-up *Moby-Dick* by Sam Ita. As I was examining the real rope rigging, I happened to glance up at the undulant mural of literary giants painted near the ceiling. Next to Whitman are Melville and a pipe-smoking Queequeg. A figment of fiction may not qualify as an author *per se*, but Queequeg did scribe his autonecrology, copying his tattoos on the lid of his coffin. I hope Melville and Queequeg are enjoying their Starbucks, up near the ceiling, for tomorrow they set sail.



## MELVILLE, MINIATURES AND MORE

I've lived a block or two from the Hudson River, in lower Manhattan, since February 1976. In those days, people with unleashed dogs would run on the landfill beach and make sculpture out of stuff the river washed up. Most late afternoons, when the industrial streets finally simmered down, I'd go to the roof to watch ocean liners, barges and tugs slip by in the transcendent hush. I'd transpose them into barks and brigs, and imagine Whitman's "forests at the wharves." He used the same metaphor in "The World below the Brine" ("forests at the bottom of the sea, the branches and leaves..."). I like this unintentional connecting of above and below. Living near water is conducive to going inside and sounding oneself out. The paradoxes we're made of come to light. "Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever," says Melville, who was born on Pearl St. at the Seaport and lived in New York much of his life.

*Moby-Dick* begins at the Battery. Melville, the mystical cousin of Whitman (and Ryder of course, and Turner), has spun for me a new apprehension of life entwined with water and the call to attend the mystical. On the brink of his sea (see) voyage, Ishmael says, "The great flood-gates of the wonder world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose...there floated into my inmost soul...one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air."

Now little of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century maritime legacy remains in the fraction of Tribeca that remains un-spiffed up. In the 90s, I replicated the old warehouses in miniature, using indigenous found objects: a splinter from a crumbling loading dock became a miniature loading dock; a plank became a warehouse, a discarded painting some artist threw out became the wall of a tenement. What interested me then, before *Moby-Dick*, was the fugitive sense of age and of history, a desolate beauty on the brink of change. What interests me now, having read *Moby-Dick*, are the pointers a masterpiece provides to the timeless ineffable, and our delivery from the superficial mundane through archetypes such as Melville's "grand hooded phantom"—whatever that may be.



## WHAT THE FLU PROVIDED

Nobody wants to be sick, but I've just discovered that every once in a while, when it happens, succumbing to illness can be valuable. The busier you are, the more useful it is. For regrouping, most everyone would prefer to go somewhere on vacation, but I've found that illness can be a kind of vacation, if I'm willing to vacate my usual expectations and demands that collect as a result of too many commitments, time-consuming preparations (like personal hygiene), insurmountable projects and deadlines. Relief that one project is over is followed immediately by an anxiety to get the next and get to it. No time to be sick, naturally. But I got the flu. I would have worked my way right through the fever had I been able, but I had to go to bed and stay there, hog-tied.

So in the middle of the most beautiful weather, when I would have loved to be out romping with the dogs and enjoying the tulips and wisteria, I lay in my tiny cuddy-room with its hull-like beams and book-laden struts. I stared at the golden light on my fractional river view, watched a boat pass merrily, and mentally protested. What a waste of time! What a headache! I tried to read. I tried to watch a movie. I found myself reading the Interpol and FBI warnings over and over. I tried to write and draw but became cranky. I tried to make additional lists of everything in every category I had to take care of, which made me anxious. Finally, I just closed my eyes and yielded to the condition and the company of flu.

Having tired of futile objections and maddening, Moebius conversations, I replaced them with observation. It wasn't so hard to do, being roped down this way. It took all 20 years of meditating to remember to stop thinking. I pretended that I wasn't me. I was a foreign being, breathing in a bed. I gave up my identification with everything I call myself and got past my thoughts. It was more of an adjustment than a decision, rather like squeezing, in a blink, through a gate. Where to? To an awareness of being aware. I lost the sense of physical discomfort. Matter didn't matter. The nameless light made me smile. It felt new and nice, this awareness of being, with nothing extra.

The inner state is both vacant and full, but never busy. It is composed of unconditional equipoise. Without this awareness of being, even perfect health is not perfect. For a few moments, in this realization, "I" consciously drowsed in what seemed a perfect little dinghy of pure beingness, upon an unsounded sea.

Then I had some NyQuil.



## ALL AROUND THE TOWN

It's rare for me to be uptown, midtown, and downtown all in one evening. What sent me all over was a preview for "Van Gogh and Expressionism" at the Neue Galerie, at Fifth Avenue and 86<sup>th</sup> St. The gracious chambers downstairs rapidly filled with mink coats, gold and silver, and other accouterments of gentility—as polished hirelings proffered champagne and canapés, and a sprightly pianist thundered and tinkled away at a baby grand. Upstairs was a breathtaking exhibition of Van Goghs and dozens of Expressionist paintings that bear his influence. On a landing between floors was a huge, back-lit photo of Vincent at 18—one of two extant photos of him, I heard. He had no idea, then, that in one decade he'd become an artist and in two he'd be dead. He had no idea how important he would be to the world. In the photo he looks guileless, earnest and lonely, like a disenfranchised, Outsider artist. Downstairs, in the shop, I bought a card with a painting by Max Pechstein: a young girl in a verdant setting, sitting with brown knees raised, a white cat curled by her side.

I hurried off to a second opening, this one in Times Square, in an SRO hotel on 43<sup>rd</sup>—home of 600 "adults in need." Artist-residents sat at small tables along a wrap-around mezzanine. They sipped Poland Spring water from bottles or plastic cups with an air of cheery eccentricity. Unlike the bedizened uptowners, these folks seemed excited. A frail old man with a long white beard leaned on a cane and spoke with a Yorkshire accent. His right eye and cheek were bright magenta from a recent fall in the street. He smiled when I said, "I'd like to see the other guy." The walls were swathed with talent. One landscape, a la Vlaminck, portrayed a lone shocked tree in a blighted heath under a furious white sky. The colors and brushstrokes were sharp, dark, self-assured; full of harmony and rage. There was a small painting that made me gasp: it was so much like the Pechstein in my backpack in terms of size, colors, composition, and subject: young girl in a green field, brown knees up. Instead of a round cat there was a basketball, on which she sat. The artist was a tall black man who also used a cane, though he wasn't old. I'm sure he'd never heard of Pechstein. I held the card next to his painting and told him that the real painting was in a museum. He exclaimed, "Oh, wow." I gave him the card. He tucked it in a pocket and asked me if I liked his his sweatshirt, on which he'd painted a big glittery face.

I went home. Got off at Franklin, a huge stretch of which is dug up for pipe work. The street looked like a sculpture park with all the steel plates, fresh tar, sawhorse barriers, traffic cones, iron tubes, and mounds of dirt. The exhumed cobblestones, much thicker than one would think, were stacked in great, respectful piles, like artifacts and gave off the faint, sewerish tang of spent centuries. And before that, they'd been used as ballast in the holds of ships sent to collect American goods from these docks, to take back overseas.

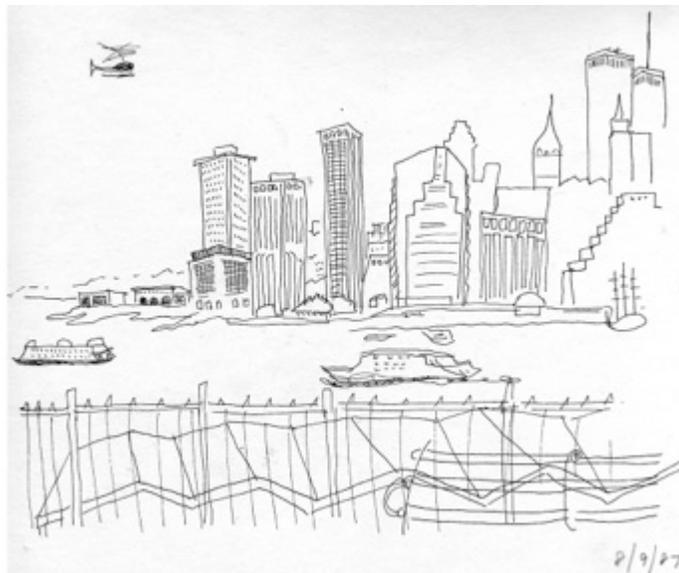


## “METTLESOME, MAD, EXTRAVAGANT CITY!”

After a hot night with three fans blowing upon four shedding quadrupeds and me, the dogs and I went early down to the North Cove. No sooner had we settled on a stone bulwark than we were hailed by a woman with a Colombian accent and a young blue-merle sheltie named Twyla. We exchanged sheltie stories and then, inevitably, tales of 9/11. On that day she'd been alone in her apartment, a block or two from the towers, with a broken foot and her 90-year-old mother. After the attack, Battery Park was evacuated, but the two women were stuck. For six long weeks, with no means of communication with the outside world, they and their two shelties (who, soon after 9/11, contracted cancer and died) subsisted on the older woman's supply of Ensure. When the dust settled, quite literally, they finally were rescued. I still hear such stories, from time to time.

The marina gradually was awaking, with bronzed sailing instructors readying a fleet of small boats arranged along the wharf like so many pointy-toe shoes. Yachts were being groomed like racehorses. Increasing numbers of people ambled about, Starbucks in hand. I sat near the marina wall, its two poetic snippets welded, in open letters of steel, in a single continuous line. Over the Whitman quote, a homeless woman, who was nursing a wounded foot just then, had hung out her laundry to dry. (Where had she washed it?) Whitman's words were all but hidden, but I could fill in the gaps: “City of the world (for all races are here. All the lands of the earth make contributions here). City of the sea! City of wharves and stores – city of tall facades of marble and iron! Proud and passionate city – mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!” On the other side, Frank O'Hara poem aptly proclaimed: “One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes – I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store, or some other sign that people do not totally regret life.”

Beyond the railing, a large walking tour in matching black t-shirts with white logos fixed its attention on a guide. He gestured to the Wintergarden, and explained how that great glass structure had collapsed along with the towers, but had been rebuilt. “And now,” he said, “we'll go inside for a good view of Ground Zero.”



## SARAH LAWRENCE REDUX

I revisited Bronxville last weekend, for the first time in years. As I trudged up the hill from the train station, I glanced back and, seeing the redoubtable Hotel Gramatan, high on a hill and obscured by trees, relived an early memory. It still seemed in a snit, ever since that night, in 1967, when a few errant Sarah Lawrence girls climbed the hotel's mast-high sign and blacked out "EL" and "TAN" from the sign, transfiguring the hotel's name to "HOT GRAMA."

I walked past familiar little village stores and across the Bronx River Parkway. I passed Brooklands, the patulous old-age home on Palmer Rd., whose bent residents bowed over their blooms just as they had when I'd first arrived, 40 years before, and mistook the rectangular flower patches for graves.

It was alumnae weekend at the college; I'd come for a reception for a painting show I was in, at the new art center next door to the sprawling president's residence. Entering the gate on Kimball Ave. I walked through the campus, surprised that no one was around; alums must have been in seminars. I went through the three joined buildings of the new dorms (as they were called when I entered as a freshman). The blocky rooms were empty and silent, bunk beds stripped. I remembered the smell. I remembered how I used to be back then.

My first room was in the middle building of the three and was called, improbably, "Garrison." At first I'd had a roommate, but that didn't work out. She had been a girlfriend of Bob Dylan, and had anticipated, by 20 years, East Village punk, with her white skin, black hair, violet eye shadow, ashen lips, and penchant for leather. The first time she brought a boy in for the night, I applied for, and immediately was granted, a room of my own across the hall.

That first year, someone asked why I never went into New York City by myself. I grew up in Miami, which was still safe in those days, and had long heard how dangerous New York was, so I wasn't ready to go exploring. I said as much, that I was afraid of being mugged or raped. To which my fellow freshman, far more sophisticated than I, and from Long Island at that, said, "*Who* would want to rape *you*?" I didn't know whether to feel affronted or mollified. I guess we all had a lot to learn, in every direction.

Perhaps it's universally instructive to reflect on one's self-transformations between 18 and 58. It's a chance to swap nostalgia for the tender concession of appreciation, relief, and yes, a little disbelief.



Freshman Self-Portrait, 1968

## INTERRUPTION

A desultory Saturday morning, warm and breezy. The dogs and I settle on a cool stone bench in Battery Park. I jot observations:

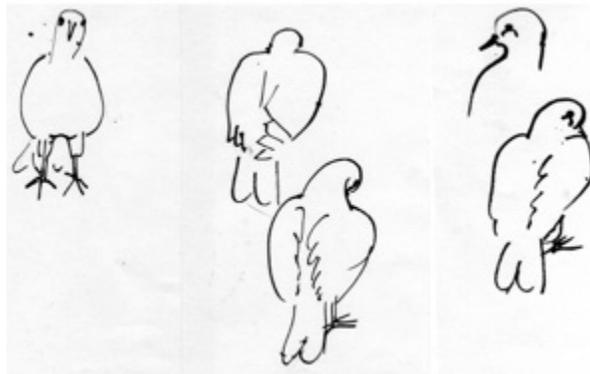
1. The lily pond is stocked with rushes and reeds; tall thickets of hallucinatory water grasses and sedge; hypnotic waterfall.
2. Female duck naps on a lily pad, bill beneath wing: brown-patterned like marquetry.
3. In the murky pond loom huge koi: silvery white, tangerine, black, calico. Their scales are imbricate, like shingles or chain mail. They break the slimy surface with waxy lips and trail me around the verge.
4. Spiky, pink water lilies on violet-green and the conical finials of tight white buds.
5. Pond reflects a marbled sky and undulant skeletal facades.
6. Sparrows, all hopped up about something, excited as little girls. Pigeons.

As if on cue, two birdlike girls flutter over. They're overjoyed because they're hiding, because they've spotted my pretty dogs, and because they are seven. One is lissome and fair, a Botticelli beauty. The other is petite and dark, a Corot jeune fille. They ask to pet the dogs. We talk about:

- a. Shyness. "Tracy is a bit shy," I begin; they chime: "Me, too!"
- b. Had I seen the turkey in Tribeca—and a whole flock in the park?
- c. Hummingbirds. Did you know they flap their wings 100 times a second?
- d. Guitar and piano music. Just learning.
- e. A dog back home in France, named Loup.
- f. 14 days of school missed because of modeling (Amber).
- g. Helping grownups with computers all the time (Sophia).
- h. Siblings: What it's like to be the first of two (Amber), the second of four (Sophia), or the first of four (me).

Unimaginatively I ask: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Amber: "A housemate." "A housemate?" "Yes. I want to live in a house with one friend and lots of animals." Just then Amber's mother, with even younger kids in tow, finds the girls. I give Amber and Sophia my business card. They dimple, and all move off slowly, in a clamorous clutch. When they've gone, I take out my notes and resume observing:

- i. On the round arm of an iron bench, 3 flies in unison lift and land repeatedly.
- j. Stray red balloon against cumulous clouds in a banner-blue sky.
- k. Pigeon-tracks, etched when the cement was wet, immortalized graffiti.
- l. Glossy speckled starlings on grass lime-green in sun, viridian in shade.
- m. The weeds and wildflowers, more mysterious than roses.



## FREEDOMS

It is difficult to meander freely in New York City except on holidays, when the streets are empty of traffic and the pavements are clear of mad cyclists, ferocious skaters, audacious gallopers, and twin- or triplet-wide prams. Yesterday evening, in the calm before the Fourth, I walked the dogs to the tip of the Battery; in that spacious pre-holiday quietude there was little risk of stepping on someone's Manhattos.

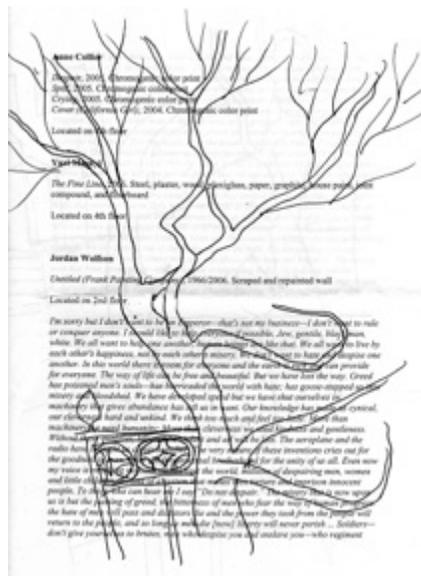
Down at Battery Park I saw a large, emancipated field, happily left to wildflowers growing tall and free. I circumnavigated Castle Clinton (1811), and peered into the inner ward through each mysterious, deep, barred and splayed window all the way around. Meanwhile, the usual assortment of assiduous commuter and visitor boats came and went.

I settled on the brink of the U.S.A. and gazed beyond the Narrows, out to sea. Distance telescoped the expanse into an intensely minuscule presence, like a Bewickian vignette. The Verrazano Bridge seemed a mere wisp. Tiny sails, cupping breezes, puffed out like little whelks. The occasional foghorn sounded in an unexpected key. In the near distance, an enormous green scow, loaded with containers and marked "Saudi Arabia," pulled out from its berth, inexorable as a landslide. Soon followed the *Pioneer*, a gaff-rigged schooner for hire, which loomed from its slip close enough for me to see the stitching athwart its trapezoidal sheets.

Above, the wheel-spoked sun had been beckoning a convoy of huge gray and white clouds that now were beginning to fluoresce. And, briefly, in the early-evening blue: a rainbow.

There's Governor's Island, newly open to the public, accessible for free. There's Liberty (nee Bedloes) Island, with the Statue of Liberty, and Liberty State Park. And Ellis Island, where my father's father came a century or so ago with nothing, including English. When the officials asked his name, he shrugged. "Here you are a free man," they improvised (so I'm told), and stamped his papers *Freeman*.

July 4, 2007



## INSOMNIAC SCRIBBLINGS

Descriptions born in wee hours of unbidden wakefulness:

**1. Cherchez la Pen.** In the middle of the night, thinking of a possible way to start his memoir, he got out of bed and rooted around for a pen among the many odd ones (biros, disposable fountains, razor points, felt-tips, those with erasable green ink, bank-ad freebies, etc.) which had accumulated in a collection of disused coffee mugs carefully lined up on a shelf. There was a yellow mug with Chinese characters [for *good luck*? For *caution hot beverage*?]; a mug with his college logo (appropriately, it was Penn); one personalized with his mother's name and a lugubrious owl on the obverse. There was a plain blue one with two white chips in the lip resembling a Nepalese mountain range; and a mug from Starbuck's (the older style); and a mug on which was embossed an image of his former favorite dog breed, the Pekinese, before he switched allegiance to the Nova Scotia Duck-Tolling Retriever (and was even now awaiting via UPS the arrival of a mug bearing the mug of that dog from the NSDTR Enthusiasts Association). Every one of these cast-off cups, now crammed with pens, having been relegated to the superannuated rank of pen catch-alls, had been used at first to drink from. He was particular about both pens and coffee mugs, quickly tiring of the latter and replacing them one by one like so many quasi-discarded relationships that he was loathe to end definitively. This was as good a solution as any, to retain and discard simultaneously, since he kept them but in another guise. It was from the chipped blue that he finally chose a suitable instrument (a black-ink ballpoint) with which to begin his procrastinatory, minatory memoir.

**2. Misery is** a clogged ear producing temporary deafness and precluding the ear plugs you normally (or not-so-normally) carry with you at all times. Every few hours you must cock your head at a right angle to the neck, like a heavy bloom bent upon a broken stalk, and apply an unctuous wax-softener unappealingly called "Debrox" by pinching the little plastic dispenser and having an awful ooze trickle ghoulishly into the ear canal. All the time you exist among maddeningly muffled sounds you regret every complaint against noise you've ever made and pray for the return of your normally hypersensitive, super-sharp hearing. You avoid the temptation to go spelunking with Q-tips because your otologist father had often scared you in childhood with horror stories of how they puncture (and permanently ruin) eardrums, though unaccountably you store them by the hundreds (the Q-tips, not eardrums), always stocking up on the super king-size family pack) despite the fact that, mainly for the sake of peace and quiet, you live alone.

**3. Misery also is** a mosquito whose monstrous and implacable near-and-far whining bears an uncanny resemblance to the Doppler effect. In the middle of the night the insect grows into a monster like the human-eating alien tripods from *The War of the Worlds*, which you unwisely watched (disobeying your Still Small Voice) only hours ago and which, unfortunately, has you wide-eyed and mosquito-battling, and alien to sleep. Each time the invisible pillaging mosquito (is there more than one?) attacks (the knuckles, ankles, wrist bones), you plunge a deep X with your thumbnail in each growing red hummock of the bites, an operation which, according to every summer-camp kid, is supposed to assuage the burning itch. That doesn't work very well so you hope the self-inflicted X's will at least distract you from your lingering movie-terror. After a couple of hours of this losing battle you get up and run a scalding bath heavily laced with baking soda. Afterwards, to expunge the special effects, you switch on the TV looking for something soporific like reruns of *This Old House*. But what you tune in to and can't turn off is *Psycho*.

## COLD COMFORT CHARM

The nicest furnishings in my flat belong to the dogs, and I don't mean Shearling beds or ergonomic water-stands. I refer to the fancy tresses above the pasterns and at the rear, which, I'm told, are called exactly that: furnishings.

In general, I do not like furnishings. I think couches, armchairs, rugs and the like belong in fictional murder mysteries. I've felt this way since childhood, though I grew up in lovely suburban Miami, in an elegant home of Danish Modern, teak and cherry wood, Steuban glass, and Jensen flatware. My own little room was ascetic, spare as a ship. As such, there is hardly anything about it to describe, except for its off-putting emptiness, and all the built-in Formica cabinets, shelves and drawers, and the drop-down drawing desk, and the other built-in desk, and the yellow shutters at the high windows blocking out all distractions of nature.

I moved to New York in 1974, to a studio apartment on E. 79<sup>th</sup> St. where I painted large canvases. (Perversely, I started painting small only when I moved downtown to the loft.) Besides the stretchers, canvas, paints and brushes, and the jars of turps, my flat contained only a sleeping bag, a tall wooden stool, and two cooking pots, which I had found in the place when I moved in. Instead of a space-consuming table, I balanced my dinner plate on the windowsill, and ate gazing out at the eastern view, from the 14<sup>th</sup> floor. The two cats perched beside my plate, luckily never defenestrated themselves. The windowsill also held a spider plant, a sansavaria, and a small India rubber tree. (The notion of indoor plants once seemed odd; we didn't have them in Miami when I was growing up. When I was 18, we visited my parents' New York friends, the Drylings. Their uptown hi-rise was the first apartment I saw (except for the one in the Bronx where we lived until I was five). I was shocked that people actually chose to live in teeny, noisy, dark cubicles, and needed elevators! And kept "houseplants" in their windows!



## A BIG MOVE

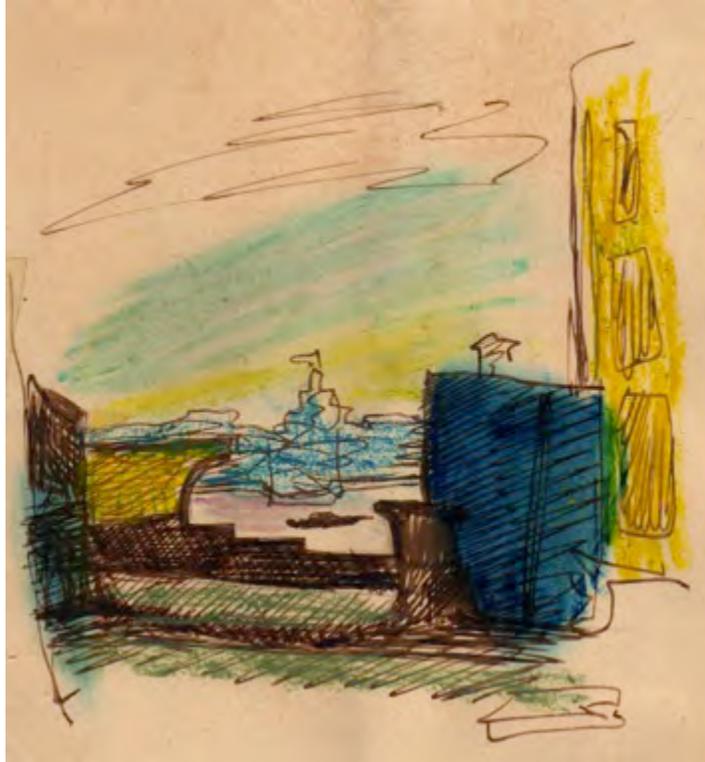


Chloe and Woofers, 1976

In Feb. 1976, I moved downtown to an illegal loft at One Hudson Street, at Chambers. I shared the floor with Jos. Shaffner, a printing factory. The rent was \$250/month. My half (1,200 sq. ft.) came with four big dead trees in plastic tubs, a rickety bed cobbled from planks, and a trove of dried-up oil-paint tubes. Until I found someone to jerry-rig a bathroom, I used the men's in the hallway and showered at the Y. The ceilings were so tall that I built a bed on stilts. I cooked on a hot plate, and balanced my dinner of soup on a window ledge—as I had done uptown—but instead of eyeing the ice-tray cubicles of hi-rises and a smidge of the East River, I now gazed over industrial landspans and Hudson River sunsets. From the fire escape I could see the World Trade Center. Every night I climbed out of one of the enormous windows, onto the adjacent rooftop, to write poems. No one around, except Woofers, who patrolled up there and used the rooftops as his personal (doggerel?) dog-run. I met him after my first trepidatious night in this new, dead-quiet, desolate neighborhood. Awaking at sunup (no curtains, no shades), I was aghast to see a wolf-like dog staring in at me with his feral, bright blue eyes.

Cat with the run of the roof





View from One Hudson Street, 1976

### A SMALL MOVE

I had to leave the loft in 1982, when the building was sold to a miscreantish reprobate. (The usual story.) I moved five short blocks north to a third-four walkup with a bar beneath, on Harrison. The four-room railroad flat had reptilian green walls (probably still full of lead), seven cracked windows boarded up with plywood, and no kitchen or bath to speak of, just a toilet at the end of a long dim hallway. The previous tenants had been there for 60 years and had paid \$60/month. The two useless wall outlets dated from the days of Thomas Edison. The gas jets in the narrow stairway were plugged. Each of the four rooms had an iron bed and a dark armoire filled with Miss Havisham's geegaws, including jars of false teeth. Behind one wardrobe I found an ancient love letter, obviously deliberately hidden away. Since I wouldn't dream of taking up valuable square footage with furniture, I got rid of everything. Rattling about in four empty rooms, I dug up ten layers of patterned linoleum, under which were newspapers from the Korean War and from World War II. Beneath them, wide-plank, 19<sup>th</sup>-century floors.

My preference for oddment dishes originated when my friend Lil told me about a brunch she went to once in Greenwich Village. The host and hostess, both artists who will remain unnamed because of their fame, used mismatched, chipped plates and mugs. They anticipated shabby chic by decades.

I never use heat in winter. When I moved in, the radiator at one end of the flat was broken and the other, which probably had stood near the blocked-up fireplace, was missing. Blithely (it was summer) I disconnected the gas line. Every winter I taped plastic drop cloths over the windows, but the wind comes in through fissures in the walls. Only when it gets below freezing out is it a mite chilly indoors; but there are always hot baths, fingerless gloves and the fur-lined quadrupeds.

## PEST-CONTROL PATROL

Lately it seems everyone I know is suffering from one plague or another. I've heard reports of mice and fleas in apartments, rats in basements, termites in the timber of weekend houses. My neighbor across the street, who boards dogs, has had a sudden infestation of fleas. Another neighbor, who found a nice-looking blanket somewhere, now has bedbugs. Despite my animals, I haven't any fleas or ticks, thank God, though gnats swarm and horseflies buzz through the screenless windows to bang against the walls, and ubiquitous drosophila circle a plate of onions and other roots. The moths must be having a field day in my box of sweaters. But no bedbugs, so far; my plinth must be too austere for bugs that like beds. And I'm pleased to report that I've been mouse free for five years, ever since the arrival of the cats. In the B.C. [Before Cat] era, I often felt furry-scurries across my pillow in the dark. Switching on the light and seeing the tiny things, I'd scream "eek!" as in those cartoons whose plot involved an eeking, shrieking girl leaping onto a piano with a discordant crash to escape a mouse. Contemptible behavior, but I did it too, sans piano. Whenever I happened to surprise the mice by going to the bathroom in the wee hours, I'd catch them tucked into my shoes, like a family of Stuart Littles.

So no mice, rats, bedbugs, or fleas, but I do have one unwelcome nocturnal visitor. A mosquito. I think it's the same individual every night: an elusive, persistent, one-bug pestilence. It waits until I doze off to bite. Sometimes its whining whirr – so much like a microscopic vacuum cleaner or helicopter – wakes me, but before I can get the light on, I'm jabbed. Last night it was my right cheek. Reflexively I slapped my face, hard, and stumbled into the bathroom to assess the damage, clicking the sailing-ship night-light on. At three in the morning, when few of us are at our attractive best, I watched incredulously as a giant welt bloomed on my bleary, greenish-grayish visage. Of course I immediately thought of Gregor Samsa and hastily jumped back in bed. I wrapped myself up in the sheets from head to foot and hoped the bloodsucker felt sated. For the rest of the night, it seemed, I applied that juvenile remedy to allay the itch, which all Florida kids know. You inscribe an X in the welt with your thumbnail. But I'm open to other suggestions. My friend across the street, the one with the fleas, found an anti-insect lemon potion on the Internet. She recited it to me over the phone. It involves a lot of slicing and zesting, boiling pulp down into a tincture and thickening it into an ointment, etc. A lot of work for one mosquito, it seemed. Another antidote could be a mosquito net.

Naturally, the bugs will leave when it turns cold. If it ever will. A few minutes ago, as I walked sweatily down the street swatting at no-see-ums and scratching at my cheek, I overheard a young woman wail into her cellphone: "I came here for the fall foliage. I never dreamed it would be eighty thousand degrees in October." Eighty thousand degrees and still unavoidably buggy.



## ME, MYSELF AND IKEA



Before Ikea opened in Red Hook, Brooklyn, I'd go to the Elizabeth, NJ store, mainly for cheap little wooden painted picture frames. I avoided weekends, when the free buses are standing-room-only. One Friday morning the bus was almost full. I brought my Walkman and a box of earplugs, arms against a sea of cell phones and complaints like: "What! You didn't realize you have to assemble everything yourself?" After disgorging 90% of its passengers at the Jersey Gardens Mall, the bus arrived at Ikealand at 11. I had two hours until the next return bus left. I went for coffee at the hangar-like Swedish restaurant, pleasantly empty, though by noon it would be crowded with meatball aficionados. I sat at a svelte blond table and watched planes scudding into Newark every minute or so. The sky was as wide and blue as Wyoming, swathed in a cumulus coif.

After coffee I meandered through the showroom of kitchens, baths, bedrooms (master, juvenile, nursery) feeling as if I were in a dollhouse or soap-opera lot with all the three-sided sets exposed. I relish Scandinavian simplicity. (I'm 1/8 Swedish: my maternal great grandfather was a Dannenberg from Goteborg.) After a cross-country store trek, I found the picture frames, picked out a couple dozen, then hiked to the cashiers, another mile away, beyond the towering ranks of furniture stock. I joined the lines in what resembled a hangar of giant bowling-alley lanes.

Outside, to the bus. A jet took off and I ducked, jittery from the memory of the plane that had coasted down West Broadway just over my head as I stood with my grocery bags, amazed. I'd registered the sharkish underbelly of the plane and the faces in oval frames. The jet levitated fractionally, adjusted aim, and sped forward, disappearing seconds later into the tower with an apocalyptic bang. The jet was like a hook in the mouth of a silver whale. Its brand was the shadow of archaeopteryx wings. An explosion, and fire, and the pure blue sky burst with the confetti of fractured glass.

I yanked myself back to the present, focused on the meadows of churning grasses, the sprigs of yarrow against a backdrop of industry. At Union City, a caption on an overpass: "Welcome to Northern New Jersey, Embroidery Capital of the World Since

1872.” The bus barreled into a dim tunnel full of trucks and buses—then burst into sunlight, and the landscape reverted once more from horizontal to vertical.

On the subway was a man who claimed to be an African king, festooned in embroidered robes, maybe bought in Northern New Jersey. He was peddling something from a covered bundle. A female beggar limped through the car trilling, “No matter what they take from me, they can’t take away my dignity.” I got off at Canal. On the platform, a cheery, one-legged man in a wheelchair hurried into the car I’d just vacated. He gave the conductor a sweet, knowing wink. The conductor held the doors for him and smiled. It’s good to leave town once in a while; it invigorates perspective and freshens home.

### QUE SEURAT SEURAT

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein, in the voice of Miss Toklas, writes: “I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken. . .” (The three geniuses were, in order of importance: Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and Alfred North Whitehead.) When I stand in front of artworks of genius, I too register in myself certain telltale signs: a prickle behind the eyes, a tickle in the throat, quickened breath. Such was my response upon seeing Seurat’s drawings at the Museum of Modern Art. Since age 13, I’ve owned a book of Seurat drawings, which I’ve always preferred to the famous Pointillist paintings. Now, most of the mysterious drawings in my book were hanging live and pulsing on the walls in front of me. Seurat is surely a master of the grisaille range, from velvety blacks to luminous whites. The pictures are at once weighty and ineffable, and seem to emerge from the paper like a scene glimpsed through half-closed eyes, or from a dream, or at twilight or dawn, when half-light indicates the whole, when less, as the modernists say, is more. One stunner is “Courbevoie, Factories by Moonlight” (1882-83), a near abstraction: black line, white circle, dark rectangle anchored by grays. The “facts” of a stack, a moon, a building, chimney smoke and landscape register more or less subliminally and throb with impact. Such is the case with the calligraphy of Zen Buddhist monk Sengai (1750-1838), “Circle, Triangle, and Square.” In both cases reduction resonates truth more eloquently than can literal narrative detail; here is how poetry beggars prose as the more qualitatively Real. This is what Ryder discovered when daylight faded and, compelled to paint what he could see: shape without detail, he discovered the immense visual power in reduction, which offers a paradox, in the awareness of a moment expanded through contraction.



## NARY A CROSS WORD

Though I'm not good at crossword puzzles, crossword puzzle definitions arise spontaneously, now and then. For example:

A place for firewood? *A log cabinet.*

Movements of a certain poet and a certain painter? *cummings & Goings.*

An exfoliated arbor? *A treeless trellis.*

An uncertain beginner? *A rocky rookie.*

A person with laryngitis? *A hoarse whisperer.*

I have another strange habit of thinking up word reversals, like:

Hook & Ladder / Lad and Hooker

Nook & Cranny / Crook & Nanny

Blue Chip Stocks / Blue Chopsticks

Pretty Girl / Gritty Pearl

Another category of wordplay is the homonym pun. To date I've thought up only one:

A twirling goddess and a favorite sports event: *Whirled Ceres / World Series*

I'm also intrigued by contradictory homonyms, such as Raze (to flatten) & Raise (to lift up), Cleave (to cling) & Cleave (to sever), Overlook (to supervise) & Overlook (to ignore), demean (to behave, usually well) & demean (to debase).

A crossword entry using a Contradictory Homonym: Harvest a sugar crop: Raze Cane.



## THE KOI IN WINTER

After the first snow, a few weeks back, I took the dogs out really early, and no one was about. We began in Staple Street, which is an alley, and I let them romp off-leash. Then we headed to the river, which that day was soft as smoke. Finding untrodden snow in the city is rare, but delightfully, uniquely and remarkably, all the tracks there were made by us. In the North Meadow, a pair of isolated pines, shaped roughly like arrowheads, stood out in isolate splendor against the fallow lawn. The lotus pond was solid ice, except for a scattering of spidery cracks through which you could see the inky water. Yellow remnants of tall pond grass stood like wattles and thatch, and were topped by dollops of new snow that looked like cotton bolls. The surface of the pond was glazed and pebbly, impressed with leaves like Indian leaf-and-petal stationery. Later the cracks filled in. Beneath the impervious glaze you could see orange koi drift eerily, as if through mercury.



## FREEMAN MEETS TREEMEN



There's a thick phalanx of Christmas trees stacked all down the block, some leaning against my building and, in an adjacent "neck of the woods," plenty more hemmed in behind a diner. This temporary forestation is both sweet and nettlesome, beautiful and unseemly. Walking down the last flight, I see a Christmas-card rectangle of pines through the door's peep-window. Beautiful. The sweet part is the aromatherapy. The nettlesome part is the hardship of getting in and out of the house or down the block because of all the trees, throngs shopping for them, and the commotion of a 24-hour presence of tree-sellers, who have brought the trees from Canada. They work in shifts and appear to sleep in their vans. The unseemly part stems from my awareness that these beautiful trees are already dead. They've been usurped from the earth to be bought, bedizened, and dumped.

In fifth grade, my friend, whose father worked on the railroad and whose mother made great French fries, gave me the top of their Christmas tree (which had to be cut for their low ceilings). This generosity came when I told Sharon I'd never had a Christmas tree before. Amazed, she asked why not. I said, "I don't think Jews celebrate Christmas." I was not sure about this. But Sharon gave me the spindly top of her family Christmas tree, and I decorated it and kept it in my room. I felt sorry for it. I never had another.

There are transient tree farms all around the city to satisfy this brief human caprice. The traffic triangle on Sixth Ave. near Spring was dominated by a large tent of Christmas lights, ornaments, boxes of tinsel, etc., and guarded by a great blow-up Santa who jumped about as Christmas songs blared scratchily from an undisclosed source. The half acre or so of cut trees, most bundled in nylon netting, was manned by a burly guy in his forties who looked like a lumberjack. He bent to pet the dogs. Loquacious and country-friendly, he extended his hand and introduced himself as Billy. His labial-nasal creases sparkled with wreath-glitter. Billy identified the tree types and had me touch the Douglas firs to test their suppleness. Since I'd never felt any needles before, supple or otherwise, I didn't know how to appraise them. He said his trees had a bigger-than-usual "gift base." I stared blankly. He explained that the more trunk was exposed at the bottom, the more gifts could be piled there.

We got to talking so much, we exchanged bits of biography. Turned out he had a Masters in cellular biology. And he'd spent years working on large cruise ships. I asked him why. He gave it serious thought, then with a conclusive nod, said slowly: "Being aboard cruise ships means a lot of heavy-duty introspection time."

## LATE LIGHT INTO NIGHT, IN CHELSEA

The long hotel, acutely white,  
Against the after-sunset light..."

--Arthur Symons, *Color Studies*, 1895: "At Dieppe"

So many painters of landscapes cite in catalog essays a bare and fundamental "interest in light." That's like a physician claiming interest in anatomy. That is making Lite of Light.

Hopper painted light in an original way and also said original things about it, like how street lamps at dusk turn city into stageset. Frank O'Hara wrote of the pleasure of neon in daylight and of light bulbs in daylight. It is a cliché even to say the subject of light never should become clichéd since light is always different, from one experience to the next.

Late today I was walking in Chelsea just before the light began to dwindle. An unexpected hush in the street intensified the pre-dusk drama. No one was about. No traffic. I went west on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, toward Eleventh Avenue. The sky, like a lucent blue eggshell, was both strong and fragile – dominant yet fugitive, on the verge of change. Dawn and dusk, like childhood and old age, signify transition, while day and night, like maturity and death, seem relatively fixed, or at least prolonged.

I came to a long, low warehouse with a stepped façade and bricked-up windows. It could have been painted by a Precisionist, the way it stood flat against the sky. It looked alien, detached, desolate – a cityscape by Ault. The painted lower half popped white in the incipient dusk. Mid-distance, beyond the warehouse, a peaked water-tower barrel looked like a paper cutout, backlit by sundown. A tree silhouette etched itself into the radiant sky, all the countless complex twig ends sparking with flinty energy.

I watched the sky darken in imperceptible grades to indigo. Turning back, I walked north along Tenth Avenue, alone in the lull as the sky finished steeping. With the blackness of night, the traffic started up with honks and shouts. A filling station leaked fluorescent firelight. From some dark alcove there drifted a whiff of clove from someone's kretek cigarette.



## WHITMAN SAMPLER

Synchronicities are like cosmic boons. For example, I am reading *Silas Marner*, and coincidentally, the movie I chose to watch, after putting down the book last night, was *A Simple Twist of Fate*. As soon as Steve Martin revealed his hidden hoard of gold I thought, “Aha! This may be a reinvention of Silas Marner.” And so it was.

In the same way, it’s fun to chance upon some literary passage that supports one’s dilemma-du-jour. This morning, for example, I’d been editing some freshman essays, all of which specialized in malapropisms, redundancies, and rafts of gratuitous detail.

I needed a break, and went to Barnes & Noble, which serves as bookseller cum study hall cum daycare center cum caffeine refueling station. Books and coffee go together like a horse and carriage. Randomly I selected a volume of Whitman’s prose and sat down under Walt’s portrait near the ceiling (next to Melville, also on a coffee break). Out the huge window, a hard rain was melting the snow, which, in small humps, lined the bone-colored curb like molars on a lupine jaw. Through the shaggy rain, the lit yellow windows of the school across the street shone like slitty eyes.

I thought of the writing difficulties of so many college students these days. The last-straw essay that had sent me to browse in Literature was so filled with clichés and hifalutin language that there was no chink for a reader to enter. I will advise the student to let his readers in. And not to over-explain the obvious. And to stop appending “unfortunately” to every unambiguous catastrophe, as in: “Unfortunately, after the volcanic eruption, there were no survivors, and everyone in the city died.”

When I opened the Whitman, my eye fell on *Specimen Days*---advice to a young writer. Walt explains that the business of a poem (or essay, I thought) is to put the reader “in rapport” so that his “brain, heart, evolution, must not only understand the matter, but largely support it.” That’s what I had meant to say, but of course Walt said it better.



## BIZARRE BAZAARS; FLEA MARKET FORAYS

On Sundays, eccentrics emerge from their brickwork lairs as if from hiding. On the subway: A stout, cheerful, grizzle-haired African-American with a young face and no eyes talked genially to himself. At a flea market: A sweet-voiced old woman wrapped in a shawl to hide her tumor-glutted face. One or two sporadic loners drifting by with unidentifiable animals in cloaked carriers. A spry old coot in Civil War garb selling old comic books. When I asked if he had the Classics Illustrated *Moby-Dick*, he fervently flipped through two or three racks and admitted he was out; but wasn't that movie great?

Some vendors slept over paltry wares, others bustled and scooted about in self-important zeal. One of them scolded me when I stepped over some cartons for a better look at a biography of Lytten Strachey. After his reprimand, I left the rank grotto (a school cafeteria on weekdays) and went to the schoolyard to see the offerings of the vendors there. In both dim fluorescence or in daylight, buyers and sellers shared a shut-in pallor.

Onward to Hell's Kitchen, whose market sprawls listlessly along 39<sup>th</sup> St. between Ninth and Tenth Aves. It begins at a disused bus ramp at the edge of Port Authority. The neighborhood is so desolate, it seems to be at the end of the world at the end of time.

In front of a pile of condemned buildings was a chain-link fence, freshly painted an incongruously tropical aqua. I was curious about a thickish wooden box with removable sides held together by green-oxidized hooks. At the bottom was a square of raised designs, like a printing block. Might be good to put a painting in, I mused. I asked the stall-keeper (young, bearded, emaciated) what the object was and how much he wanted for it. He drawled: "Oh that's a butter mold," and hastily added, "But you could just as well use it for maple syrup." Not for \$35, thanks.

I found three promising small wood frames, which the overburdened seller was willing to part with for \$12. I then went from the southwest edge of Port Authority to the brink of the Lincoln Tunnel; then south to 25<sup>th</sup> Street on Ninth Ave. and east to Sixth, still at the end of the world at the end of time.

A man passed carrying a heavy beat-up picture frame. He must have picked up my frame of mind, for in mid-stride he called, "Want it? I was just taking it to the trash." I took it reflexively. Entering the garage-turned-jumble-sale I leaned over a moldering table as if to examine a knickknack and surreptitiously propped the clunky frame against the table leg. I imagined someone later asking the bemused vendor for the price.

I sifted through lots of dispirited detritus: packs of old thumb tacks (some missing from the cards leaving rusty holes); an unfeasible snarl of embroidery floss; a basket of blackened keys; piteous figurines. I was tempted by nothing but an Australian postage stamp, picturing a whale under glass in a tiny soldered frame. But not for \$25.

Flea-marketing was better twelve years ago, when I made the rounds as I began my *Magic Flute* series. Wondering how to make 18<sup>th</sup>-century opera sets, I emerged from the subway and saw a big red sign: MAGIC. I thought, OK, Magic, where's Flute? On the heels of that thought I spied a wooden flute, just like Tamino's oak one. OK, I thought, Magic and Flute: how to make operatic prosceniums? In seconds I found some fancy-curly-carved picture frames pleading to be painted silver and glued around the stages. I was on a roll, and it didn't hurt to be standing in the shadow of the Masonic Lodge, across the street from the Mozart Café.

On the subway, I read bits from "Benito Cereno," perfect in its strangeness for the incalculable strangeness of the day. When I got home, I removed the pictures that came with the \$12 frames. One was a sort of love note, addressed to "Moss," which ended with an admonishing quote from Luke. Then I drew a picture of me and Mozart.



## MIDTOWN, A NICE PLACE TO VISIT

It has been a while since I visited Midtown, but today I had a Meeting with a Publisher and an Author to discuss the third in a series of books that I have been contracted to illustrate. The Author politely hinted that I “dress up a bit,” for she is familiar with my carefree freelance ways. I donned something more or less suitable that made me feel strange to myself, even as I felt strange emerging from Grand Central into the misty midst of Midtown Manhattan. The rain accentuated the somber verticality of the tall buildings. The sky appeared now and then, intermittent strips of silver duct tape. The office to which I was escorted, at the end of a hush-carpet warren, had windows to mirror images of plaid of granite, brick, glass and steel; the modulated palette of a fine haberdashery; the geometries of tessellated marble floors.



After the Meeting I found a lunch counter on Madison filled with businessmen in suits color-coded with the skyscrapers, ties flung over their shoulders, uniformly consuming sandwiches and Cokes. While waiting for my vegetarian chili, I accidentally caught the eye of a William Shatner look-alike reflected in the mirrored wall. He paused mid-sentence (speaking inscrutable financese) and apologized for “interrupting my reverie.” “Oh not at all,” I said, and explained: “It’s been ages since I’ve been in this neighborhood, and I’m taking everything in, like a tourist.” He asked what neighborhood I was generally in. Upon telling him, he said, “Can you recommend a downtown restaurant quiet enough for a meeting?” I suggested a place I’ve never been but which is popular among the well-heeled. The cheap eateries I once frequented are all closed now, scooped back into empty caverns of valuable raw square footage.

After lunch I went to the Morgan Library. From the elegant shop I bought: (1) a large sheet of giftwrap patterned with clipper ships (2) two post cards of cow paintings by Johannes Goedaert (1617-68) and Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88); (3) notecard facsimiles from illustrated letters by Van Gogh to (a) Gauguin (ink sketch for “The Bedroom in Arles,” 1888) and (b) Emile Bernard (sepia sketch of “The Langlois Bridge,” March 18 [yesterday’s date], 1888); (4) a Wm. Blake card of “Europe: A Prophecy” (1794). This enigmatic little masterpiece shows God squatting in the sun, surrounded by the best storm-radiant clouds ever rendered, as he extends his long compass earthward.

At home, I pinned the sheet of clipper ships above a wainscoted alcove. It looks like a fragment of old wallpaper from a seafarers’ inn. That’s exactly what I think this rickety old building used to be, around the time J.P. Morgan built his Library.

## STUDIOS AT BAY STREET LANDING

Before 9/11, I often went to Staten Island for the ferry ride, and to absorb Manhattan from an aqueous remove. The ride was always a thrill, no matter how many times I took it, no matter the weather. As Melville says, “Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever.” Every ride was that, a meditation.

The ferry would dock with a grinding bump. As it scraped the spiles (each uniquely ringed in bronzy-green, Miss Liberty’s hue), the ferry screamed like seagulls, bellowed like bulls, and added scars to its berth. Shaking off the thick crowd at the gangplank, I’d walk up to Richmond Terrace, turn right, and head for a comfortably lowlife donut shop, after which, replete with caffeine and sugar, I’d start my wandering. I loved looking at the houses, which were decomposing but inhabited, and I’d venture through the hilly streets above, to see those houses too. On the highest elevation I could find, I’d stare at the World Trade Center, stage center from that vantage, rising above the clutter of lowly edifices like a pair of giraffes among a bovine herd. The towers glinted and winked, answering Miss Liberty’s salute. They seemed to be giving the peace sign.

After the terrorist attacks, I stopped going. Now, seven years later, I’ve broken my ferry fast by going to see artists’ studios at Bay Street Landing. Leaving the ferry, I had always turned right, onto Richmond Terrace. I’d never even thought to turn left (intrepid traveler that I am), onto Bay Street. On a map it looks like the same road with two names. So onto Bay Street I turned, a new route of exploration.

At the edge of the East River, near the Verrazano Bridge, is a former coffee warehouse, now condos and artist studios. The lofts I got to see were as different one from another as the art in them. Some spaces were places, fixed up and fancy; but I liked best the ones left somewhat raw. My favorite was cavernous, with such tall ceilings—15 feet perhaps—that two small rooms had been built near the ceiling, treehouse-like; and below them was a permanently dark sleeping cave with a narrow, tossed bed. I liked the contrast between the undomesticated height of the large painting space, and the three or four burrow-low chambers tucked within—a propitious combine of warehouse and dollhouse, which I call cottage-industry. (A few days later, I read a quote by an architect in *The Most Beautiful House in the World*: “A building in which ceiling heights are all the same is virtually incapable of making people comfortable.”)

In seven years there have been many changes to the ferry terminals on both the Manhattan and the Staten Island sides. A fire destroyed the Whitehall terminal, on the Manhattan side, which was rebuilt as a sterile, hi-tech, even colder facility. Fewer vagrants camp out there, fewer proprietary pigeons swoop grandly from the rafters. The St. George terminal, on the Staten Island side, was improved just last February with the inclusion of two ten-ton, eight-foot-tall salt-water fish tanks, in which 400 exotic fish in unimaginable colors swim, spaciosly. The silvery squares of the tanks reminded me of the dead towers.

Still, I was unprepared for the sad shock of seeing, for the first time, from that angle, the City without them. Was this why I’d stayed away so long—to postpone the inevitable shock? I’d moved into the neighborhood three years after the World Trade Center opened. Before I knew I’d be moving downtown, and without knowing that Philippe Petit would be my downstairs neighbor, I’d saved the *Times* article about his famous tightrope walk. The Towers *were* New York, which was, perhaps, their doom. People joked about them with affection, e.g., “There’s the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. And there are the boxes they came in.”

On the ferry back, gazing at the spot, I thought: Before them, there was nothing there to miss. I’m guessing that anyone who knew the Towers, whether up close or from afar, *always* will miss them, even when the new Freedom Tower takes their place.

## A FISH TALE WITH 325+ NAUTICAL TERMS

I'm a little under the weather, feeling blue, experiencing waves of nausea. Maybe I should see a doctor for a clean bill of health. Maybe I should quarantine myself. Sorry, I don't mean to gripe, or let the cat out of the bag, but I want to deflect any scuttlebutt. Let me tell you what happened. I'm not spinning a yarn here; this is recorded in my logbook.

The bigwig boss, who at first was so aloof and even snubbed me, suddenly turned cranky when I was on my watch. One day he barged in and, with an undercurrent of hostility, accused me of being a fly-by-night and a flake. Hey, I never flake out. When he told me "welcome aboard," I thought him first-rate. But now apparently he was showing his true colors. He lowered the boom and squalled: "We were short-handed. I hired you as my mainstay. But you're no great shakes, you're a mere figurehead. You're deadwood." His voice shrieked like a siren. "And, you son of a gun, you've overreached your bounds. I've done a tally and find you've rigged the books, fudged the figures, and dipped into the slush fund. You fouled up, crossed the line. Holy mackerel! I run a tight ship! There's no room for skylarking in this company. You're all washed up! Do you catch my drift? Shape up or ship out. I've a good mind to jettison you. In fact, you're fired. Now, you roustabout, shove off!" He looked ready to give me a flogging; I braced myself for a smack. We were at a standoff, but I managed to retort, "Hell's bells! Tell it to the marines!" before he steered me to the door.

Overwhelmed and taken aback in the wake of his bilge, I sensed I was on the rocks, since he would give me no quarter. But why? There wasn't a glimmer of truth to his accusations. It was he who'd pressed me into service, to salvage his floundering, foundering, jury-rigged office, which was known to be in the drink. Maybe I'd misread the garbled hodgepodge of the dressing down he gave me.

Just as I was thinking that one halcyon day I'd overhaul, dismantle and plumb the depths of everything he'd said, like a loose cannon, in his overbearing way, he swept into the room and, looming above me, let fly, "You're a galoot, you dirty dog, an albatross around my neck! You have the devil to pay!" I edged away from him, protesting, wishy-washily: "Now, don't go overboard, Skipper; please don't get carried away." But no way could I stem the tide of his temper. I felt adrift. He was having a field day with me. I had no clue as to why we got into this flap, since I've been aboveboard, A-1 from stem to stern. After all, we were in the same boat, working in close quarters. Now, having run the gauntlet, I determined to grin and bear it. Somehow I'd weather the storm.

The job, in the offing, had seemed a good deal. For a long time I'd been at loose ends, and always hard up. After weeks of casting about and trolling for work, by a fluke I found this gig. It would be my maiden voyage, as far as employment went, and a bonanza at that. The only other trades I'd ever considered were as a pilot and working on a caboose but they didn't jibe. I procrastinated a while, afraid of being landlocked in an office job, which might turn out to be like boot camp. I spent some time making lanyards. But as they say, time and tide wait for no man. Fearing to miss the boat, I convinced myself to fish or cut bait. I couldn't hold on too long to my knockabout life. I decided to brace up, shake a leg and tackle the job, because off and on, ever since I was a little nipper, I've been scraping the barrel. This job was opportune; it would be a lifeline, and would keep me afloat. In desperation I took this one: any port in a storm.

Having been a drifter and an idler, I looked somewhat derelict, so I tidied up, became mainstream, got a crewcut and trimmed my beard to look less sloppy. I dressed to the nines in a pea coat, a blazer, bell-bottom dungarees, navy-blue Dockers, a watchcap, and deck-gray Topsiders. I stowed everything in a bulky duffel under my bunk, including a hammock and a packet of lifesavers. Now that I fit the bill, I launched this career. Every

morning, eager to embark on my new adventure, I would rise and shine and get cracking. I felt footloose and fancy free with the ballast of a steady income. I was gung-ho for this windfall, with all its perks. I imagined making money hand over fist. Maybe I'd make governor one day. I imagined cruising toward a whale of a retirement. I was hooked.

At the office I handled all the flotsam and jetsam, though I wasn't hired as a flunky. In fact, I was listed on the masthead. My office was aloft in a posh, flagship skyscraper. I swabbed the decks, kept things spic and span and shipshape. I even proofread the galleys. When my boss took me to lunch, I insisted we go Dutch. We usually shared a submarine sandwich of turtle, marinated with rosemary.

Gradually I learned the ropes, began to know the lay of the land, kept abreast of things, learned the loopholes of the trade and the jargon for all the gadgets and gizmos involved, and truly believed I was making headway. It was all hunky-dory, and I was as happy as a babe in a pram.

So I couldn't fathom why he'd change course so suddenly and take the wind out of my sails. Here we were, at loggerheads. He came at me like a maelstrom. I felt not only thwarted, but walloped. He was rubbing salt in my wounds. How could I salvage my job? What a stick in the mud, I thought angrily. Then it was my turn to sound off. I told him to stand off, pipe down and keep his shirt on. But when he went after me, bearing down in hot pursuit, I almost keeled over and hit the deck. I careened away from his hulking presence—did I mention he's rather broad in the beam, with skin like scurvy and a nose like a rostrum? I just cut and ran. By and large, I've been bamboozled, hijacked and shanghaied. The job has become a no man's land. For a while it had been touch and go, before I got my sea legs, and success seemed like a long shot, but I thought I'd passed muster with flying colors. I thought I'd become a beacon to him. So why would he want to deep-six me?

Just when I was over a barrel, there was an unexpected sea change that put a new slant on things. He seemed to re-channel his opinion, as if he'd turned a blind eye to my alleged shortcomings. I had no idea where he hailed from when he asked me to return. "Now you're talkin'," I said, becalmed, but I bit the bullet and zig-zagged back to his office again. There we chewed the fat and seemed to get squared away. At last, with a lopsided grin, he said, "Well, carry on." I was taken aback with this plain-sailing attitude. I had thought it was the bitter end, but maybe he'd prove to be an old salt after all. "Aye, aye, sir," I said with flimsy humor, adding, "but I wish you'd cut me some slack." He replied, "Don't hand me a line."

To explain his reversal, there'd been a ground swell in the company. He had no recourse but to take another tack, and toggle back toward a show of civility. But I wondered if the coast was clear. Was this the calm before a storm? I was all at sea, and half wanted to bail out to avoid being taken down a peg or two again. Although I knew I was still in his black book, and that my progress was certainly choppy, I vowed to stay, come hell or high water, but kept a weather eye open in case he flared up, tried to pull a fast one, or gave me the old heave-ho.

For some time, he left me high and dry. In fact, we were like two ships that pass in the night. I interpreted this renewed indifference as his way of giving me leeway. But, had we cleared the deck? Were his jibes over? Were we on an even keel? I still felt like his whipping boy. I was careful not to rock the boat and continued to give him a wide berth. I mind my ps and qs, just in case he still harbored resentment. To fend off the possibility of being stranded and marooned, if scuppered, I battened down the hatches. I practically lashed myself to my deck chair, up in the crow's nest. I sure didn't want to be put through the hoops again. I would have done anything to stave off his wrath, as well as unemployment. So I toed the line. Swamped with work, I stayed anchored hard and fast to

my desk. My antenna was up. I was far from coasting, always ready to scuttle off, even as I tried to go with the flow.

Three months have passed. You might wonder how I'm bearing up. Truth is, I feel I'm between the devil and the deep blue sea. I'm ready to jump ship. Why? The job turned out to be a washout. I feel dead in the water. I'm pooped, in the doldrums, listless and at loose ends. It's time to forge ahead. I need to make a clean sweep, start over with a clean slate. I feel I've missed the mark. To buoy myself up, get my bearings, get underway again, first I'm going out for a cup of Joe, preferably Starbucks. Maybe I'll splice the main brace and get good and groggy. Yes, right down the hatch, three sheets to the wind. I'll also have a square meal. Then, when I'm chock-full of food and water-logged with booze, I'll go to a rummage sale looking for junk, and maybe binge on the whole nine yards.

The whole nine yards



## FLYING DUMBO

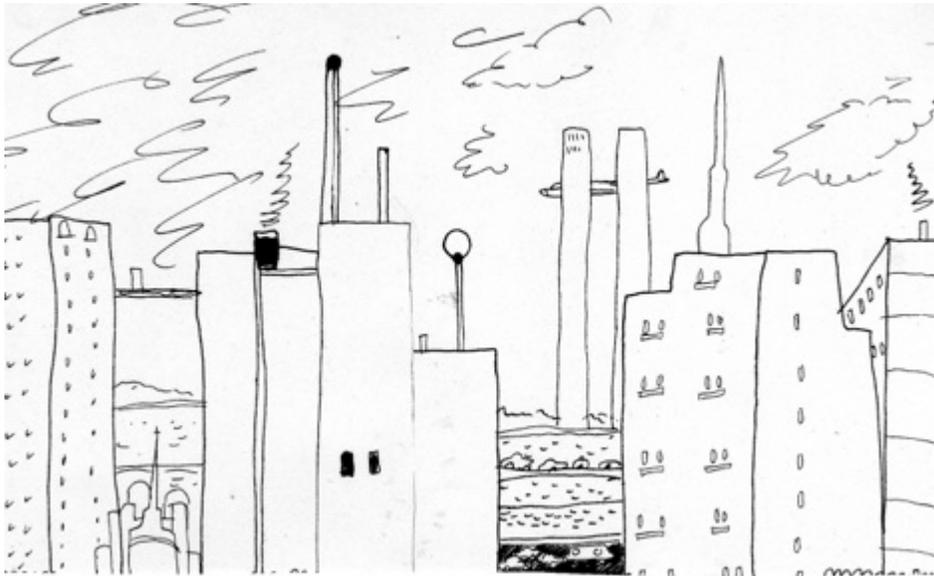
It was only a 15-minute subway ride to that strange province beneath the Brooklyn Bridge designated as “Down Under the Manhattan Brooklyn Overpass (DUMBO).” Since it happened to be the Bridge’s 125<sup>th</sup> birthday, I should have walked across it, to St. Ann’s Warehouse, which is under the bridge on the Brooklyn side. I went to St. Ann’s to install two miniature opera sets (“Papageno’s Nest,” from the *Magic Flute* series; and Puccini’s “Turandot”) in the Temporary Toy Theater Museum.

In the hangar-like Warehouse space, quite a few artists were already at work on dozens of charming microcosms. My own dioramas had been picked up from my studio the day before and delivered to the Toy Theater Festival site. “Turandot” was literally in pieces; I had to reassemble much of the Ice Princess’s palace, and reattach the princely decapitated heads on their spikes. Such fun. “Papageno’s Nest,” filled with feathers instead of foliage, needed a dusting with a feather-duster.

When I left, heading back to the subway I was delighted to see -- in a foliate, offhand plot surrounded by a cascade of cabs, cars, trucks and buses -- an incidental miniature theater that echoed “Papageno.” Someone had installed a birdfeeder made from a milk container, with a drinking-straw perch.



**THAT UNIMAGINABLE DAY**  
**(AN ESSAY FROM SEPT. 26, 2001)**



Drawn Long Before 9/11 WTC with a Passing Plane

I've just taken my puppy to the river, a few blocks from the disaster site. How bizarre to sit on a log on a pier and listen to the wash of the river, the cries of the gulls, the clanking boats—and look just south to all that horrible, mythic destruction—an enormous charred mound still smoking after two weeks.

I saw the event on the 11<sup>th</sup> from a few blocks away. That morning, instead of going to the World Trade Center as I usually did to walk the puppy, I went into Soho to get some daikon, of all things. I was on West Broadway, south of Canal Street when the jet flew right overhead. It was as low as a plane is when taking off or landing at an airport. It aimed for the World Trade Center and seemed to pick up speed. I watched it smash into the north tower, leaving a black wing-span shape like a cattle brand. There was an instant of complete stillness, and then the sharp blue sky burst into silver confetti—the windows, I suppose, or a zillion bits of paper. My thought was: Those top floors can be repaired. It didn't even register that I'd just witnessed the instantaneous death of hundreds of people. I ran home in horror, and called my sister and her husband, who work at *Time* magazine. They weren't home, so I left a frantic message. By then the second plane had hit the second tower.

I ran downstairs again and watched the unimaginable nightmare of people jumping out of the towers. At first I thought they were bits of falling debris. When I realized they were people jumping or being blown out, I had another irrational thought: maybe the authorities had had time to surround the building with safety nets for the jumpers. That thought dissolved when the flaming towers buckled and crumbled, like the legs of an unstrung marionette.

## A NEWBORN FERRY TERMINAL

Early this morning, across from the World Financial Center, I was startled to see a brand new, partially constructed, glass-gabled, cathedral-regal ferry terminal being coaxed into place by two large tugboats, a red and an orange, while a little white-and-blue Push Tug stood by, aft of a barge, rather like an observant midwife. Conceived in Louisiana, the ferry had been floated over from Brooklyn, only a few hours before. As part of the berthing process, there were a couple of immense barges, like inert brown sea cows, whose hodgepodes of barge-clutter—domes, cylinders, spheres, wheels, rectangles, trusses, rope-loops, etc.—resembled the standards of Precisionist iconography.

The little Push Tug was so close to the railing at the esplanade that I could talk with the captain as if gabbing with a neighbor over a picket fence. I seized the chance to ask about something I should have resolved before my parents died. Had he ever heard of a “Tracy Tug”?

“No,” he replied, “not specifically; but it might be the name of one of the old-fashioned McAllister tugs, like the one at Pier 17. They all had girls’ names.”

I said, “While my mother was in the hospital, waiting for me to be born, she said she watched the Tracy tugs from her window, trawling up and down the Hudson. She considered naming me Tracy after them. I never thought to ask her more about it, and I’ve not been able to find any reference to Tracy Tugs. Anyway, it’s a moot point, because after all that, she named me Jane.”

The tugboat captain gestured with an elaborately tattooed arm and said, “Well, now, that’s this tug’s name. Her name is Jane.”

(But spelled Jayne.)



## THE ARTFUL DODGER

*"Improvement makes straight roads; but the crooked roads  
without improvement are roads of genius." -- William Blake*



Went to an art opening in Soho, a respectable show of tasteful paintings, pleasant, well crafted, glib. Should do well over a leather couch in a magazine spread. I left and walked east, to Elizabeth St., passed a storefront with a miniature replica of itself in the window. Proceeded to the Lower East Side, to another opening, at the Cake Shop on Ludlow. In that window, a plastic lawn-deer (wearing a black wig) basked on a collection of old cassette tapes arranged like floor tiles. Inside, paintings of interiors, by my young friend Sophie, wreathed a wall from front to back. Her palette was disciplined, quirkily somber, the perspectives experimental. No easy solutions here, no glibness; the work caught you unawares, like a glance askance. I admire such authenticity, poetry and process versus product, a twist in a ribbon, a skip in a song, a chip in china or a rhyme got wrong. From a dour young guy in heavy black glasses I bought some cold green tea. I hung out in the back near a large window with a view into an empty courtyard. The crowd, two generations younger than me, was not looking at the art. Some of the boys emoted lonely uncertainty. The confident ones with dates each had a hand on a female knee. Two oblivious fellows typed on laptops, side-by-side. Their faces glowed like luminous dials in the glare of their screens. At a teensy table an obese girl exuberantly nibbled the point of a triangular slice of pie. I put in my earplugs and mentally critiqued the paintings. Half an hour passed and no Sophie. The din trumped my earplugs. I left this spectacle for the jammed streets. A chalkboard sign at a bar on the Bowery beckoned: "Happy Hour. Have a Night You're Sure Not to Remember." Soon I came to the New Museum, open tonight late and free. The chartreuse-green elevator was enormous, as most museum elevators are. Its two stainless steel doors mirrored and multiplied the occupants like Alex Katz cutouts at a cocktail party. The art in the white spacious galleries was largely multimedia, irreverent and coy—but nothing I hadn't seen before. Less interesting, I thought, than the incidental rooftop views beyond the unexpectedly narrow corridors and stairs.

## SUMMER SOLSTICE 2008

Just past 8:00 a.m. by the Colgate Clock, across the Hudson in Jersey City, easily readable because the octogenarian timepiece is fifty feet in diameter.

This morning, on the first full day of summer, the river is glassy, quiescent, dimpled like cellulite. Its pattern is deceptively simple, etched with thumbprint whorls and nearly invisible rings that come and go, imminent and transcendent, from surfacing fish or unseen insects or something else.

In the distance: a barge with a tug, like a nuzzling cow and calf.

At the North Cove marina, the *Ventura* is about to leave for a trip up the Hudson, to Tarrytown. On the floating gangway, Patrick (“Captain Pat”) Harris, the owner of the sloop, comes over to pet the dogs. He says people can bring their pets for a sail anytime, for an extra dollar each ([www.sailnewyork.com](http://www.sailnewyork.com), 212-786-1204). Why leave the family at home? He smiles. With all his passengers aboard, he returns to the yacht and the boat casts off.

As the *Ventura* slides out of the marina, a mate at the bow blows, on a conch, the most archangelic sound.



## SLIPPING GLIMPERS, LOAFERS AND DINGLEDODIES

We must reserve a back shop all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty and our principal retreat and solitude. – Michel de Montaigne

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) –Gerard Manley Hopkins

Be out of sync with your times for just one day, and you will see how much eternity you contain within yourself.” – Rainer Maria Rilke [cf. Whitman, “I loaf and invite my soul.”]

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. – Emerson

Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” – Whitman

In life, never do as others do... Either do nothing, just go to school, or do something nobody else does.” –Gurdjieff’s grandmother on her deathbed, quoted in *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*

But then they danced down the street like dingleddies, and I shambled after as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue center light pop and everybody goes “Awww!” – Jack Kerouac

Y’know the real world, this so-called real world,  
It’s just something you put up with, like everybody else.  
I’m in my element when I am a little bit out of this world.  
Then I’m in the real world – I’m on the beam.  
Because when I’m falling, I’m doing all right;  
When I’m slipping, I say, hey, this is interesting!  
It’s not when I’m standing upright that bothers me;  
I’m not doing so good; I’m stiff.  
As a matter of fact, I’m really slipping  
Most of the time, into that glimpse.  
I’m like a slipping glimpser.

--Willem de Kooning



## FREEDOM TO FEAR, OR NOT

“Every man bears the whole stamp of the human condition.” –Montaigne

Sitting on a bench at the marina was a very old lady I’ve been seeing on morning walks. In her compact solitude she seemed like a Zen monk. She held out her arms, when I paused to say hi, and asked me to keep the dogs back. She explained: A dog bit her on a finger in childhood, and her fear of canines is “deep-rooted and innate.” Something in her plight stopped me, and I sat the dogs a little distance away. She went on, “No one understands that I *do* realize it’s not their dogs, that it’s entirely me. Since that bite, before my teens”—she held up the ancient scar—“I never had a pet, never cared for animals. My fear of them is entrenched and I can do nothing about it.”

Sarah is 91. She’s unafraid of death, traveling by herself, or being alone. Her husband died years ago. She has no children. She cultivates no friendships, does not take meals with the other seniors in her elegant “independent and assisted-living” apartment house. I asked how she spent her time. “I get up at 6, go for a long walk, and let the day unfold as it will.” To which I said, “It sounds like a nice, free life.”

She’d lived a full life, of work and travel all over the world. But not to Australia, she amended, which, being a “new country,” never appealed to her. She preferred old countries like Greece. Was there any place she regretted not getting to? “Africa,” she said, surprisingly, “because of the animals.” I teased: “You’re not afraid of lions and elephants, but you’re afraid of dogs?” She smiled: “I wanted to *see* the animals. Just see them.”

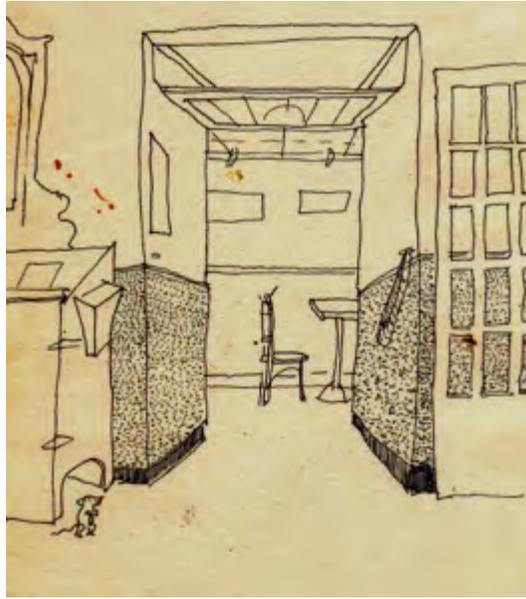
Meanwhile, Caleb and Tracy were sitting very still, watching the old lady gently. “They seem docile enough,” she said, and apologized again for her aversion. She thanked me for not cajoling her to pet them, as well-meaning people always did, to help her overcome her dread through their harmless pets. I said, “You’re free, aren’t you, to stay afraid. We all protect our phobias. One of *my* biggest is driving. At 15, I chose never to drive. But there’s another Freedom—larger and deeper, which is freedom from fear itself, which overrides our peculiar little tendencies and preferences. I intuit that inner Freedom, but I’m not ready either to give up my fears for it. Not yet.”

Sarah looked at the waiting dogs. “Thank you,” she finally said, understanding. “Maybe, if I see you again sometime, I’ll let your dogs come closer. But it might take me the rest of my life to touch them.”

– July 4, 2008



## VIN-YET



A sudden storm. I duck into an old tavern, with walls of ancient bead-board and yellowed pressed tin. The plank ceiling looks like the deck of a ship. Disoriented by looking up, I'm briefly hanging by my feet from a spar.

This dreary Sunday afternoon (my favorite kind), the narrow dining room is empty but for two girls getting tipsy by the window. The silver arc of a car parked out the window unites them in dialogue. The brunette says, of her burger: "It was raw on the outside and black inside. I mean, raw inside and black outside." Giddy confusion and gales of laughter. The blonde does most of the talking, twisting up her hair when the check comes. Apparently they've complimented the waiter's flamingo-pink tee shirt, for I overhear him call over his shoulder, as he glides by with their money: "I bought it in 1993, and wear it only one day a year. That would be *today*. Girls, I've gotten so fat, I'm like Elizabeth Taylor squeezed into a dress."

## RAIN DANCE

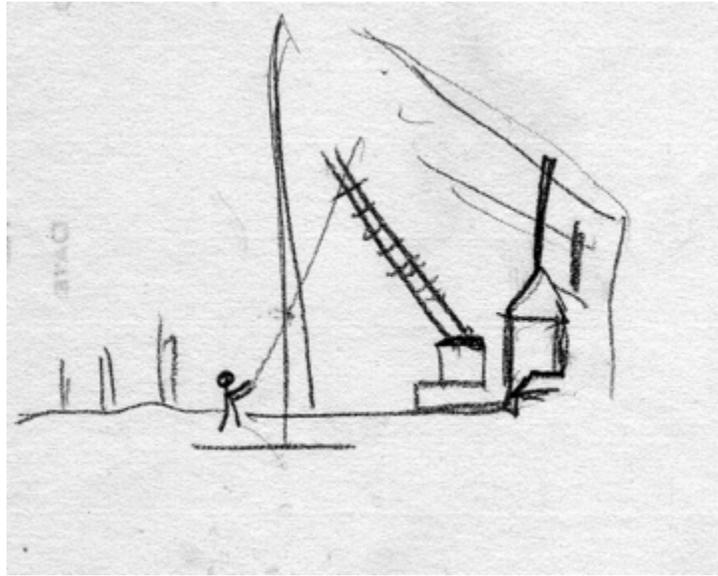
Hazy Saturday morning, North Cove marina. My birthday. A guy in nautical togs, neither young nor old, leans on a floating gangway. He beckons to the dogs. I see he's from the private pleasure yacht just yonder; yes, he's chief engineer. A uniformed crew is serving breakfast aboard. I assume this man, whose name is Raoul, has been a boatman all his life, but no. For years he'd traded commodities on Wall Street. One day he had a sudden urge to sail. I picture him without his tan, in the frantic din of the Stock Exchange, his face greenish under a maelstrom of ciphers circling like sharks in a glowing tank. The funny thing, Raoul says, is that he'd never even been on a boat. I don't blame him for his Ishmaelean sense that it was high time to get to sea.

Anyway, Raoul buys a little sailboat and climbs aboard to commence his maiden voyage. With a hand on the unfamiliar tiller, he flips through the manual and reads the instructions: "How to Raise the Sail." That done, he manages to point his prow toward the Bahamas....

Just then, a searing lightning taproot rips above Ellis Island. Thunder wrecks a monumental CRACK! sounding like a ship stove in two. Tracy leaps into my arms. I set her down and bid Raoul goodbye. Another whip-crack of thunder, and the shelties bolt through the downpour like sled dogs. We race for shelter under the overhang of the Irish Hunger Memorial, where a miscellany of young families is huddling optimistically. The steely rain intensifies to a shrill static, thrumming like piano strings. The adults consult watches, rearrange prams, call on cell phones, bounce infants, reconfigure plans. Suddenly, one small girl dashes out into the rain, followed by other little girls. Gleefully they gambol and twirl, using the slick pavement as an impromptu rink for dancing.



## TRAPEZE FLIERS & DERELICT BUILDINGS



From the West Side Highway, around Houston Street, you may be startled to glimpse trapeze artists soaring in the sky. If you're curious about the Trapeze School, you may venture into Pier 40, which was once used only as a vast outdoor car-park. The cars are still there, and in addition, two full-size ball fields (football and soccer) with grandstands, and a field of Astroturf where gymnasts and cheerleaders can jump about like grasshoppers. You can watch, close up, people jackknife through the air. There are views all the way around (the River north and south alive with boats, ships, barges); New Jersey to the west; Manhattan to the north, south and east). The vicinity between Houston and Canal is still partially derelict, with some of the few remaining buildings of mysterious decrepitude: a long-abandoned diner, the strange-looking, impenetrable Dept. of Street Cleaning and the Ventilation Building; weed-wild lots inside chain-link; ungentrified warehouses; and, incongruously, as I look up, a patio with a telltale red umbrella, wedged behind some scaffolding. . . .

## SHIP SPOTTING

I set the alarm for 5 and wake in pitch darkness. Harness the dogs. Downstairs, and out into a silent city – little traffic, no people, and warm as summer. We cross the nearly deserted highway to the westernmost verge of the esplanade. Dry leaves hiss across the paving stones like bicycle wheels. Sky and river are scabbed in rust, not from sunrise but from lights along the horizon in New Jersey, which do nothing to dispel the encompassing darkness. The water is oily, black, curly as karakul. I aim my camera to the south: Something is out there, imminent, huge yet invisible. I fathom its presence only because the Statue of Liberty has vanished, blocked from view. Now, incrementally Liberty reappears, and so does a full-frontal behemoth, out of the dark, a waterborne city of lights.

As she languidly turns, exposing her immense starboard flank, a young guy whizzes up on his bike. I whisper, “QEII” and he goes into raptures. This is what he’s come for, what he’s been waiting for. He videotapes the advent, to upload on YouTube. Meanwhile, my camera isn’t picking up anything at all: not enough light. It’s as if I’m trying to capture a ghost. The young man says, “Set it to video,” and shows me how. Together, amazed, we train our lenses on the great passing ship until she diminishes upriver. He hops on his bike to follow her north. Except for two apparently incurious joggers, no one else is around.

In 12 hours she’ll pass this way once more, leaving the Port of New York for the last time in history. October 16, 2008, 5:55 AM

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*It’s 12 hours later. The Rendezvous Spot. Mary appears, to wait for Elizabeth. Bearing down, she looks like a buoy. She waits. She waits and waits. Where is that Elizabeth? She bellows like a Woolly Mammoth. Louder than rolling thunder! This must be the sound of Brahma creating the universe, a blast that extinguishes existence and starts it up again. Here She Comes. The Sister Ships reunite, and sail out of New York harbor together. We may see Mary again, but Elizabeth will not be back.*



## CHICKEN SOUP WORKS



This is some weather under which to feel. Chilly dampness permeates all. People around me are sneezing, and not into their elbows, as was recommended on TV.

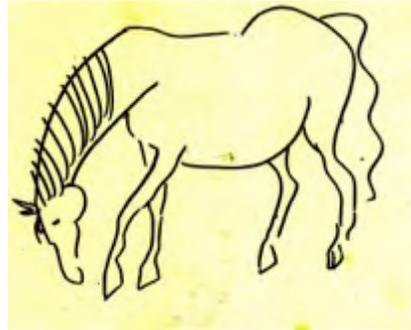
Feeling slightly fluish in the darkness-at-noon drear, I find myself with a rare hankering for chicken soup. At a minuscule café on Seventh Avenue I order size “small,” and for \$3.25 am served a portion to fill a test tube or a sample perfume vial. Delicious, yes. Reinforcing, yes. And expensive. It occurs to me that I could practice some self-reliance here and make my own. Yes, I’m going to do that. It means, though, I’ll have to buy a chicken, which I’ve never done before, despite being almost 60 and of Jewish heritage. This odd fact may be due to a vegetarian’s squeamishness about most anatomical things, or maybe it’s just me.

At the market I choose a grisly-looking package of pink avian legs that are half the price of pink avian breasts. At home, I read the warnings on the package. I anticipate every disease in the book (fear adding to my squeamishness, exacerbated by recent episodes of *House, M.D.*). Horrified, I remove the legs. I know enough to get rid of skin and fat. Feeling like Hannibal Lechter—but without the glee—I peel skin from muscle and excise bits of waxy yellow stuff. Cringing, I drop the gruesome dismemberments into the pot.

And then, to my surprise, I realize this faint nausea from handling chicken has offset the pre-fluish nausea that was the start of it all. Adding turnip, parsnip, celery, carrot, and onion, I begin to feel entirely well. Proof enough that chicken soup works fast, even before the first sip.

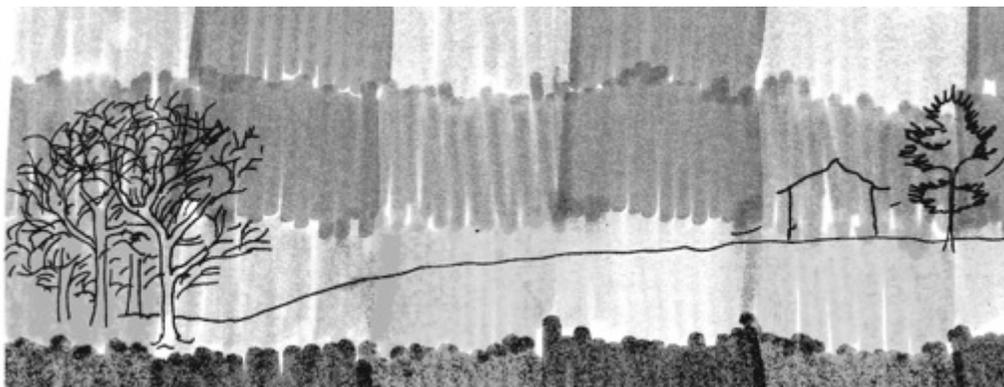
## EQUINOX EPIPHANIES

Minutes ago, I heard an immense clatter of hooves. Out the window, hundreds of police horses were trotting down Greenwich Street. Horses of every color and many breeds – browns, greys, whites, blacks. Clydesdales, quarter horses, Appaloosas. The police stables are a few blocks away [they were moved, after this writing, in 2011]; I often hear the clip-clop of a horse or two on the cobblestones. But this equine deluge was something else; a sustained, bountiful energy, a clarity of precision consonant with the brisk, joyous gait of fall. How remarkable to live near horses. When I first moved downtown, 30 years ago, I left work late one night and walked home, in raptures as I neared the stable: just think! Horses at home!



Autumn begins. The air cools as the foliage colors warm, change from summertime lime and emerald to sap-loden-olive; then flame-wild and brown. I notice three great trees in a row, at the edge of a playground, the first full of frilly yellow leaves; the second completely bare; the third with a handful of fans clinging to the branches. And I thought of Sonnet 73, with its improbably exact correspondence: “When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang...” Seemed as though Shakespeare were looking through my eyes.

Autumn begins. Soon the windows will be shut tight, hushing street noise. By day the sky is stark blue. Twilight comes ever earlier, a cradling net cast in the fiery fanfare of sunset. An invitation and reminder to come inside.



## NEIGHBORLY



One cold, misty, full-moon night, I saw a woman emerge from the police stables with a jet-black thoroughbred. She led him to the quiet intersection of N. Moore and Varick. There was a suggestive pause, then someone else appeared, from the opposite direction. This woman was with an enormous black Great Dane. The two animals floated together, nose to nose, as in a dream. Was it an assignation? The great dog barely lifted his head; the ebony horse barely lowered his. They touched noses under the moon, then gracefully turned from each other and circled away.

## BACK IN THE '70s

What I loved best about Tribeca, besides the 19<sup>th</sup>-century buildings and the nearness of the river, were the police stables, which until recently were at the First Precinct, on Varick and Ericsson Place. Every day you'd hear a cheerful clip-clop on cobblestones, and occasionally, a stentorian, air-clearing whinny. For a time in the '70s, just after I'd moved downtown, I worked the late shift at a restaurant in Soho. I'd walk home after midnight along the deserted streets. Sometimes I'd stop at the Market Diner (long since torn down) on Laight and West. The clients in the wee hours were strange indeed—I remember four or five guys sitting in a booth, all with blue mustaches.

Late one night in 1976, I wrote this as I walked home from work:

### One A.M. Walkabout

Forgot to be shy kissed Jacques welcome  
worked a hard moving stint made money  
and at length walked out, full of feeling  
into an impromptu urban autumn night.  
Under the heightening moon's  
Boo, a bridge spans the empty  
alley called Staple Street, now bathed  
in purple from a black-lit gallery.

The bars are in their final hour. Seedy  
Puffy's is the last and best (its juke spins out  
a symphony). One last surprise tonight,  
before home and bed: fragrant as a bakery,  
the invisible stable, where giants stand fast  
in hay-filled slots—horses asleep in the city!



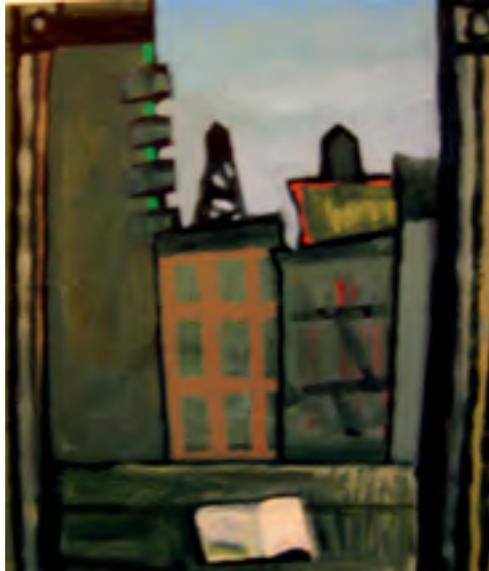
## APPLE, CANNON AND LEE

Early morning, at the river, I heard the horse before I saw him: a jetty steed that I later found out is called Cannon. His whinnying was so sustained and harmonic, his name could have been Canon. For 20 minutes his neighing reeled and ricocheted like thunder. When he cantered off, I heard him from a quarter mile away. When he trotted close, I asked his rider what the fuss was about. "He's a herd-bound horse," the policewoman explained. "He's calling out, hoping to find other horses." But there were none.

I usually see only one horse at a time on the esplanade, though sometimes there are two. Sometimes Apple and Lee are tethered near each other at a fence. Lee, who belongs to Officer Sean, weighs 1600 pounds, is six years old, looks 16 hands tall, and is part Clydesdale. Sean weighs about 180, is in his 30s, is about 6'3", and looks part Viking. He answered my horse questions: the life expectancy of a horse is 40. He gets to run regularly in a paddock. Each breed has a different gait. The saddle weighs five pounds. And yes, he had named him. "How'd you pick 'Lee'?" I asked. Sean said: "It's the custom, when your partner is killed, to name your horse after him."



## KEEPING DUPLICATE BOOKS



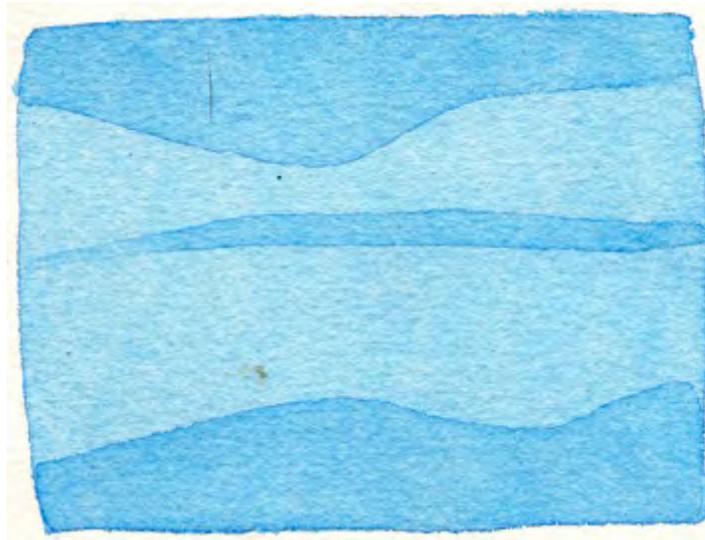
The sting of a spring morning in April. The long rain is over, having left a strong cold wind. The clouds look like laundry lint. The few trees struggle to bud: green frills at the ends of branches look like plucked grape stems. In the bike lane I sprint east across Prince, against wind, traffic, and the madding crowds. I turn north on Crosby, and enter an old warehouse whose musty double doors open like pages. It's Housing Works' monthly 30%-off book sale. Among the dollar books, which today are 67¢, I find a decrepit copy of *The Portrait of a Lady*. I have two copies already, and hate the idea of a third, but decide to buy it for Mr. Edel's intro. I continually pare down (down with pairs!), and dislike redundancy (except for the duplicate cats and dogs who share my listing, leaky, drafty, spare and shipshape ark. Once in a roadside restroom I saw a sign taped to the towel dispenser: "*Why take two when one will do?*" – an adage I often revisit. Thoreau had three chairs, "one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society." Any more chairs would be excessive: he says, "Furniture! Thank God, I can sit and I can stand without the aid of a furniture warehouse." I have stools that can be sat on or stepped on to reach high shelves; one object with duplicate functions is better than duplicate objects of the one function. (Melville pegs most people as "unnecessary duplicates," a charge I agree with, hoping I'm not one myself.)

This battered edition of *The Portrait* bears no ex libris on its endpapers. I gently riffle through the pages. Out falls a bookmark: a yellowed business card in Gothic print, with an obsolete exchange ("Chelsea 3"). The pages are well underlined and annotated. Curious, I peruse the marked passages and the meticulous marginalia, much of it familiar. "Isabel as America"—I had noted that insight too. Where Miss Archer says: "I shall never make any one a martyr," the reader wryly jotted "*except yourself*"; my own annotation, felt with no less a pang, "IRONY." Evidence of someone else's finely-stitched absorption makes the sale. I park it between the other two copies, with their various introductions, footnotes and end notes, their unique personal embellishments, such as odd old bookmarks, faded as pressed flowers. The editions form a strange camaraderie, and confer as a kind of book club just for books. The one copy is for solitude; the second for company; the third for a book club. Come to think of it, I have duplicates and triplicates of other titles I couldn't resist stowing like shipboard commodities, enough to last the lifelong voyage. Meanwhile, I know people getting their reading now on Kindle. No eccentric bookmarks required.

## RAIN AND TRAIN PAIRINGS

I bridle at the overused term “pairing” for wine-and-food matches, as in “the felicitous pairing of a Petite Sirah with a Duck Confit”; or for the coupling of accessories and clothes touted on the shopping channels: “A sling-back sandal paired with a strapless designer frock.” However, as I ride through rain on a train I think: there can be no more perfect *pairing* than this Philip Glass music (*The Thin Blue Line*) with the chuff-chuff of the train and the patterns of the rain. And there’s a natural pairing between riding a train and reading Patricia Highsmith, as I happen to be doing. Moreover, Glass’s obsessive syncopation pairs beautifully with Highsmith’s jittery antiheroes. And both share a deceptive simplicity – the note-scales drumming in the ear, the prose notes tracking as the eye chugs down the page. There’s the felicitous pairing, as well, of the train’s kinetic precipitance and the precipitation of the driving rain. All together these elements produce, like the self-similarity of fractyl reduplication, an aural, visual and psychological maelstrom of fugues and fugitives. In short, there are many nice pairings here – the rain, the train, Highsmith and Glass – in any combination.

We spin through Harlem past eyeless windows where no one lives, over an unlovely river paired with a graceless bridge. The huff-chuff of the traintrack reflects the soundtrack’s plaintive locomotive rhythms. The rain piles white slanting stitches on the panes, and Highsmith’s plot thickens: “The train crept on northward, carrying into nowhere the prints of his ten fingers on one of its gritty sills.”



## VICARIOUS THRILLS



One day in June, in a healthful Village eatery, I was scarfing down a plate of brown rice, hijiki, adukis, kale, and some intriguing roots including a morsel of rutabaga and a jolt of Japanese purple yam. Because it was between lunch and dinner, the place was empty except for a girl to my right, probably a model, perhaps 19, long lank hair half-hiding a face that could launch a thousand lips. Fashionably fleshless (a capital L with elegant serifs) she sat perfectly still, booted ankles crossed on the facing chair. She picked at an array of dishes but seemed more interested in the paperback in an extended hand. After a few minutes, in strolled a young rebeard, a lumberjack-type with a tuckerbag. Of course he sat right next to the girl, on the long booth-bench we three now shared in the still empty eatery. When he initiated conversation, I detected an Australian accent. Hadn't been in New York long; just passing through. She murmured a rejoinder neither encouraging nor otherwise and during their exchange never moved: chopsticks in her right hand, book in her left, hair like a curtain of privacy. Despite my efforts not to eavesdrop, I couldn't help but overhear the following:

He: That looks good—what you're eating. What *is* all that?

[She names each dish, indicating them with a minute, bored flick of chopsticks.]

He: That'll keep you healthy for sure.

She: In Texas where I grew up, all I ever ate were hot dogs and buttered popcorn dipped in chocolate ice cream. My parents had autographed pictures of Laura and George Bush on the fridge.

He: Awesome. I've been to Texas. The worst part, though.

She: You probably mean Dallas.

He: Yeah, Dallas.

She: That's where I'm from.

He: Oh, sorry.

She: That's okay, I agree that it's the worst part of Texas. I'm glad I moved to New York. I can't see ever leaving. It's the best city in the world.

He: That's the attitude of most New Yorkers. You should get over that.

By then I'd paid my check. With no excuse to linger I left, having second thoughts about the viability of that potential romance.

## EYES AT THE EAR INN



Kitchen Fireplace, Ear Inn

Always before, when I'd gone in winter to the Ear Inn—the 1817 pub on Spring Street near the Hudson—the transition from outer darkness to inner gloom was not overly dramatic. On a midsummer late afternoon, like today, however, the sun was so strong it forged the river into a blinding diamond too bright to look at. Squinting, I entered the empty bar and tenebrous dining room, and asked the blonde waitress if she could turn on the lights so that I could write. Surprised, she said, “This is as light as it gets.” She pointed to the sources of illumination: a few electric candles and a scraggle of remnant Christmas lights. “Your eyes will get used to the dark,” she promised.

When I paid my check, I mentioned that I'd been coming here for 30 years and had always wanted to see the upstairs. “Oh, Rip, the owner, just came in,” she said. “He's upstairs now. Ring the bell on the outer door.” I decided not to presume I'd be welcome, and was just about to slip away when a handsome, heavysset, youngish man appeared. He towered above me, pint in hand, and, apparently having overheard my dialogue with the waitress, beckoned me to follow him. I couldn't help but think of Bulkington, whom Ishmael sees at another water-nigh bar, the Spouter-Inn:

He stood full six feet in height, with noble shoulders, and a chest like a coffer-dam. I have seldom seen such brawn in a man. His face was deeply brown and burnt, making his white teeth dazzling by the contrast ... from his fine stature, I thought he must be one of those tall mountaineers from the Alleghanian Ridge in Virginia.... his shipmates ... raised a cry of “Bulkington! Bulkington! Where's Bulkington?” and darted out of the house in pursuit of him. — *Moby-Dick*, ch. 3

I followed this guy with the bulky build and novel name up the steep, uneven, narrow stairs. I murmured, “Too bad I didn't bring my camera.” Rip said, rhetorically, “What's wrong with using your eyes?” (Much about the eyes at the Ear today.)

We entered an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century, wide-plank, tin-ceiling room with a fireplace that had a ship's wheel in its grate. The room was filled with artifacts: huge old oyster shells ("You'd need only one of those for dinner," Rip observed), shards of blue-and-white china and bits of glass sorted in cartons, ready for examination by an archeologist from NYU. I mentioned my interest in New York maritime history, and in Melville. Rip said, "Melville certainly must have been here drinking. There are lots of M's carved in the bar."

Rip took a post card from a stack on a little table, scrawled something on the back, and gave it to me. On the front was a photo of his gaff-rigged yawl, the seven sails filling with wind. It was the *Klang II*, an English Channel quay boat built in 1924. On the back he'd penned, "Welcome aboard! Capt. Rip 914-263-6716." How beautiful the boat looked, with its black body, trapezoidal mainsail, and jibs. Maybe one day I'd come aboard. But first I plan a sail on the schooner *Pioneer*, the day after Melville's 190<sup>th</sup> birthday.



## OUT-OF-SYNC IDYLL

*Be out of sync with our times for just one day, and you will see  
how much eternity you contain within you. -- Rilke*

The same advice might apply to stepping out of sync for a moment as the days whiz by like clattering beads on the abacus of life. I've just been to the wild west of Canal Street, to Pearl Paint and the Post Office. Closer to home, I plunk down on a creaky loading dock on a mercifully deserted street. Above is a rusty overhang that once had sheltered carts and trucks from hail and snowstorms—pleasant to consider, along with a tall iced coffee, on a muggy midsummer Saturday.

What could be better than impromptu languishment, like this. To prolong the “out-of-sync” moment, I unload my backpack. Out spills the Rilke, paintbrushes, a tin of turps, and a huge tube of titanium white, like family-size toothpaste. From the post office, one- and two-cent stamps decorated with Navajo necklaces and Tiffany lamps, to bring superannuated denominations to the current rates. Other stamps, chosen for their designs—tiny panoramas, portraits of notables, and new post-card stamps with full frontal polar bears.

Someone from a high window starts singing glissandos. The up-scale trilling makes me glance upward to see an old water tank that hovers like a Zulu rondavel. Most passersby would not know it existed, unless they happen to plunk down, out-of-sync like this, lazily gazing upward. The back side of a huge billboard dominates a weedy parking lot. Year after year, one boring ad after another festoons its front; but the rear-view armature is magical, and turns the anonymous space into the backstage rigging of a theater. A pirouetting ailanthus raises taffeta-clad arms to the painted clouds. How diverting to make the ordinary poignant.

The unseen singer sings, the ballerina brachiates, and I glance randomly at the book, to see what Rilke has to say, in this moment. Rilke says: “It is contrary to nature to part with books with which one agrees, just as it is important in the same case not to hold on to people for too long.” Of course not, or else one never thinks to peer behind the billboard’s hackneyed ad.



## IN MINIATURE EXILE

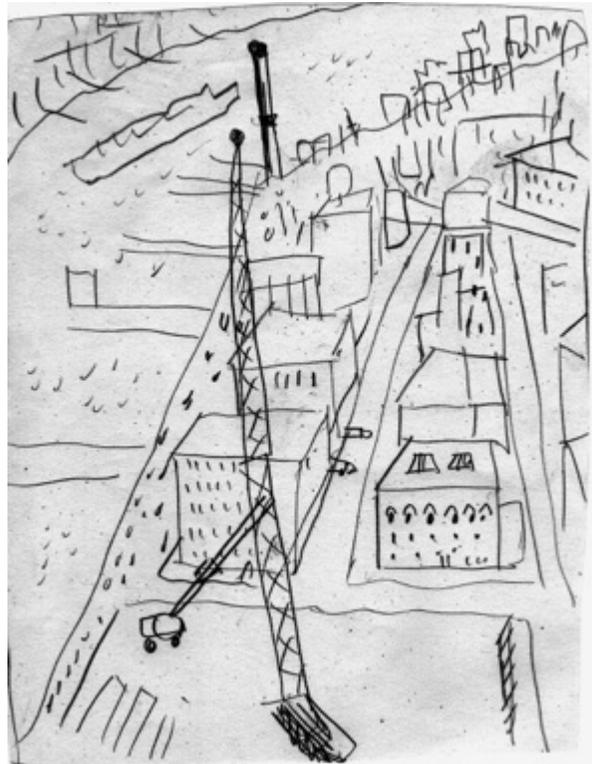
Day after day, Harrison Street is ripped up in an effort to replace the rotten 19<sup>th</sup> century pipes and re-lay the even older paving stones. The excavation entails jackhammers and stone crushers which resemble the heart-stopping, nauseating clamor of machine-guns. The crew drive claw-mouth tanks to gouge foundation rock, metal, asphalt. The equipment grunts and screams jerkily, stop-action monsters fighting to the death. An army of workers in fluorescent bibs and ear plugs directs cars single-file along the site. There's a heat wave on. The dust is legion. The café downstairs has closed. By 8 AM it's time for me to leave.

As if in miniature exile, I and the dogs, who also are upset by the cacophony, evacuate to the river. Sometimes we head south to the lotus-lily-duck-and-koi pond, near the Irish Hunger Memorial with its loop of plaintive songs. Sometimes we head north, as we did yesterday, to a long stretch of hilly, winding decking running parallel with the Hudson.

Here I settle on a bench in an inlet of breezes, birdsong, the soporific buzz of crickets in thickets. We've gone, in a few blocks, from aural violence to silence.

I've got Tolstoy's last novel, *Hadji Murad*, which bespeaks the gruesomeness of war. It begins as a flashback remembered through a Proust-like trope of sensual association – not a madeleine dipped in tea, but a crushed thistle with a blackened and broken red flower. I had come to the very end of the story, whose echoes surprised me:

The nightingales, that had hushed their songs while the firing lasted, now started their trills once more: first one quite close, then others in the distance. ... It was of this death that I was reminded by the crushed thistle in the midst of the ploughed field.



## BAD BEHAVIOR



Maybe Mercury is in retrograde and accounts for a recent spate of bad manners I've encountered from strangers. Maybe it's New York. Of course I don't blame planets or the city. I've learned to examine what part I might play in adversarial situations, for it does take two to tangle. But not always. In the cases described below, which happened over two days, I chose to bow out rather than engage. The first incident happened when the dogs and I went to Battery Park. Castle Clinton, the early 18<sup>th</sup> century fort at the tip of Manhattan, was open. Curious, I ventured inside, stayed close to the wall and headed for the exit on the opposite side. Near the exit, a gigantic guard appeared. He bellowed robotically, like a siren in a gun-tower: "Dogs-are-not-allowed-here! Leave-the-premises-at-once!" That's where we were headed, clearly, but he kept it up: "This-is-Federal-Property!! You-can't-be-here! Leave-immediately!" The dogs had their tails between their legs, and I felt like the world's most undesirable interloping scoundrel.



Half an hour later we got to our street, which was still being ripped up from end to end. No matter: a photo shoot was spread out right in front of my door. I stepped around the sweating stylist, two ethereal models, and a model Boston terrier getting a barrage of treats to stay seated. During the 15 seconds it took to fish my keys out, I observed the

fascinating rows of fabric-tightening pins and clamps at the back of each girl from ankle to nape. In the five seconds it took to shove in and turn the key, the stylist sneered, “Are you able now to move out of the shot?” The photographers had yet to take aim, so what was the problem? Besides, I thought, I live here. How is it that irrational sociopaths and jumpy power-mongers can make me feel like the world’s most undesirable interloping scoundrel? Tails between legs once again, the dogs and I got ourselves upstairs.

Next day, on the way to a used-book store, I stopped for a take-out coffee. A man whined, “There’s no Half and Half!” I checked the labels: Skim, Whole, 2%, Soy. No Half and Half. Trying to be helpful, I said, “Just ask, and they’ll bring it out.” The man snapped, “Don’t tell me what to do!” I think people have been murdered for less. My cue to be off.



At the bookstore, I headed for Art & Architecture. The section was inaccessible because someone had commandeered it. He was squatting in front of the shelves, knees apart, arms extended in a roadblock. He wasn’t just balancing his squat. I hovered expectantly, the way people do in crowded bookstores, until the browser emerges from his reverie with an apologetic smile and moves aside. This squatting, brachiating guy read each title, left arm along the rows, right hand fingering each spine in a proprietary caress. Beneath his armpit was a book on Sir John Soane. I hinted: “Excuse me?” Coldly he turned his head and said: “*I’m* here now. *I’ve* got this section. It’s *mine*. Go somewhere else.” I said, “But this is a bookstore.” He snapped, “Then at *least* have the *courtesy* to move somewhere *else* until I am finished!” I gave up on Art & Architecture and went to Poetry and Philosophy. As I paid for my finds, I told the clerk about the creepy man. He said, “Imagine what his life must be like.” “Yeah,” I replied. But I couldn’t.



## MOMENTS PRESERVED

Many people prefer photographs to drawings as more reliable pointers to the “truth.” That which is rendered by eye+hand+mind/memory, without mechanical mediation, is often considered interpretive, compared to what a camera captures objectively. Yet photos can be expressionistic or impressionistic, selective in data and detail, and as evocative as a painting. A drawing, on the other hand, can be rendered with “photorealistic” verisimilitude, and supply information that will elude the camera.

There’s an age-old debate between what is “actual” (factual, objective, measurable) and what is “real” (subjective truth). Any humanly created expression would have to be illusory because it’s filtered through unique perception; and fragmentary, because limited or slanted by choice, bias or ability. No work can encompass omniscience, except by intimation, as some Minimalists, Zen artists, and myth- and metaphor-makers attempt to do, e.g., Blake’s grain of sand; Donne’s little room as everywhere.

The mystic G.I. Gurdjieff wrote ten volumes titled *All and Everything* (1924-31), one of his intentions being “to assist the arising, in the mentation and in the feelings of the reader, of a veritable, non-fantastic representation not of that illusory world which he now perceives, but of the world existing in reality.” The word “representation” is to presentation what research is to search. It connotes a separation from the immediate, the primary, the direct thing. I’m not sure that it’s possible to transcend the limits of perception to apprehend *What Is Real*, except, perhaps, for the spiritually enlightened, the attainment of which may have been Gurdjieff’s hope for all his readers of *All and Everything*.

Robert Frost said that a poem begins as a lump in the throat. The lump is the direct event, out of which the poem springs. Afterward the poem exists on its own. Both the event and its capture are “real” in different ways. In *The Velveteen Rabbit* or *How Toys Become Real* (Margery Williams, 1922), real is defined with accurate ambiguity:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”  
“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you...”

Like a lump in the throat.

Snapping a picture certainly is easier than drawing, which requires an effort of observation, a commitment to remembering, and the work of rendering the memory of a momentary (sometimes split-second) event as faithfully as possible. The content of a drawing offers a different reality than camerawork does, but it is not *less* real. To those who prefer photographic documentation, drawings may seem “incredible” or “fantastic” (i.e., *not believable as actual*).

Anyway, believe it or not, each of these events, drawn below, actually took place.



On West Broadway, 2 bizarre occurrences seen on the same day, and a nap in a park.



## BEDBUGS: A PLAYLET



Scene: St. Luke's dim basement thrift shop on Hudson Street, Greenwich Village.

Characters: A fastidious and rather anxious-looking YOUNG MAN and an upbeat female CLERK. THIS DIALOG HAPPENED, VERBATIM.

YOUNG MAN (cradling a pile of selections): Are you *sure* everything is guaranteed bedbug-free?

CLERK: (cheerfully) They sure *better* be.

YOUNG MAN (uneasily): Better be?

CLERK: Yes. Well, I'll vouch for it, sure. Bedbug-free.

YOUNG MAN: (doubtful) Well... OK, then.

CLERK: (slight pause) Funny, you never used to hear any mention of bedbugs, and now you hear about them all the time.

YOUNG MAN: (frowning, vaguely alarmed) *I've* only heard about them in that Rolling Stones song.

(*I exit.*)

## ROBIN DIED



Robin sleeping, 1974

This Thanksgiving, I'm thankful to have known Robinson Fredenthal, who was great in every way a human being can be great. His beauty matched his brilliance, kindness and depth, which some were lucky to know, as did I for a few precious years. Robin died this summer at age 69, having lived with Parkinson's disease for 45 years. A memorial was held at the Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, where nearly 6,000 of his sculpture maquettes are housed in the permanent collection. Some of those models have been fabricated into monumental steel sculptures around Philadelphia and in other cities. His sister Ruth Ann asked me to speak at the memorial, along with his doctors and a few old friends from architecture school. This is what I said:

Ruthie asked me to tell you how I met her brother. One remembers life-changing events like that. It was October 1973, at the start of my last year at the Graduate School of Fine Arts. I was 24, and like many Penn students, had a waitress job at La Terrasse, on Sansom Street. After the lunch shift one day, the bartender asked if I'd like a kitten. Never having had a kitten before, I impulsively said yes. Rab said, "Go next door and ask Robin for one—Blanche just had another litter." I didn't know who Blanche and Robin were, but I went next door, climbed a long, dim stairway straight up, and knocked. Someone said "Come in." I pushed open the door. Sitting in a broken chair, as still as a statue, was the handsomest, the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

He was darkly tanned and wore only a pair of white jeans. His black hair fell Prince Valiantly to his shoulders. I honestly thought he was Cherokee, or maybe Apache. A curiously fragrant cigarette dangled from his mouth, film-noir style. He seemed frozen in the chair—I soon learned why—except for his smile and a devilish twinkle. I said, "If you're Robin, I hear you're giving away kittens." He indicated a pale, exhausted-looking cat stretched out on the faded rug, with about eight new pestering babies, and told me to pick one out. I chose the darkest. She resembled her papa, Qua, who was lurking nearby, looking guilty and resigned.

The following week after my shift, I got lunch and had the bright idea to bring it to Robin—an excuse to climb those dismal stairs again. That became my routine for almost a year; but Robin himself never was routine. I never knew what to expect when I walked in. If he was in a yoga posture, nothing could distract him from holding it for ages. I might come upon

him dancing wildly from too much L-Dopa, yet with his nose in a book of Eastern philosophy. I might find him out front working with the guys on the cardboard models, or holding court with a swarm of visitors. I always kept it in mind that I was just another smitten girl in a rather long line. Some of my predecessors also were Janes (or some permutation, like Juanita); and more often than not, they were Leos. So I wagered I had those two things going for me: a promising name and sign.

Robin taught me more about art than I ever learned at Penn. All the disciplines I follow today stem from his influence. In everything he modeled courage and focus. He was serious, but generous, light and funny. The way he did everything reflected an elusive equipoise of passion and detachment. Alongside the charisma, the rock-star appeal, the intellectual brilliance and the musky wit were depth and wisdom—and mischief. When I graduated, I moved a couple inches up the map, to New York City. But for over a year I came back every weekend to spend with Robin. Once when I asked what he'd like from New York, he requested toy soldiers, to use as a scaling device for his models. The midtown model-railroad stores sold figures in various scales—O, N, HO, etc., and I got an assortment. When Robin set a figure against a cardboard model, it shifted the scale of the maquette from miniature to monumental. The tinier the figure, the bigger the sculpture seemed. I'm sure this playing around with scale influenced me years later, when I made hundreds of miniature constructions, from fancy opera sets to ruined warehouses.

I wrote home about him, of course. One letter from April 5, 1974, says: "Enclosed is a magazine article on my good lovely friend Robin Fredenthal...He's definitely a genius... everyone knows that. And *always* surprising. The other day, he was talking about the mystical properties of geometric forms. Abruptly he stopped and stared at me. He said something amazing, and we both cracked up. Then he returned to tetrahedrons. I suppose you're curious about what astonishing thing he said. Well, Mom & Dad, I'll tell you. He said: 'God! You have a *beautiful* nose!'" 11-26-09



The Nose in 1973

## MIDWINTER DIVERSIONS



I came upon a snowman, last night, which had been signed by the artist! Each blizzard this winter has spawned unusual snow-art. Yesterday, on E. 81<sup>st</sup> St. (near the Metropolitan Museum), on the hood of a buried SUV, was a snow-sculpture of the Venus di Milo! I always did think of that disarmed beauty as rather cold.

In both directions the subway was jammed (every hour is rush hour), made more crowded by everyone's thick layers. Heading downtown, I slipped through the stile just as the train came into the 86<sup>th</sup> St. station and boarded toward the rear. My exit was closer to the front, so during the creeping ride I made my way up through the cars, in order to be at the Franklin Street exit rather than at North Moore. From car to car I trailed a begging homeless man who was chanting, "I don't drink, I don't do drugs. Can you spare a penny or some food?" The only one who gave him anything was another homeless man, much older and in far worse shape, who offered the first man some coins and the message: "*Find your enemy and stick him in the ass, praise Jesus!*"

Out on Franklin Street, I saw a lady with a big red dog who was snuffling in the snow. She crooned, "What did you find, Max, a frozen rat? Good boy!"



## SLUSH FUN

I awake in the dark and the TV confirms that yes indeed, we are experiencing precipitation in the form of a snowstorm. More precisely, it's a slushstorm, and not expected to abate until the morrow. The anchors on three stations (I change channels to see if they concur) advise everyone to "*stay home* if at all possible" because it's "potentially *treacherous* out there." I leave the flat at once.

My yoga class is on 13<sup>th</sup> Street, a mere half-hour walk away. And I always walk, never have resorted to bus or subway because of something as mundane as weather. Besides, I enjoy bad weather as an "experience" that is far more interesting than sunny days. Like the proverbial mail carrier, neither snow, rain, heat, gloom, sleet nor in this case slush deters me.

Apparently most everyone else has taken the weatherpeople's advice; only once must I sidestep another umbrella brim. Step by step (or *padam padam*, as they say in Sanskrit), I keep my eyes on my toes, and gradually coast into the pleasant continuum of alert meditation. The barely inflected gray cement unfurls like an endless grisaille monoprint; like an old-fashioned newsreel; like Jack Kerouac's type-scroll; like a Chinese landscape – a fugitive washy scribble of boot prints, paw prints, sled-runner tracks, dolly tracks, the x-mark signatures of pigeons, the pocky imprints of soggy flakes. In the mile and a half of these commercial streets up Hudson, and later, returning down Greenwich, I see salt thrown on the slush only once.

By now, I think, the Upper East Side surely has been properly shoveled and salted, with residents not even venturing out to appreciate the traction afforded by the salt, but still, I imagine, cozy under designer eiderdown, or sipping organic fair-trade special-blend in front of the fireplace with cords of wood from the Korean markets, the fireplace in the in the brocaded bedchamber, or in the vast, pre-war, state-of-the-art renovated kitchen with the 200-year-old Irish farm-table that seats 12 and the industrial Viking oven with 14 burnished burners. At least that is my fantasy about life on the Upper East Side. Well, I muse (cognitive-dissonantly): I have my portable roof up – black, sog-and-saggy as an old tar roof, but shelter enough. And I can hear the truly musical impact of sloppy snow on the broolly's cheap nylon. It sounds, strangely enough, like chowder abubble on a camping brazier.



## THERE'S SNOW PLACE LIKE HOME

Second day of the big snow. Yesterday's slippery slush now is buried under many feet of full, fat, dry flakes. Ms. Church on WPIX says seventeen inches cover Central Park. The other weather-people again urge caution: "Stay home if you possibly can! Airports and schools are closed! Treacherous conditions!" There is, indeed, a ubiquitous whiteout like unshered sheep, which, in the words of Robert Bridges ("London Snow") is "hiding differences, making unevenness even." Home I cozily snowbound stay.

Early this morning, Caleb and Tracy, activating remnants of their latent sheep-herding DNA, pulled me ecstatically into Staple Street to organize the stray and shaggy drifts. I dropped their leads; spinning and jumping, they accomplished such imaginary missions (Herd! Play!) even before seeing to their biological emissions. I've heard that the Shelties' small feet and exceptional agility come in handy (footy?) when real sheep get stuck at an impasse, and the dogs are stuck behind them with no access to the front. Their solution is to jump onto the back of the rearmost sheep, walk the thick-pile carpet to the front, jump to the ground, and nudge the prisoners out of their predicament.

On Harrison Street is a row of little Federal houses. The easternmost house (1819) is called "The Old Wool House." I can see a squint of river from the window of my sleeping-cuddy. The clarity of the view is compromised by the plastic sheet on the window, a bastion against the cold, although the wind still permeates the porous walls. Without heat it is sometimes a little chilly indoors; but I don't mind, for from my bed, through the hagioscope of a trestled overpass, I can peep at river traffic on jade swells.



## SNOW MASSIFS

Turns out the blizzard has coated NYC with over 20 inches. Everywhere are icy fields. What a treat: Macadam and pavement are whited out, under a bone-grey sky. This morning at around 8:00 I take the dogs out. In the past couple of days we've seen very few people but colossal dog breeds: light-grey Malamute, jetty Newfoundland, snowy Great Pyrenees — each swaggering dog about 200 pounds and grinning. My own dogs, sure-footed and delighted, are impatient with human caution. We scoot west along Chambers Street. They prance side by side as if harnessed together for the Iditarod.

There's little traffic. In front of P.S. 234, with its flotilla-fence of large black barks and schooners, a plow and dump-truck work away at a pile whose peaks repeat the ships' sail shapes in an accidental rhyme. At each curb and corner we navigate massive snow-massifs, and balance our way through single-file trenches incised by shovels or stamped by boots.

At the river we pass one or two runners. Silhouetted against the gesso-white field: some evergreens, arrowhead shaped; and a few huge Canada geese. In the absence of color — all this white accented with sprinklings of black — shapes dominate. Here is a young black man in a white shirt, chanting from the Koran. He glances up from his small ornamented book to smile, his melodious voice blending in the overarching silence.



## SARTORIAL, or College Collage



In my experience in both college and grad school, with one exception (Joseph Campbell), the more casually a professor dressed, the more effective he was as a teacher. At Sarah Lawrence the male teachers wore baggy corduroy and tweed pants. It took the female teachers a few years to exchange their pleated A-line skirts for cuffed flannel trousers (this was the late 60's). The students (98% of them female) wore jeans and Frye boots. For class they changed into hem-dragging, antique negligees, a la Myrna Loy, but never forsook the clunky Fryes, which they'd indolently prop on the classroom table as a prerequisite to igniting the first cigarette of the hour.

Later, at art school at Penn, everyone wore blue-jeans except for Neil Welliver, who favored khaki chinos and khaki flannel shirts, having just flown in from Maine (he commuted). Joe Brainard, one of the visiting artists from New York City, who was around 25, had a mop of brown wavy hair, oversize glasses, and a boyish look of equal parts innocence and guilt. His jeans had a big red rose applied on the crotch, which I chalked up to evidence of maverick genius. He made intricate collages out of postage stamps and he wrote poetry. Also, he was gay, which impressed me. How glam to be out and outrageous about it.

Until I was 18, and my youngest sister 9, we four were attired in identical little dresses with puffy sleeves and patent-leather Mary-Janes with white knee socks. Our ages ranged from pre- to post-adolescence, and being dressed like a child for so long may have accounted for my arrested development. We called ourselves the "Trapped" family, not thrilled to have to play Baroque recorder-soprano, alto and tenor-with our four girl cousins, who were our ages and lived two houses down, a proximity that made us think we eight had two sets of parents each. The recorder idea and identical dresses probably hailed from my parents' fascination with Maria and Captain von Trapp et la famille, whom they once had seen on Broadway.

When I left the upper-middle-class Miami suburbs of my elegant parents, with their movie-star looks and immaculate grooming, I donned, for all time, the forbidden jeans, a skimpy cardigan worn backwards, and boots. I let my hair grow out of its lifelong little-girl bob that was cut at a salon when my mother noticed my hair descending below chin-level. Simultaneously she would make a moue and a salon appointment, commenting, "You look like the wild woman of Borneo." On my vacations home, that first year, she'd say, "Before you go inside the house, step out of those clothes. And burn them." It was our little ritual. (As Hawthorne remarked about Melville: "He is a person of very gentlemanly instincts in every respect, save that he is a little heterodox in the matter of clean linen.") Someone had to work the matted tangles out of my eventually waist-length hair, which, needless to say, I never brushed. Those behaviors, plus not eating, were my forms of rebellion, in lieu of the

drugs and sex everyone else was flirting with. I never outgrew a distaste for having to dress up, but thankfully I did transcend the anorexia.

In Miami, in the old days, we were close to a certain family who were bohemian intellectuals. The mother, who had gone through school with Mom from first grade through college, was a concert pianist. The father, having been mysteriously debarred from practicing law, happily concocted a renaissance-style life at home, painting wild pictures and doing all the cooking. At a time when men had their barbers clip their hair very short, this father wore his in a multicolored frenzy like an orchestra conductor. They lived with their four kids (I guess it was fashionable back then to have exactly four), whose ages corresponded with ours, in a ramshackle two-story mansion (sagging, everything on the brink of collapse and each bedroom always a creative mess). At a time when furniture came in matching sets, theirs was eclectic, once-good pieces debased by time, and looked as if they'd been collected piecemeal from the Salvation Army. This didn't jive with the invisible fact that they were quite, quite wealthy. There was a Steinway grand, and more books (many in foreign languages) than I'd ever seen in a home. The family disdained air conditioning, which contributed to a pervasive odor of humidity, saltwater and mildew, common in old Miami dwellings. Out back sprawled a huge borderless tract, complete with a derelict fire engine that seemed a metaphor of their poetic dishevelment and nonchalance. The kids went to formal parties with holes in their sweaters, and that made them seem immensely free to me.

Their aesthetics informed my own. Now that I'm older (well, old, to be precise), it is socially acceptable to be slovenly to a degree. I do consider upgrading my sartorial literacy, but have no real aptitude for it. Recently, on two separate occasions, it was suggested that I make more of an effort. My supervisor at NYU said, "Wearing the clothes you paint in, to teach, is simply unprofessional." We'd been sitting in his office, talking merrily about art and philosophy. Suddenly he noticed the threadbare denim (once black, now gray) on my left knee, which that day had metastasized into unprofessional heterodox tear. I apologized and bought a pristine new pair of jetty jeans. But within a day or so they somehow acquired a spot of Permanent Green Light. With any luck, no one will notice it or care. At least until the pigment works its way into the cotton, for oil corrodes fabric, which is why we prime canvas. But it's a slow process. I figure it will be a few years until I must face the eventuality of the next rip. Meanwhile, I can make cut-offs of my old flawed jeans, for the summer. Not to wear outside, of course. I know better, at my age, than to make that sartorial blunder.



## EMERSON'S MIXED METAPHOR

*Life is a train of moods like a string of beads; and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its own focus.*

-- from "Experience," 1844

Riding the subway the other day, I saw this quote posted overhead—one of the MTA's "Sub-Talk" or "Poetry-In-Motion" contributions, found among a hodgepodge of ads for hemorrhoid relief, cheap lawyers, zit-zappers, and solutions for accidental pregnancy. Mr. Emerson had packed his sentence with so many metaphors that I spent the entire ride, which seemed an eternity, trying to unravel them. But life does appear sometimes to be a three-ring feedbag of mixed nuts, and the world a kaleidoscopic collage. So perhaps Emerson's cluttered trope, per se, may be a metaphor for the bewildering vicissitudes that certainly do describe the chain of adventures one encounters while chugging through this flame-brief junket called life.



## ABDUL AND THE BOOKS

You can tell how gentrified the neighborhood has become from what is thrown out on the streets. I glean many substantial boxes from Prada and Tiffany's and Kate Spade, to keep receipts, letters and photos in. It is not unusual to come upon furniture in fine shape, barely-used toys and baby equipment, almost-new sports gear and kitchen appliances.

So it was with no great surprise, but with absolute delight yesterday, when walking on Greenwich just north of Canal, along a tidy row of preserved Federal-era houses, that I chanced upon two great trash bags packed with pristine paperbacks of literary merit. There were also glossy magazines for the leisured and well-traveled, and bound in a wide red rubber band, a bundle of street maps ranging from New York to Los Angeles to Mumbai.

Just as I was filling my backpack to capacity with, among others: Edith Wharton, Nick Hornby, Michael Korda, Richard Ford (the surnames a coincidence of assonance, thought I, with the glee that stems from serendipity)—up saunters a homeless dude with a shopping cart of *objets trouvés*. He was dressed—if not to the nines, then certainly to the sixes or eights, in a loud-patterned shirt, a wide-brimmed hat, boots, assorted necklaces, and snug jeans worn with panache and a fancy belt. Careeningly tall, excessively lean from deprivation, he smiled with toothless warmth and charm. “Man,” he said, gesturing broadly, “you’re getting the best of the lot.” I assured him there was plenty for both and invited him to peruse. “Ah, Dickens,” he crooned, and dug in with gusto.

After a moment he confided, “I recently found \$3,000 here, in stacks of one-dollar bills.”

“Are you sure it was real?” I asked, savoring the black-cherry timbre of his voice.

“I certainly hope so,” he frowned. “If not, there’s a lot of fake bills circulating out there, with my fingerprints all over them.”

“Wow, three thousand dollars. You say you found them here?”

“Around here, yeah. I’ve found a lot of other stuff too. But no dead bodies, yet.”

“I guess that’s good,” I said. “What is your name?”

“Abdul,” he said, extending his hand. “Yours?”

“Jane,” I said, shaking it.

“As in Dick and Jane?”

“Actually, I prefer Tarzan to Dick.”

He looked me up and down and dryly asked: “So where *is* Tarzan, Jane?”

“Hell if I know, as long as he don’t cheetah.”

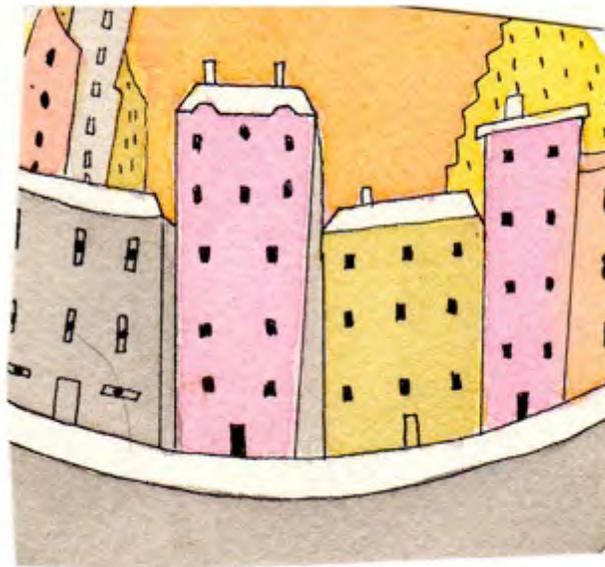
“That Tarzan,” Abdul mused, “he must be some swinger.”

I laughed at his joke, finished loading up, and stood. “Nice meeting you, Abdul,” I said. In a final act of appropriation, I slipped the red rubber band from the street maps onto my wrist. He touched a hand to his wide-brimmed hat and nodded.

I hefted the weight of my backpack and headed off. I glanced down at my rubber-band bracelet and saw that a slogan was printed on it: **YOU ARE CRAZY**. Being in a literary mood, the word triggered one of Yeats’ “Crazy Jane” poems, which I paraphrased:

*I met Abdul on the road  
And much said he and I...*

And so I continued my ramble, keeping a sharp eye out for stray cash.



## REAL LIFE



Reading *Precious Bane*, 1966

That's me, at 16, up a seagrape tree in Miami, feeling no pain. These days, years, and decades, leisure is rare. Due to both circumstance and inclination, I'm not one to take vacations, in the sense of leaving home for R&R. In fact, I haven't had what most would consider a holiday in over 30 years. But every so often, for intervals ranging from two to six weeks between factotums, I manage to take off time. I give time a break. My most recent interlude began in mid-May, end of the spring term. For five weeks I basked in the same state as the tropical girl—quickened and floating in freedom and solitude. Simple happiness arises when time stops exerting its gadfly whip. In my period of non-time, I did just what I did in my youth—made art, read and wrote, walked by the jouncing small boats.

Of course, as with a going-away vacation, such pleasure doesn't last. Now it's back to the clockwork business of life. This week brought an onslaught of overlapping appointments, obligations, commitments, interruptions and compromises—things to take care of, to fix and upgrade, long lines to wait in or time spent on hold. Deadlines. Schedules to revise and obey. At NYU, I told a friend of my regret at leaving freedom behind. He sympathized—he's an artist too—and reminded me that interruptions, obligations and compromises are merely "real life." I'd rather call it "actual life," reserving the Real for the free and carefree inner state, such as I knew in the sea-grape. It's useless to indulge in daydreams, resistance, negativity, preferences (look where they got Bartleby). However, I knew the way out of the trap. All the mystics advise detachment. Ride the ever-present, permanent bliss within—even during rush hour. In every moment that freedom may be chosen. Not one's situation, perhaps; but certainly, one's state.

## SERIOUSLY

The hero of *Oedipus Rex* is famous for being blind to his own errors. Tiresias, the blind seer (great oxymoron) knows/sees/perceives everything that has happened and that will happen, and counters Oedipus's scorn: "You mock my blindness?...you with your precious eyes, you're blind to the corruption of your life.... One day...darkness [will shroud] your eyes that now can see the light" (Fagles, p. 183, 470-80). When the king realizes that it was he who had killed his father, married his mother, and brought a second plague to Thebes (after ending the first plague by answering the Riddle of the Sphinx), in an act of supreme selfless justice intended to restore harmony to the populace, he takes down his dead wife/mother from her hanging rope and, with the pins that fastened her robe (symbolic, for he had no right to disrobe her as her son), he gouges out his eyes.

I put down this most horrific of Greek tragedies and turned on the news, which was as usual full of contemporary disasters often called "tragic." The TV went to commercial. Something about macular degeneration. I ignored it. But for the next three mornings I heard the same commercial. I began to wonder if there was a reason. I hadn't had an eye checkup in at least a decade. Maybe I needed new glasses. I made an eye-doctor appointment. As soon as I did, the commercial stopped appearing every morning. Strange.

At the Manhattan Eye and Ear Infirmary, the ophthalmologist did a few tests. "The good news," she said, "is that you don't need new glasses. The not-so-good news is—your angles are alarmingly narrow, and you need laser surgery in both eyes." She let that sink in. Then added: "If you let this go, you risk glaucoma and blindness. You don't have glaucoma yet. But I wouldn't wait too long. I'd advise you to get a second opinion." So I did. The second-opinion doctor warned, "I'd have it done *very soon*, or risk a 30% chance of going permanently blind." (Terrible fate for a painter.) I made the arrangements.

Being superstitious, I've been spending the days leading up to the surgery looking for signs. When I asked the spirit of my doctor-father for protection, I immediately passed a guy in a t-shirt inscribed with the name of Dad's medical school. Then, crossing the Street, I barely evaded a car that seemed to disregard the value of human life. Crossing opposite me was a guy who met my gaze with an intense stare and intoned: "You Are Safe." Good sign, I thought. But a few minutes later, entering a bookshop, the first thing I saw was a big tome titled *Blindness* — canceling out the auspicious hints. Well sod all that, I tell myself. I'll just have to wait and see.



## PERFECT VISION

Plato arrived at his theory of Forms having deduced that since everything is imperfect, there must be a perfect Form which everything in the apparent world imperfectly represents. Perfect/imperfect: one of the zillion pairs of opposites that arise from dualistic thinking. The Forms, Plato said, are real, and their imitations (you, me and everything we know through the senses) are not. The defect of this theory, I think, is that Plato located the Forms outside of himself.

Perfection, according to the Indian Siddhas (Siddha means perfected being) and other saints, lies inside oneself. The Kingdom of God is within. Visionaries have dubbed it variously: Eden, Heaven, Zion, Paradise, Shangri-la, Elysium, Avalon, Jannah, Utopia, Arcadia, Nirvana, etc. We think of this place as fiction or metaphor, but I believe the names indicate a universal intimation of the accessible reality of the perfection within – that prelapsarian inner state we know before dualism (which probably starts ticking at birth) divides us from the incorruptible state of unity, wholeness, and bliss.

The Siddha saint Swami Muktananda said: If you see imperfection in the world, change the prescription of your glasses.

*Om purnamadah purnamidam / purnaata purnamudachyate, / purnasya purnamadaya/  
purnamevaavashishyate / Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti*

~~~~

*This is perfect – that is perfect / Perfect comes from perfect. If you take perfect from  
perfect / What remains is perfect. Let peace, peace, peace be everywhere.*

Invocation to the Isha Upanishad



## THE HEROIC FUGITIVE AS EPIC ARCHETYPE

Ginny Rowland: “A man of many cities. Don’t you ever get lonely? Unhappy? Lost?”

Richard Kimble: “Quite often. It’s the human condition, isn’t it?”

--*The Fugitive*, “Glass Tightrope”



Another Shabby Room, Another Lonely Night

I grew up in the 1960’s, and wasn’t allowed to watch much TV, so I missed a whole generation of popular culture. I’d never even heard of shows like *The Fugitive*. They say if you skip a stage of development, you’ll have to make up for it later, so I guess this is my time to compensate for a childhood spent reading at the expense of watching TV.

A few weeks ago, browsing in the library, I found one season of *The Fugitive* (1963-67) on DVD. From the first episode I could appreciate this archetypal quest narrative of a hero on the run, an innocent wrongly accused and a living paradox: a prince disguised as pauper (doctor as migrant worker/ bartender/ laborer, etc. I imagine that, packed in his array of satchels, in addition to hair-dye bottle and toothbrush applicator, there must be a change of clothes suitable for the factotum’s next makeshift job). He is the convicted murderer who saves lives; the wanted felon who does good. A hero on the lam, often in disguise, is embedded in our literature, our culture and our psyche. We see it in movies like *Good Will Hunting*, about a savant disguised as a porter, and his reluctant journey of self-discovery. (A character in Dante’s *Inferno* is Goodwill, who stands at a gate before the “straight and narrow way” to the Celestial City.)

And we see it in film-noir. There’s the 1947 film *Dark Passage*, in which Humphrey Bogart, as Vincent Parry (“prevailing deflector”), has escaped prison, having been framed for murder (cf. *Shawshank Redemption*), and with his new face hides out with Lauren Bacall. A recent film about running away (in this case voluntarily) is *Into the Wild*. The novel *Children of the Atom* (1948) by Wilmar H. Shiras, is about a race of genius children, isolated from one another and thinking they’re alone, in hiding from the world.

The appeal of the hero in hiding, the hero on the run, the existential wayfarer, lies in a perhaps universal, if not consciously acknowledged intimation of being sidetracked, detained, interrupted, misunderstood, or hounded. Sometimes we may feel like a case of mistaken identity to others and an imposter to ourselves. (Who am I?) And, if we yearn to discover who we really are, we become both persecuted and persecutor—Dr. Richard

Kimble and Lt. Philip Gerard wrapped into one. Above all, the hero-quest depicts a spiritual journey disguised as an adventure tale, and the hero can be a superman or an everyman, stand-ins for you and me.



Another Brief Ride to Nowhere

An ancient paradigm for the nimble Kimble, whose pantheon of nemeses are Lt. Gerard, a host of paranoid newspaper-reading citizens, and constabularies nationwide, may be Ulysses, whose own adversaries are Neptune and assorted monsters who “would not let him get home.” In Book V, staggering with exhaustion, far from home, Ulysses wonders if his flight will ever end. Tonight, if he sleeps near the river, he might freeze to death. If he chooses the woods, he risks being eaten by an animal. Opting for the woods, he buries himself in a pile of dead leaves, falls asleep and forgets “all memories of his sorrows.” In the morning the picaresque ordeal resumes, and will not cease until his return home.



Another Dreary Point in Time

Similarly, in the opening lines of *The Aeneid*, the hero is designated a fugitive driven on by Fate. (Each episode of *The Fugitive* begins: “But in that darkness, Fate moves its huge hand.”) Aeneas’s chief adversary is “cruel Juno,” who, like Gerard, is determined to thwart her prey by any means. Joseph Conrad writes in his story, “Amy Foster,” about the shipwreck of the main character: “It is indeed hard upon a man to find himself a lost stranger helpless, incomprehensible, and of a mysterious origin, in some obscure corner of the earth. Yet amongst all the adventurers shipwrecked in all the wild parts of the world,

there is not one...that ever had to suffer a fate so simply tragic as...the most innocent of adventurers cast out by the sea....” [Quoted in Said, Edward, “Reflections on Exile”].



Another Night and Another Road

It is not surprising that fate is constantly cited in *Moby-Dick*, e.g.: “... the invisible police officer of the Fates, who has the constant surveillance of me, and secretly dogs me, and influences me in some unaccountable way—“ (Ch.1); ...those stage managers, the Fates (Ch. 1); “their fear of Ahab was greater than their fear of Fate” (Ch. 124); “The hand of Fate ...” (Ch. 134); “I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab’s bowsman...” (Conclusion). And in one of my favorite chapters, a soliloquy by Ahab:

...we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike. And all the time, lo! That smiling sky, and this unsounded sea! Look! See yon Albicore! Who put it into him to chase and fang that flying-fish? Where do murderers go, man! Who’s to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar? (Ch. 132)

The author of *The Divine Comedy* was fated to lead an epic life. Dante Alighieri was “a penniless exile convicted of a felony, separated under pain of death from home, family and friends; his life seemed to have been cut off in the middle” (Archibald T. MacAllister, intro. To Ciardi trans., Signet, 2001). His hero is Kimble’s age, 35, and the *Inferno* begins with perhaps the most famous midlife crisis in literature: “Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself/ In dark woods, the right road lost.” The hero is exhausted, alone, frightened: “My weary frame / After short pause recomforted, again / I journey’d on over that lonely steep...” He has a long way to go. (In *The Fugitive*, comely Beatrice-types pop up regularly to lead Kimble out of danger.)

The theme of urgent flight appears in one of my favorite novels, *Jane Eyre*. In Ch. 23, a manipulative Rochester tells Jane: “It is always the way of events in this life... no sooner have you got settled in a pleasant resting-place, than a voice calls out to you to rise and move on, for the hour of repose is expired.” However, the great escape—from Rochester’s deception and a bigamous marriage—occurs in Jane’s wild exodus across the moors, during which she undergoes epic tests of hardship, danger, spiritual suffering. Saved by St. John Rivers, she will not disclose her identity to him: “Anxious as ever to

avoid discovery, I had before resolved to assume an *alias*.” As Jane Elliott, she begins a new life, having severed contact with her past. The novel’s strange ending concerns the fate of St. John, a rigid perfectionist incapable of romantic love, the opposite of the passionate Rochester. When St. John proposes to Jane merely to make her a fellow missionary, again she flees, making the allegorical return-journey, back to Rochester, who, meanwhile, has gone through his own trial by fire; though wounded and blind he is now her moral equal, and worthy of a prompt union. A decade of marital bliss is dispatched in a few words—“My tale draws to its close: one word respecting my experience of married life, and one brief glance at the fortunes of those whose names have most frequently recurred in this narrative, and I have done”—as if to affirm that the unfinished, unsettled, unbound life is the one to chronicle; that “happily ever after” signifies The End of the tale. After sound and fury, the rest (the remainder; a repose; or death) is silence. Refer to the final episode of *The Fugitive*. (It is significant that Melville ends *Moby-Dick* with Ishmael bobbing on a coffin, floating on the margin of the shipwreck, in the middle of the sea—about to be rescued, but still *in medias res*. However, the chase is over; the white whale has escaped Ahab’s harpoon, if not his death-grip, and is free.) At the end of *Jane Eyre*, St. John writes from India. Mrs. Rochester, secure in her long-desired fate, in a revised account of his character, beams, “A more resolute, indefatigable pioneer never wrought amidst rocks and dangers.” He has become more interesting, and his redemption from dogmatism and domination has edged him toward heroic stature. On the last page, Bronte ends the novel with a mention of hero and adversary in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, one of the greatest quest-narratives of all.

*The Fugitive* has countless literary and popular road-trip parallels—the exodus of Moses and the exiles of Oedipus, Adam and Eve, Cain, Philip Nolan in “The Man Without a Country”; Plato’s philosopher-ruler leaving the Cave; in the East, the tradition of the wandering sadhu, the renunciant who on his constant quest after Truth never stays in one place. Kimble is like the maverick cowboy, too, thinking on his feet, improvising, constantly changing, elusive, never pinned down. The Lone Ranger stays masked and anonymous from one adventure to the next. And, as my brother-in-law Arthur, who shares my admiration for *The Fugitive*, reminds me, Kimble is quintessentially like Shane who, at the end of Jack Schaefer’s novel, slips invisibly away: “He’s gone...He’s gone, alone and unfollowed as he wanted it. Out of the valley and no one knows where.”



Another Weary Pause

The journey quest is the business of action heroes and adventure tales. In *Star Wars*, George Lucas was influenced by Joseph Campbell's definitive study of the hero quest in cross-cultural mythologies, which all say pretty much the same things. Accounts of the life of Jesus (except for all the unknown years of wandering), until his crucifixion at age 33, depict the most mysterious and misunderstood person in story or history, a hero on levels both religious and secular. Perhaps the faithful who retrace his final steps, along the Stations of the Cross, may have been prompted, consciously or not, to enact or initiate their own inner journey-quest. The hero is a paradigm on which to base one's most intimate identity. The story of the great journey, in any permutation, for those who resonate to it on any level, can serve as a map to life and as a pointer to authentic inner being in the long and arduous process of getting home—which is code for self-discovery after all.



Another Appointment, at Another Time, at Another Place

## PITCH PERFECT

The previous tenants of this apartment left around 1980. They were in their late 90's, and even though the rent was affordable - \$60/month, I hear – they no longer could manage the stairs. The couple never went outside—two ancients prowling five dark rooms, bathing in a metal tub in the kitchen, two electric outlets that no modern plug would fit. The walls were painted a scaly, amphibious gray-green. Ten layers of linoleum covered the floor, beneath which were newspapers from the Korean War, beneath which were papers from World War II, beneath which were pristine, wide, dark planks. The seven windows were cracked, covered with plywood, and the wind gusted in anyway and through the leaky walls. The western windows, facing the river, must have had an ample view of ships offloading goods at the Mercantile Exchange.

I never met the Martinezes, but imagine something of their lives by what they left behind: four iron bedsteads, old wardrobes and bureaus, jars of false teeth, and strange all-sorts collections in collapsing boxes. When they left for good, they left everything behind, so I was the accidental heir to their trove, an accumulation of half a century. I'm told that every night, Mr. M. supped at this corner window, then pitched his leftovers and beer bottles out onto Greenwich Street. I understand the pleasure of defenestrating things. I pinch off dead houseplant leaves, or a bit of fuzz, toss them into the breeze, watch their flight, and feel a miniature frisson of terror and vertigo. A mote loops brilliantly in a china-blue sky, changes tack, zooms to a balcony across the street, opts for the air again, soars free and finally disappears, as everything eventually does. From here, the high-rise balconies seem like pigeonholes, from which just about anything not weighted down could blow away in a strong wind. In fact, last May, the wind blew a terrier from his terrace, sailed him around and landed him safely on a balcony five stories down. It would be nice to get his point of view, as one who was jettisoned from on high and lived to tell the tale.

Thrills and chills at the edge of a ledge! I place a toy car on the sill and mentally squeeze into it, on the brink of doing a Thelma-and-Louise. Bon voyage, Mr. M.! Imagination lets one play safely, and enjoy a payoff of terror, which is in fact real. Whee!

10-10-10 at 10:10



## ASCETIC AESTHETIC

On Greene Street I found two small boxes — a tin labeled Victorinox, “makers of the original Swiss Army Knife — and an iPhone box with near-Golden proportions. In the Victorinox was a nesting form which I would have used the army knife to pry out, if there had been a knife inside. A paperclip did the trick, and I was left with a nice empty box. Two of them. I’ve had a weakness for boxes, particularly empty ones, since childhood, when I arranged little boxes in a drawer — plastic slide-boxes, mother’s cosmetic boxes, small-gift boxes, etc. My father did the same, in his meticulous workshop and in his top bureau drawer. An ear doctor, his dominion included eardrums, liquid-filled spirals, canals, and sets of the three smallest bones in the body. He operated through a microscope. I think he was comfortable in small spaces, the way a dentist may be, working in a congested mouth. The collection of plastic slide-boxes stacked on Dad’s workshop table were crammed with gizmos and spare parts, which seemed to justify having the boxes. They were not there for their own sake; they were utilitarian. Early on, I sensed a certain luxury, or mystery, about emptiness, a state that defied the temptation to fill a void by making a container functional. Microcosms: the asymmetrical grid in a drawer that itself was a box — in a room that was a box, as well. The cardboard, metal or plastic coffers were as snug-fit as a beehive — only rectilinear, irregular, and subject to rearrangement.

I have a magazine photo of Donald Judd’s studio. On a table, an empty box, like an unrealized aquarium or an incipient stage-set. An inviting tension rests in the emptiness, which is spacious and enigmatic. It tempts one to plumb for allusions, or merely bask in the suggested void. Judd’s box may be waiting to be filled, but it never will be; the artist may be too brilliant, aesthetically ascetic, or ornery to comply with the tendency to fill space, as, according to Spinoza, nature abhors a vacuum. It’s invigorating to resist the temptation, and instead collude with the suspense of vacancy. There is far more emptiness in the cosmos than there are planets and stars. The answer is the question. Speculation is on the naked thing-in-itself. The subject is nothingness, as everything. Vasko Popa wrote, “Now in the little box you have the whole world in miniature.”



Imitating Donald Judd

## Cherchez La Factory



Shortly before Xmas. Patrolling the neighborhood for cheap oddlots stuff to build a miniature factory, particularly plastic baskets to use for industrial buildings. Prowled two Lot-Less stores and its rival, Less-Less. No luck. Tried the thrift shop but found nothing useful. However, I did find, and bought back, a novel I'd given, over which I'd later suffered donor's remorse. Including tax, it was \$3.26. In vain I searched for those once ubiquitous plastic baskets (3-for-a-dollar), dead ringers for windowed building facades.

Meanwhile, time for lunch. Got a large soup from the Koreans for \$3, which included saltines. What they didn't provide was a place to eat it. I went out in the below-freezing wind to *cherchez* somewhere to swallow scalding soup. Ducked into a Dunkin Donuts around the corner. Had never stepped foot in a DD in my life. No employees stopped me from bringing non-DD products on the premises. No one even noticed. A window seat was available, with a depressing (yet elating) view of Chambers Street. A few dispirited coffee drinkers sat at flimsy deuces. A young couple in a good mood giggled about sex. I sipped soup, resisting my resistance to the *décor* – a straggly tinsel garland around the ceiling, a red banner with a gratuitous caption. I fully expected the motley clientele to stand one by one and belt out a little spontaneous Handel, as in a flash mob. Instead: the tinny static of prepackaged jingles. I finished my soup, and trudged the barren stretch to the counter to dispose of my container. It was like walking on a refrigerator cake covered with kitchy ornaments in a fast-food theme. Still disappointed that I couldn't find any plastic baskets, I went home. There I found other possibilities: a spent firecracker casing I'd picked up one July 5<sup>th</sup> years ago; empty ink cartridges from a Sanskrit calligraphy pen; a complicated machine part of reasonable scale. As is true about all the dioramas I've put together recently, everything needed was here all along. No need to go out searching.

## WEATHER OR NOT

Spent last evening at the windows of my sister's and her husband's loft, transfixed by snow swirling over the fogbound river, lights extinguished by the blizzard, and the Gothic trees below lashing and clashing like swords. I was invited to spend the night, but I thought I should be home. When the brave-hearted dogs and I plunged outside, I sank to my hips in snow and they were all but submerged. We forged to the middle of the plowed street. No cars, and no sign of life on the three blocks to Harrison Street.

This morning, I opened the street door to a dutch-door of snow that blocked us in. I shoveled some but wasn't any match for the "mystical and well nigh ineffable" monster. Still, the shelties needed to be walked. I pushed them beyond the threshold, and all three of us sank deep. Tracy seemed like a minnow swallowed by Moby-Dick himself. Caleb threw me a "you've gotta be kidding" glance and scrambled back inside. They bounded up the stairs before they'd finished their business. I assured them that today they might use the floor with impunity.

So we're snowbound, but content. I feel a little manic. There's enough roots to make Root Soup. I've chopped parsnips, turnips, yams, rutabaga, turnips, etc. which are bubbling away. The only other sound is that of snowplows, faintly grunting like mastodons far away.



## INTO THE MILD

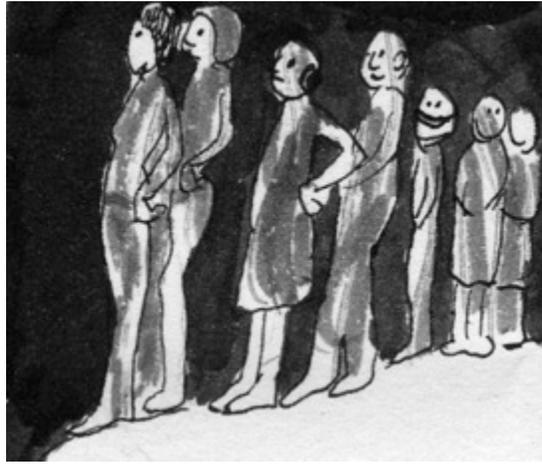


Yesterday was the Tribeca Film Festival street fair, an occasion that affords an annual opportunity to forsake this neighborhood for some remote destination northward, southward, or eastward. By last night, a covey of white tents and several bandstands had been set up. The unrelated bandstands, one of which was beneath my window, were set to broadcast a daylong amplification of static and stridency.

Next morning, around 9:30, the first bridge-and-tunnelers and pram-and-nanny families drifted into Greenwich Street. Five minutes later, the dogs and I decamped.

North would take us to Chelsea via the river esplanade. East would take us to Tompkins Square Park, which has the best dog run in the city (it's large, round, and the ground is covered with cedar chips). But the most tranquil route was to head south, to the Battery.

I'd packed picnic lunches for the dogs and me. Also some reading, writing and drawing supplies in case I found myself "at a loose end," as the British say. And in case I found myself feeling like a storybook character wandering with animal friends, I'd brought *The Adventures of Frog and Toad*. I also had a random collection of peregrination essays: Rousseau's *Reverie of the Solitary Walker*, Hesse's *Wandering*, Max Beerbohm's "Going Out for a Walk," R.L. Stevenson's "Walking Tours," etc.; and a brief history, printed from the Internet, of the *flâneur*, to complement the nomadic condition. Also in my backpack were a dog comb with long and short tines, and a summer hat for when the 53-degree morning chill rose to 70. When it did, as Accuweather predicted, I traded the teal watch-cap for a pink bateau.



Between amblings through my ramble-essays, I managed to harvest enough of Caleb's undercoat (what I call his winter underwear) to fill a large trash bin. The more I combed, the more soft white fluff came out. Tracy wasn't shedding as much, but was content to watch Caleb's intermittent grooming sessions. Otherwise we kept on the move, aimless as authentic flaneurs. Here and there we perched on park benches or lolled on dandelion-dotted grass. Occasionally a strange person with a cart of brimming gallimaufry joined us, apparently to confide in the dogs. Countless tourists drifted by in schools like fish, duplicatively crooning: *Ohhh! I miss my dog! / Are those miniature collies? They're so cute! Like Lassie, only smaller! / I grew up with shelties just like these! / Can I pet them?*



We spent eight consecutive hours in plain air, a record for me. At 5:30 we headed back. We were transformed. Without his undercoat, Caleb was half his original size. Tracy seemed more confident. And gosh-golly-gee, I had survived a whole day without the Internet.

In Tribeca, the bandstands were playing their clashing final sets. The street was littered with paper plates, spent balloons, remnant crowds. Oxygen-drunk, we retired early. I was lulled by the hollow-metal clangs of tents being disassembled, sailcloth whooshing to the paving stones and macadam—the thuds and bumps of set-striking. Made me think of my first nights downtown, when I woke in the wee hours from cheese barrels thudding into trucks waiting at the loading docks below.

That was 35 years ago, when Tribeca was empty, industrial, still ignored, and interesting.

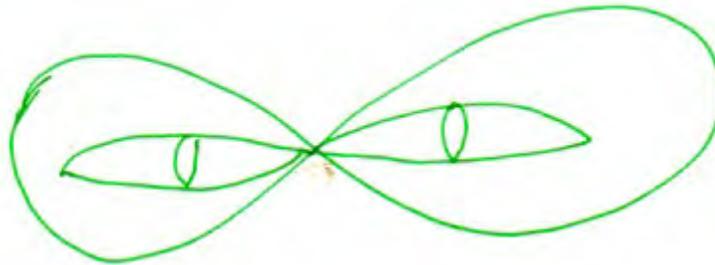
## “WHAT MIGHT NOT EIGHT YEARS DO”

“This is where we will live together until you take the vow.”

“When will that be?”

“In eight years.”

-- *Vision: From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen*



In the last few movies I've seen, a turn of events occurs in the life of a young person after a span of eight years. In the British film “Black Orchid,” 1953, a young woman returns from an eight-year absence, which catalyzes her sister's divorce and enigmatic death. In the Italian film “David's Birthday,” 2009, 18-year-old David's return after eight years in New York precipitates an erotic crisis for a psychotherapist. In the French thriller, “Tell No One,” 2006, the young wife of a pediatrician disappears for eight years under mysterious circumstances. Literary antecedents to this theme of eight years include *Jane Eyre*, when 18-year-old JE arrives at Thornfield after eight years at Lowood Institution. (Rochester: “Eight years! You must be tenacious of life!”) In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliott, persuaded by Lady Russell not to marry the worthy but poor Frederick Wentworth, is shocked to see him when he returns, a successful sea captain, eight years later (“What might not eight years do?”). In *Crime and Punishment*, Roskoknikov, exiled to Siberia to serve an eight-year sentence, rhapsodizes hopefully, “And what comfort was it to him that at the end of eight years he would only be thirty-two and able to begin a new life!”

Question: Why is eight the only number designated as a figure eight? Does it have Möbius-like properties? Many cultures signify eight as a gap between the natural and the supernatural, between the finite and infinity. According to the Kabala, “The number eight always alludes to a departure from the ‘natural’ world, and entry into the supernatural world” (Greg Killian) and expresses the idea that man can transcend his nature. After the Flood, Noah was the eighth person to step out of the ark and “onto a new earth to begin a new life.” In Christianity, eight signifies a new beginning. Perhaps it is no accident that writers frequently choose an eight-year span to flag a reversal in the drama or the drama or in the psychological evolution of the characters. The hero's journey, too, is always about a cyclical return, like the figure 8.

## HURRICANE

I've always loved severe storms, having grown up in south Florida where hurricanes were annual events. The neighborhood became flooded, and we were cautioned not to go out afterwards, in case there were loose electrical wires down in the streets. I imagined the flooded roads swarming with black electric eels, and was duly scared, though some of the reckless kids would ride their bikes through the submerged pavements, coasting with their legs straight out, tires cutting through and spraying waves.

Indoors, during the storm, we were safe from fallen trees whose branches were on the ground and roots were exposed to the sky. I'd drape a table with a sheet to make a haven, and ferried toys to safety in a shoebox train. The sound effects were monumental: rattling jalousies, creaking roof, scraping branches, the crack and boom of thunder. We filled the bathtubs with drinking water. When the electricity died, we had flashlights. The phones and TV no longer worked, so we listened to a crackly radio, with its alarmist cautions and weather-speak. The next day school was closed.

During Irene's visit (9/2/11), weatherpersons busily tracked the storm's progress up the east coast with what looked like flying ninja stars, or the lethal-looking symbols for biomedical waste. "The bay will meet the ocean in this one," a wary bystander told an anchorman, who held a mic under his nose. I awaited Irene's arrival at a window. In the interminable lull, I hazarded out for more supplies.

I passed a woman in a hurry who was telling her phone, "Eighty-five-mile-an-hour winds they're predicting." The river was jade-gray. Dragon-tooth clouds marched across a sky of a different shade of white. A huge cruise ship slipped by, a silent behemoth like the encroaching storm. Large, silent, moving objects are often ominous: the shark circling in the water; the stealth bomber circling in the sky; the panther turning and turning in a narrowing gyre, before the crouch to pounce. The breeze's predatory breath, meanwhile, had been increasing incrementally into rage. In the park, a Chinese man was calmly doing Tai Chi, a lone figure dwarfed by overpowering nature in a landscape-scroll, or dwarfed by the thought-vortices in his own mind. I thought of Leonardo's drawings of winds and tides.



For most of the night I stayed up to watch the lashing rain and the rioting, mane-tossed trees. By next morning, the storm was over. There were no lakes of electric eels, just an aftermath of remnant winds and a mess of leaves on macadam. There was a different kind of stillness now, without threat. And that evening, under a spectacular sunset, some little boats with shark-tooth sails ventured out.

## SMALL ANTECEDENTS



I made only one miniature interior in childhood. Having never seen a dollhouse, I had no example to follow (probably for the best), and recreated my own room in a wooden box viewed from above rather than straight on. All that remains is the bulletin board, a 4x4½” Masonite scrap. In the photo, my sister Katie looks about two, so I must have been 11. My only other miniature-making enterprise was an attempt to enhance the same-old anthill architecture I observed for hours. Hoping to make the repetitive circular huts more interesting for the backyard ants, I made them distinctive twig-and-leaf abodes. But like incurious art critics, they skirted my assemblages, faithful to their classic mounds. Art supplies came from cardboard (good for haunted houses) from my father’s laundered shirts, and tongue depressors from his office for puppets (Holmes and Watson are pasted into the *Casebook*). My mother gave me fancy perfume-bottle packaging. Into one of these, a quilted oval box, I cut a hole to make a stage for a Kleenex soprano with a golden fan who, I decided, was singing Vivaldi.



## BEAUTIFUL DIRTY SNOW



After some time spent walking around in the drizzle, what was dreary became spacious and mysterious, like an ancient Chinese painting. The sodden sky went from sullen to silken, with a delicate ink wash. The dirty snow mounds, tarnished by car exhaust and thrown-up mud, transformed into grottos and gullies, cliffs and gorges. Peaks of lacy crystal rose majestically above melt-water rivulets. This was scroll-travel at its best. I ambled leisurely toward the river, to confer with the peaked black conifers.





### **ART IMITATES ART, Or BY THE BOOK, Or HOW BRONTE SAVED MY LIFE**

Precisely at the age designated by Dante as midlife, when one is apt to lose one's direction, as I did in 1986 or so, I was saved by re-reading *Jane Eyre*, a childhood favorite which contained unimaginable treasures. The novel untangled me as no therapy could, and did far more. I secluded myself for a week to be with the lines and between the lines. I wanted to make some kind of art about it, as a way to participate in Charlotte Bronte's mind. Predictably (for I had been painting for fifteen years), I made a series of large oils: Rochester on horseback; Bertha burning his bed; Jane fleeing Thornfield, etc.; but they did not satisfy. Next I tried some respectable bookish watercolors. No dice. Then I wrote a 40-page essay analyzing the novel's import and symbolism, an invigorating exercise in critical thinking to be sure, but still not enough – I still felt outside of the book, paying it homage.

One night, at my desk, the bookshelf in front of me (which I was frowning at) suddenly became a room. I swept off the books, taped fancy wrapping paper to the walls, and piled on odds and ends to furnish a miniature Thornfield Hall. I felt a thrilling blitz of urgencies in replicating the interiors as Bronte describes them. For example: How to make an arched doorway? Plastic coffee-can lid. Purple drape? T-shirt fragment. Gothic furniture? Incense and cigarette boxes. Paintings? Postage stamps, art cards. Bibelots? Costume jewelry. Fireplace? Sumi ink blocks, with a mantle from a scrap of molding.

I was participating from the inside, with the same intimate absorption of reading; and this began a new direction in my work and in my life.

## FORAGING THEN AND NOW

The midtown hobby shops of the 80's and 90's were like old-boys' clubs whose staffs, by tacit consent and ancient habit, snubbed females and treated them (me) with almost comic scorn. So clotted with merchandise were these dusty allsorts shops that you had to crab-walk along the narrow aisles to poke through cartons of miscellany. I loved rowing in those stale, finite worlds, and then emerging into the larger fantasy of Times Square. It was usually at the start of dusk, when the sky was still light blue, like an airgram, but the streets had grown ashy. Day and night were fused, as in Magritte's "The Empire of Light." Street lamps, fluorescent office lights, and shrill neon signs avidly bred like fireflies in the gloom. The side streets were lined with single-story theaters whose baroque facades looked like stage-sets themselves, as did the desolate public garages, with their sooty, mullioned windows. From that unexpected vantage, I'd look up and with a peculiar tang, see both the Chrysler and Empire State buildings. In reality they were avenues apart, but there they existed in the same plane, brandishing their jeweled syringes at each other, or maybe at the thin-skinned, surrendering sky.

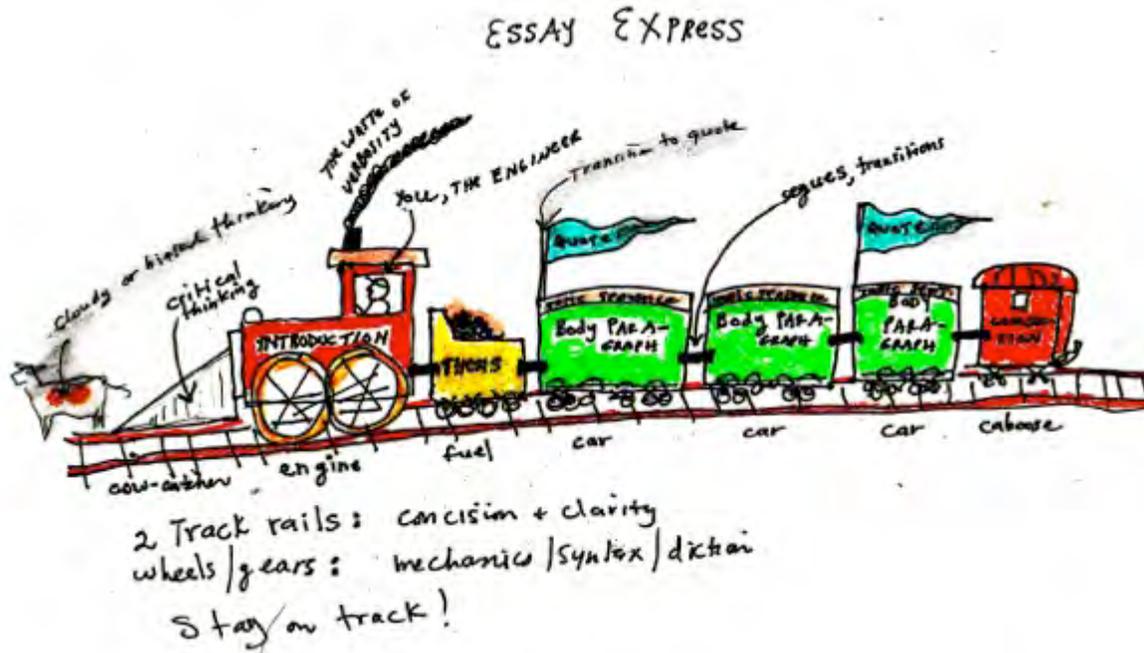
Odd-lot stores have disappeared to gentrification, so these days I make do with what I've salvaged over the years—clockworks, finials, spools, tiles and such. Much has been discarded to make more space. At one point I thought I'd never make another diorama again, and gave most of my building supplies away. But then I got hooked on "The Fugitive," which spawned dozens of ideas. Recently I wanted to make a piano for the "Branding Iron" cocktail lounge, in the Pilot episode. I tried various possibilities but nothing worked until I spied a heart-shaped copper cookie cutter at Whole Foods. A potential baby grand. I asked the price. The employee asked, one would think gratuitously: "Are you making cookies?" "No," I answered. "I'm making a piano." I realized that my answer might be construed as facetious, as in those puerile jokes: Passerby to guy in car crash: "Have an accident?" Survivor: "No thanks, just had one." I explained that I would use it to make a piano for a miniature cocktail lounge. She nodded sympathetically.

The long and the short of it is that while New Yorkers are griping about the garbage buildup from the succession of blizzards this winter, I am happy for the extended opportunity to find useful discards. Just when I needed something circular for a Ferris wheel, I found a perfect gizmo right on my street. Amazing what is set curbside.



## Notes on Writing

### TRAIN OF THOUGHT



I've been compiling a little handbook of writing hints for my students at NYU. Many beginning writers suffer from verboritis, redundanitis, and other common ailments that congest an essay. Of the many metaphors I've thought of is the comparison of the academic response paper or personal creative essay to an old-fashioned choo-choo train. Amazing how similar is the composition of their anatomies – from the cowcatcher of critical thinking at the front, to the conclusive caboose at the end. The engine (introduction), coal car (thesis statement), passenger cars (body paragraphs) and caboose (conclusion) are connected by segues, transitions. The wheels turn with the proper gears (syntax, diction). A quote is properly cited like a pennant on a staff. This mnemonic device should help beginning writers stay on track as they engineer their train to ride the rails of concision and clarity.



## WORDS

Vocabulary and the Dictionary. If you were to hire a carpenter to build bookshelves, and he arrived without tools, or was so unorthodox that he uses a nail-file to cut wood and a bottle-brush to drive nails, you'd send him away and seek someone with the equipment and knowledge to do the job. If you write an essay using an insufficient vocabulary, or misunderstand the definitions of the words you do use, you'll be limited in your expressive and communicative capacities. The same is true with choosing words with the wrong connotation.

Connotations and the Thesaurus. One reason to build a good vocabulary is to have many words in your tool-bag to choose from. Each synonym conveys a different feeling, association, flavor, color, key, sound, or idea. Is there a difference in "feeling-sense" between "house" and "home"? The writer's choice of words is called "diction." In describing a thin person, you might call him scrawny, skinny, sinewy, spare, slender, slim, or svelte – and those are just the "s" words! All refer to leanness, but each has a distinct connotation. Choosing a word with an unsuitable connotation is like putting sugar instead of salt on your mashed potatoes. Sugar and salt are both white crystals, just as scrawny and slender similarly mean thin, but sugar and salt, and scrawny and slender differ in effect. (Note, however, that some experienced writers deliberately use a word with a "wrong" or unexpected connotation for irony, emphasis, or shock.)

Example of connotation: Henry James begins *Portrait of a Lady*: "Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea." James could have chosen many other synonyms for "ceremony": ritual, rite, habit, custom, observance, routine, practice. Each has its own flavor. James chooses to *color* the simple domestic convention of having afternoon tea with grandeur, through "ceremony.")

Thesaurus means treasury. Collect a treasure-house of words.

## AFTERWORDS

Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words

-- Eliza Doolittle

Words, words, words! They shut one off from the universe.

--Aldous Huxley

Words words words . They're all we have to go on. -- Tom Stoppard

