

645 Million Breaths

These are unconnected impressions of the theatre of my life, with players who drift in and out of light and dark, clear and sullied moments, faded and acute images, that emerge in the present as muffled prayers, or jumbled visions, during a winter harvest of memories.

Like a dedicated farmer pruning trees so they may grow healthy, I have searched for the places in my life where seeds were buried, and sought the fruit that may have been born. At an early age I became aware of vacuity, but with little life experience, filled it with the toys of the world, rather than the Name of God.

In my daydreams I visited invisible cities, and used poetry and art as weapons to defray the enemies of mankind. In the nearly 645 million breaths I have taken, how many have been conscious, how many contained the Name of Allah? Far too few I am sure.

The Sufi sheikhs say that a breath taken in which the Name of Allah is missing, is a wasted breath. How much of this precious life have I wasted, dreamed away, clouded with confusion, crowded with meaningless or poisoned thoughts? Will I be written down as a man broken by the world, a life devoid of meaning, unfulfilled, or is there yet a glimmer of hope, the afterglow of a firefly's light?

The Sufi sheikhs tell us that to say once in one's life, *la illaha illa Allah*, is enough to enter Paradise. This can be said in one breath. Not just repeated, but said from the deepest part of one's heart, with every fiber of one's being, with every cell of one's body alight, like the firefly.

Perhaps we are given 600 million breaths in order to locate the one where the Name of Allah is hidden.

The Wedding Night

Anatolia is like embracing ice in the winter of 1972. Konya is cold. Nevertheless thousands of lovers of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi converge from various parts of the world, to honor “his wedding night” in December. The Whirling Dervishes turn each night leading up to the 17th of December; the day Mevlana met his Beloved, some 700 years before.

I arrive from New York, the city of a hundred thousand traffic lights, to Konya, a small city in the heart of Central Turkey, that has one traffic light. I didn’t know it but this particular journey would change my life.

Salik, a friend from New York is my traveling companion. We struggle with our bags at the old, dingy, Yesilkoy Airport in Istanbul, then find our way to Uskudar, to the house of Mevlevi musician Nezih Uzel whom I had recently met when the Whirling Dervishes were in New York.

Houses in Istanbul are heated by wood or coal stoves and carry a night chill. Nezih is to play the *bendir* in the Mevlevi dervish ceremony in Konya. Sadettin Heper is the *kudumzenbashi*, Kani Karaca, the blind *hafiz*, will chant the *Naati-Sherif*, Kudsi Erguner and Aka Gunduz will play the *ney* and it is master *ney* player Ulve Erguner’s last *sema*, as his face is swathed in bandages, the result of the cancer that is eating him.

We board the night train to Konya at Haydarpasha Station. The “iron horse,” clatters, clacks and chugs its way through a dimly lit Asian landscape, occasionally covered by patches of snow.

Arriving in the chilled early morning, we take rooms in the Shaheen Hotel on Mevlana Caddesi, just down the street from Mevlana’s tomb.

The following day, a burly figure accompanied by four men wearing overcoats and round white hats, enters the Hotel Shaheen’s lobby. Everyone who is a dervish runs to kiss his hand. I

am among them. This is Sheikh Muzaffer al-Halveti al-Jerrahi and his dervishes from Istanbul.

I greet him, he greets me, and that is where it ends... for the moment. That night after the *sema* there is a private *zikr* in a Konya apartment. Seventy or so people are packed into a tiny, hot, room. I am pasted against one of the oven walls. The sheikh and several of his dervishes are seated on their knees in a circle on the floor, surrounded by several standing Mevlevi musicians.

"I can't stay like this for hours." I don't know what encourages me to do it, but I move to the circle and sit on my knees between Sheikh Muzaffer and his *khalifa*, Safer Baba. Not invited, I nevertheless nudge them aside and sit down. The *zikr* begins and I repeat the Names of Allah and do the swaying movements, which is natural for me. It becomes a part of me. I feel as though my soul has returned home.

The circle of men performs various movements in this long *zikr* that continues for several hours. My heart is bathed in light. At the conclusion, in this space of sacred air, the sheikh looks at me and says, "You make *zikr* like us," and he kisses my eyes.

"I want you to come and see me in Istanbul."

"I'll be in Konya another week."

He meticulously writes down exactly where to go and when to come and see him. "*Insha'Allah*, I'll be there."

Whose dream could have unfolded these images of an American educated, son of Russian immigrant parents, sitting before a dervish sheikh, in a *zikr* circle in the ancient city of Konya, the laboratory of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, in 1972?

Some World Conditions

In 1940 a new car cost \$890 and a gallon bottle of milk could be purchased for ten cents. American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt requested wartime powers, and urged higher taxes for defense. Britain began rationing bacon, butter and sugar. Saudi Arabia had been a country for only eight years. Israel did not exist. Saddam Hussein was three years old, and Muammar Gaddafi had not yet been born. Kemal Attaturk had recently died. Kings governed Iraq, Egypt, Iran, Libya and Saudi Arabia. There was no television. Pablo Picasso had painted *Guernica*. The Cincinnati Reds won the World Series and Joe Louis was the heavyweight-boxing champion. These were some of the conditions of the world when I entered.

Born In The Sky

Sophie lay on the clean sheets of the Medical Art Center Hospital on Eighth Avenue and 59th Street in New York City. She was in an upper floor room of a high-storied redbrick building that could have easily been mistaken for an office or apartment building. I was born in the sky. I passed through the birth canal of awareness, into the ocean of consciousness to an unknown world, and Sophie saw to it that I knew no hunger. They named me Ira, and I was called by that name for the first twenty-five years of my life, and long after by some friends and family. My father Sam was a member of the electrical union and therefore was assured a good income. After living in Brooklyn, New York for two years my parents moved to Boston, to an area called Roxbury.

My mother looked like a Russian ballerina, but had a modern dancer's walk. Her raven hair was parted in the middle and pulled back tight into a bun that rested on the back of her head. She wore

it that way every day of her life, along with the gold gypsy hoops about the size of a quarter that hung from her ears. She had a birthmark in the center of her forehead in the place that Indian women position a small circle of red powder called *kumkum*, to indicate marriage. Her name was Sophie, but everyone called her Sonya. Some two decades before, my mother was living in Montreal with her mother and sisters. Her father had died in Russia many years before. He sold meat to the military, and when the czar was overthrown he was arrested.

“They arrested him. When the communists arrested someone, you would never see them again, they would kill them...you understand. Papa would never come home, he’ll be dead. But then somehow...he just delivered them merchandise so they let him go. He was in prison. When he came out his skin was grey, he was a good man, his hair was all white and he became sick. Papa died and they assembled our papers. So we came here without him. They saw that papa wasn’t a general, he wasn’t one of them. One friend had a house in back of the jail where we used to go. We would see how they let out the prisoners in the yard. We used to see papa but we kept quiet so they would not discover us. When the Cossacks went to the streets every week to dance and play music we ran to look for papa. There was a special place on the main street where the Black Shirts met. I remember. I do. I don’t know why.”

The clattering of horses’ hooves on cobblestoned streets sent Sophie and her siblings scurrying beneath their beds. The family hid from the Cossacks, until they could gain passage on a boat for Halifax, and then on to settle in Montreal.

My mother’s father was married to a woman in Russia who birthed six children. Somewhere in the batch were twin brothers. One drowned as an infant, in the milk of the woman breast-feeding him, who had fallen asleep and unconsciously pressed her peasant arms so hard against his back, that he couldn’t release

himself from the massive breast. His brother, at the age of eighteen, was swallowed by the Black Sea while swimming, his intestines scrambled by the sea, and soon there was no breath left in him. Neither got to comb grey hair.

My grandfather's wife witnessed five of her children pass through her birth canal into the world. When her sixth child made the journey to the ocean of consciousness she died. As was the custom of the time, her husband married Ethel, his wife's younger sister, who also gave birth to six children. One of them was my mother. This all happened more than a hundred years ago.

At fourteen, my father was a volunteer fireman in Moscow. A photograph of him with a helmet and uniform, printed on a metal surface, was displayed in my parents' home. He was handsome and feisty. In his twenties he jumped a ship to the west and followed an older sister, Annie, who had settled in Canada. When Sam arrived he spoke no English, but got a job selling sandwiches on the train that went back and forth between Montreal and New York. He memorized the names of the sandwiches and could make change, so he got along with his customers. He worked long hours, saved money, and sent for the remainder of the family who were still back in the U.S.S.R. It appeared that destiny offered him more. One day he disembarked the train in New York and never looked back. He found a cousin in Brooklyn who took him in, taught him the electrician trade, and eventually got him a union card. He became flush with money, had a car and lots of women. He visited Montreal periodically to spend time with his family.

One day, during one of these visits, he was walking with a friend on Esplanade Street in Montreal at the foot of Mount Royal. In a window of one of the wooden houses with a thousand steps, was a beautiful woman. My father, of course he wasn't my father then, was smitten. His friend asked if he was interested in the woman. He answered that he was, and the friend coyly said that he knew her. She was the sister of one of his friends. They courted, married

in Montreal, moved to New York and then Boston, and I lived with Sam and Sonya until I left for the army in 1962, and then on to New York to follow a career in the arts.

Numbed By Love

A devout dervish was walking one day when he passed a house and looked up at a window, where he saw the most beautiful woman he could imagine. Her beauty mesmerized him, and he remained on that spot looking up at the window hoping to gain another glimpse of this beauty. Days passed into weeks. Nights of rain and cold passed. The woman noticed the dervish's vigil and after some time sent her servant to bring him to her.

Upon seeing the beauty of the woman, the man's heart swelled. "What do you look for, standing day and night with your eyes pasted to my window?"

"Your beauty has numbed me with love."

"If you think I am beautiful," she said, "you should meet my sister, her beauty makes me look like a dwindling flower. There she stands now just to the right of you."

The man looked over his right shoulder but saw nothing.

"I see nothing."

"I have no sister, and if you really loved me you would never have looked toward another." With this she slammed the door in his face.

We say we love Allah, but we are constantly looking at the world.

Radio Days

I would often sit with my dad in the 1940s style kitchen of our Roxbury apartment. The wooden ice-cream-parlor chairs faced each other, and we would lean toward the brown table radio

perched on the center of a wooden counter painted white. My father jiggled one of the large glass tubes in the back of the radio to clear the sound.

Our knees nearly touched, and our hearts jumped with anticipation, as we faced the radio, my ears straining to hear Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber, defend his heavyweight boxing title against all opponents on what seemed like every Friday night.

The radio warriors rested for one minute and boxed for three. During that minute, when the seconds and handlers were washing down their fighters in their respective corners, and the sure-handed cut men worked their trade like fine surgeons, King Gillette, a name not a title, sold us razors that promised clean-shaven faces in the comfort of our homes.

Our attention waned as I shadow-boxed my father right there in the kitchen, and he parried my blows. I felt like Joseph Louis Barrow himself.

These were our radio days. My last impression of the champ came years later. Joe Louis was a black hero in a white world of segregation and discrimination. He defeated everyone but the Brockton heavyweight Rocky Marciano, and only when he had become old and depressed, rolling in a wheelchair was he finally beaten, not by a man, but by the Internal Revenue Service. The taxman put a lien on his earnings and broke his spirit.

My imagination was diminished, and the blow-by-blow descriptions of the excited announcer slid into the past when, a few years later my dad bought a television set.

Now on Friday nights I would carry one of the wooden chairs from the kitchen into my parent's bedroom where we watched Carmen Basilio, the onion farmer from upstate New York, battle Carl "Bobo" Olsen, or Walker Smith, better known as Sugar Ray Robinson, pound for pound the best boxer in history and as slick as they come with his Harlem "do."

On some Friday nights we watched Kid Gavilan, the black Cuban

who threw a devastating bolo punch that came from nowhere, like a steel stealth bomber that always landed on flesh.

On other Fridays we followed the movements of Emile Griffith, who reduced the square ring to the circumference of a nickel. I saw him knock his fist against the head of Benny “Kid” Peret so hard that Benny later died in the hospital from a brain turned to mush.

Marciano was the heavyweight champ. Built like a fire hydrant he took on all comers and left the ring, undefeated. Roland LaStarza was a foot taller and Rocky couldn’t land the blockbuster. So for eleven rounds Marciano punched LaStarza’s upper arms until the twelfth, when the challenger came out to battle but couldn’t lift his dead arms. Rocky sent him to the canvas with a sledgehammer to the head that could have stopped you from reading books.

Boxing was violent, but as a boy I like what my dad likes.

Radio was my main source of entertainment and offered much more than boxing memories. I listened to the western, Gunsmoke, Amos ‘n’ Andy, and the Jack Benny Program, but my favorites in those early days were the detective programs with their intriguing introductions spoken by announcers with mellow voices.

“There he goes. He walks down the street. Steps on the scale... weight 300 pounds, fortune, danger... J. Scott Smart as The Fat Man,” or “Friend of those who have no friend, Enemy of those who make him an enemy...Boston Blackie,” but my all time favorite was, “While traveling in the Orient, Lamont Cranston learned the secret of how to cloud men’s minds. Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men, the Shadow knows.”

I slipped from my youth with radio on my mind.

Jack-Of-All-Trades

My dad wasn't an athlete, or even a good businessman. He was a jack-of-all-trades and could fix almost anything, especially if there was a second that he could use as a model. In those early years, when I was still a boy, my father struggled to support his family.

Iron Lungs

I often rode my Schwinn bicycle with balloon tires down the steep Cheney Street hill to get a pack of Kent cigarettes for my mother. They cost fifteen cents for the pack. I puffed the breath out of me on the way back so that sometimes I walked down the tree-lined hill from Maple Street. I held my breath until I passed Steven Fisher's house. He had polio and I think that not taking a breath as I pass his window might save me from the same plight. The disease is the fright of our childhood. We are not allowed to enter common swimming pools, or even go to the movies. Crowded places were avoided. Everyone knew someone in an iron lung or crippled for life. Others like Steven were lucky and made a full recovery. Although my friends and I admired the baseball players Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio, Dr. Jonas Salk, who developed the first successful polio vaccine, was our true hero.

If we aren't on our bikes, we are roller-skating down Cheney and balancing ourselves as we quickly turn into Maple Street. It was daring and risky to ride the Cheney hill all the way down to Grove Hall at the bottom. Our roller skates were made of metal, and clipped onto the ridge at the sole of our shoes and tightened by a skate key worn on a string around our necks.

The Smokescreen Of Childhood

Perhaps my father was unlucky, but he was as honest as a July day is long. When I was a boy he was in the haberdashery business. He had a store in South Boston. His partner Nat was a retired army captain and a hero in World War II.

On Saturdays when there was no school my younger sister Vivian and I went to the store and dad would give us movie money. We'd then go to the Oriental Theatre and watch matinees of double features, cartoons, newsreels, and a thrilling serial that always left the hero in a dangerous position. The film would be cut with a promise to find out what happened in the next episode. All this in a movie house with a ceiling adorned with sporadic clouds that appeared to move in a starlit sky.

Tom Mix, Gene Autry (the singing cowboy), Roy Rogers (he had a taxidermist stuff his horse Trigger and kept him in the living room of his house), and Hopalong Cassidy, the cowboys of my youth, moved on the screen bigger than life, filling my Saturdays with dreams of adventure, the smokescreen of childhood.

Coal Men

The somber Boston streets of my youth in the 1950s often smelled of yesterday's rain. Maple trees with their million leaves that changed from green to red, yellow, and orange in autumn, lined the street where I lived. My mother called me and my sister to dinner from the painted streets, by ringing a cowbell out the window of our first floor flat.

Buildings were still heated by burning coal. Men with bituminous arms arrive at our brick apartment house once a month, and trucks that bend over, send pyramids of coal down to the cellar via metal chutes placed in the open basement windows. I would

sit by the window, my face pressed against the glass, peering at the black coal sliding below and listening to its roar.

Horses With Wings

Finally my dad had to close the shop. His partner Nat was caught hijacking trucks containing expensive furs and sent to prison. My dad worked for years to pay off his business debts. His honesty kept his pockets poor but his heart rich. I don't remember much about Nat, except he once gave me a pair of professional boxing gloves.

My father was a licensed electrician and a good carpenter, so he went into the business of buying empty run-down stores that were auctioned in the Boston Sunday Globe, and rebuilding them for resale. He did this for a few years until an old friend of his with a clothing store near Dudley Station in Roxbury asked him to manage the shop. It was a tough neighborhood, and there was one night my father returned home pallid because thugs or junkies jammed a pistol at his ribs in order to force him to open the store's safe. There was never much cash in the safe, if any, but junkies dream of horses with wings and will do almost anything for a fix. After the incident of the pistol, my mother perched herself in front of our living room window every night, anxiously waiting for my father's old Plymouth sedan to turn into our street.

A Fist Full Of Greenbacks

A lot of characters passed through my youth leaving behind a unique picture of events I would never see the like of again.

Jerry Sutter was wiry and tough. He had a few run ins with the law and was compelled to join the Navy. Periodically he returned

to the neighborhood on leave, adorned with Navy tats and a fist full of greenbacks. Jerry liked me so I had a sort of built-in protection plan which was good, since I was a skinny kid with little desire for street fighting, although my imagination served me well in many a battle. I was watching when Jerry kicked another guy's eye right out of its socket. Few were prepared to mess with him. Later I think he was either swallowed up by the Navy or prison... I lost track of him.

I also had more gentle friends. Barry who lived across the street must have been rich because his house was the first in our neighborhood to have a television set. His father worked for the government and he had an older brother Kenny who I barely remember.

I have been working since the age of fourteen. My first job was packing raincoats on Saturday mornings, in the basement of the Cable Raincoat Factory in Boston, and placing them into large cardboard boxes, then fixing them with a hand-binding machine that tied the boxes with metal strips.

Innovators Of The Moment

I am on Maple Street in Roxbury playing stickball, using the ledges of parked cars and manhole covers as bases, and a sawed off broomstick as a bat. Once the ball is hit you race between an old Buick fender and the headlight of a 1948 Kaiser that looks somewhat like a leftover tank from the war, the platypus of cars. Games were invented. We were innovators of the moment. If a high bouncing pink ball broke, we carried on, now playing half ball. We collected cards with pictures of baseball players or battle scenes from World War II. Sometimes we waxed these cards by rubbing a candle on them so they would slide better as we flicked them along the sidewalk toward a brick wall. Whoever got closest

to the wall won and owned the other player's card. No one ever beat Dickie Freeze at this game.

Every boy had a folding jackknife that fits snugly in the front pocket of his dungarees, and serves as the tool to mark out territory in the ground. We shot the knife into the earth with a flick of the wrist, and from wherever it stuck we drew a line, and now owned that property. Years later I learned that adults did a similar thing with countries in the Middle East.

Sophie's Game

Sophie sits at the kitchen table in Roxbury playing solitaire and roaming her thoughts. She has two children, my sister, and myself, and is far from the Kremenchuk apartment, north of Moscow, where she was a child. I watch her move the cards from column to column while sipping black tea from a tall, clear glass, through the lump of sugar resting on her tongue.

She ate a raw onion held in her left hand like a baseball, and sliced with a paring knife. A slab of dark rye bread followed. The left-over traditions of Russia.

First Sufi Lesson

My first introduction to Sufism came at the age of twelve, when I read a two-line poem that affected the rest of my life. It stayed with me through my youth, my teens, into college years and for years after. It simply read, "I cried because I had no shoes, and then I met a man who had no feet." It was credited "anonymous" at the bottom. Years later, in my late twenties, when I was studying comparative religion, I learned that the poem had been written by Hafiz, a Persian Sufi poet.

Meat And Vegetables

Hoja Nasreddin's wife was constantly complaining. "The only meat I see is in the butcher shop, and the only vegetables I see are on the grocer's shelves."

"Be thankful to God," said the Hoja, "for you could have been blind."

The Walls Of Roxbury Memorial

The music of the 1950s was Rhythm & Blues and Rock and Roll. I was a teenager living in Roxbury, a section of Boston, when one of the greatest music events of the decade took place at the Shawmut Theatre. It was pre-Elvis and the stage was occupied by the likes of Chuck Berry, Little Richard, The 5 Keys, Big Joe Turner, Fats Domino and others. We were dancing in the aisles and shouting the lyrics to songs that are now known as the Golden Oldies. Music history was being made. I felt the sound beat into my bones.

At Roxbury Memorial High School our annual Talent Show was the hottest ticket in Boston, because our students were the best of the best when it came to singing Blues and Rock and Roll. Racism existed, but not inside the walls of Roxbury Memorial.

White Flight

During the end of my high school years white flight had begun in our part of Roxbury, and within a few short years the middle class whites moved out making room for blacks. I had many black friends, including Josh the preacher's son, Roscoe Baker and Hewitt Joyner, two of my teammates on the Roxbury Memo-

rial High School basketball team. At Roxbury Memorial we took our basketball seriously. When Tony Santio, the team's star guard, fell asleep in Spanish class, Mr. Bonner, the Spanish teacher had the entire class silently leave the classroom, so Tony could finish his nap before the big game that evening.

Social pressure mounted and we became the last white family on Maple Street to leave.

Art School

I am nineteen, in my first year of art school. We had moved from Roxbury to Brookline. Milk was still delivered in glass bottles by either the Hood or Whiting milk companies, and was renewed by my mother placing a rolled up paper in the empty bottle's neck requesting additional quarts. Personal notes to unnamed people. The empties were left outside the door of your apartment.

I like New England weather. Mark Twain was right. You only had to wait a minute for it to change. The summers are warm and the winters are snowy. I walk down Beale Street, then Longwood Avenue toward art school, listening to the crunch of dried leaves under my shoes. Autumn brings multi-colored leaves and spring promises a season of baseball. Once it snowed in April on Opening Day of the new season. The Boston Globe ran a photograph of a snow-covered Fenway Park, the home of the Red Sox. Although later I became a Red Sox fan, in the early days I rooted for the Boston Braves. They had a great pitching combination in Warren Spahn and Johnny Sain. The sports writers coined a phrase, "Spahn and Sain and pray for rain."

Satchmo

I lived with my parents and daily trekked the twenty minutes, like a postman in the heat, rain, cold and snow, to the Massachusetts College of Art where I spend four years with paint-stained hands and clothes, before I graduate and join the Army Reserves, hoping that President John F. Kennedy won't send me "over there" to help build the Berlin Wall. I watched it built and I watched it fall.

Our landlord in Brookline was a bandleader at "The High Hat," a famous Boston nightclub. One night he invited our family to the club for dinner and to listen to Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong the great jazz singer, trumpet player, and scat vocalist, which was the art of using sounds and syllables instead of actual lyrics. I stand before "Satchmo," bask in his wide smile and notice that the dedication and many hours of playing trumpet had left his lower lip hard as the back of a clam. If you want to succeed you have to work diligently at all costs.

Mr. Sullivan, my Boston Latin School English grammar teacher loudly proclaimed, "If it doesn't hurt, you're not studying."

Picasso's Restless Hands

At Mass Art I do all the things expected of art students in the sixties. I am sitting with my fellow students downing 10-cent glasses of beer at the local saloon and arguing whether an ink blob could be called a hand, or perhaps even art.

I read that Picasso had restless hands. In a Paris bistro he molded bread into little figures, held unusual objects at an angle then changed the angle, and made a design on his plate from the bones of a fish that he just ate. He would turn something into something else and make it his own.

During lunch in a Harvard Square restaurant, in January of 2013

Leo, a former classmate described me when I was an art student. “You were aloof to a system that you disagreed with and wrote poetry that none of us understood, but we refrained from telling you, out of the fear of losing your friendship. You were on your own trip, with your own interests, and nurtured those directives. You wandered the corridors rather than attend classes. Didn’t like being told what to do and were desire driven. Poetry seemed to be the answer to the world’s problems and you were hungry for a hidden knowledge.” Leo added, “If we looked at what you’ve done all your life to this point and we saw it back then, none of us would be surprised. You know, you are the only Muslim person I have ever met.” What a revelation this was to me. An intelligent seventy-year-old man living in a cosmopolitan city in the United States, had never met a Muslim. It is no wonder that the U.S. doesn’t understand how to handle its Middle East policy.

I was guided in a direction beyond my control for my entire life. I was seeking something, and knew there was something different than what was presented to me, yet I was fastened to the world.

Reading Gurdjieff

Art school brought out strange traits in us boys. In life drawing class a beautiful nude model sits on a high stool in the center of the room, and we would look past her to catch a glimpse of what was beneath the skirt of the girl sitting across from us in the studio. After all we are explorers. Explorers of art, the culture, sports, women, spirituality, mind expanding drugs, anything that could give us some clue as to who we are and why we are here. With what seemed like great seriousness, we sought some purpose to our lives. We shunned television, and had no dreams of laptop computers or phones that fit into your pocket. I spend long hours in my room painting or reading *All and Everything*, by G.I. Gur-

djieff. Then, at a certain moment I realized that I could not change the world, but that I could change myself, and at that point I started to look at things differently. So, it didn't matter anymore on a grand global scale what was happening. What is important is the realm of my being and how that related to the world outside of me as well as the one inside of me. The *zahir* and the *batin*, the hidden and the revealed.

On Tuesdays I cut classes and either drive or take the bus to New York, and make my way to the Lexington Avenue loft to listen as Willem Nyland talks about Gurdjieff, consciousness, and how to work on oneself to become a harmonious man. I never worried about the classes I missed, since one of those who made the trip was my painting instructor, George Lockwood. Others who often went along were the photographers Paul Caponigro, Marie Cosindas and a teenage boy, the nephew of Montgomery Clift, the actor, whose name was Bill, who years later moved to New Mexico, and photographed Factory Butte in such a way that it made you dream. After the "meeting" we made the five-hour drive back to Boston, arriving in the early hours of the morning, but before dawn. Although I was a few years older than Bill Clift, I couldn't have been more than twenty.

My first real girlfriend, or adult relationship, came at this time. Suzanne had been married briefly, so she was versed in certain physical arts that I had until then only imagined. Her long hair was the color of oats and she always had a sweet smell. Her apartment in Greenwich village was small, and decorated with hand-crafts that she did in her spare time. We were together for several months, going to the Gurdjieff meetings and working on Mr. Nyland's land in Brewster on the weekends. She was a bit promiscuous so it came as no surprise that she left me for an older fellow in the group who was a carpenter. She left him also, and the last I heard of her she had become a "Weatherman," involved with the terrorist group that was making explosive devices on Eleventh

street and wanted to sabotage the system. They began as the May 2nd Movement, then merged with the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) a faction of which became the “Weathermen,” taking their name from a Bob Dylan song.

“Keep a clean nose, watch the plain clothes,

You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.”

I Wanna Be Like Mike

In college I played some basketball and once went to a game with a 104-degree fever and scored 32 points. My press pass allowed me free entry to the Boston Garden where I viewed Boston Celtics games, sometimes from the press box with the Record-American’s sports reporter Bill McSweeney, who was my friend and mentor. He had been a hero in the Korean War, and was now a major in the Army Reserves. Just before I was to be drafted, I enlisted in the Reserves during my last year at the Massachusetts College of Art.

The basketball heroes of my day were Bob Cousy, Bill Sharman and Bill Russell, the nemesis of Wilt “The Stilt” Chamberlain, one of the great centers of the game. I saw George Mikan play for the Minneapolis Lakers, before the twenty-four second rule was introduced to force the game to go faster. At nearly seven feet tall he towered above the other players. He stretched his long arms upward and almost without his feet leaving the ground, dropped the ball into the basket. Those were the basketball days where the running was even-paced, and jumping was rare.

This was before the Chicago Bull’s Michael Jordan changed everyone’s perception of the sport. Jordan would soar into the air like a black angel floating toward the basket, and dunk the ball one-handed into the net from an altitude other players could never reach.

We admired the talents of our sports celebrities and forgave their indiscretions. They gambled, cajoled, were infected by HIV, bragged about their numerous female conquests, until finally we lost our admiration of them as role models for our sons. Heroes are hard to come by.

Untimely Death

My girlfriend in art school was an umber-haired local beauty queen. Years later she had married someone else, had two kids and was pregnant with a third, when she climbed a water tower in Revere clutching one infant and leapt. The results of an alcoholic father, an acquiescing mother, and rarely hearing a soft word in the family. The seeds of unhappiness are generally planted early in life. I read it in the Boston Globe while visiting my sister in Randolph.

The Birth Of A Leopard

Ilearned to draw and paint. The two art scholarships, to the weekend program at Mass Art and the weekday program at the Museum School that I was awarded in high school seemed to be paying off. My immigrant parents would have liked me to choose law or medicine as a profession, but I stayed with art, and fifty years later I'm still in that game.

It is 1958. I am sitting on a wooden chair in the Saturday morning art class at Mass Art. Light enters the room from the large glass windows on the Longwood Avenue side of the building. I am painting a watercolor of a leopard; concentrating on the ink, as it becomes black spots on the leopard's yellow body. I am present at the birth of the leopard.

Roxbury Moments

Blessings come in various disguises. In high school I was a decent basketball player and one of a few white boys on a mostly black team. Contrary to the belief of some, I could jump and had a decent jump shot, but being skinny as a stick I lacked stamina on the court. I sat on the bench watching my teammates glide over the slick wooden floor like gazelles. Those were the years when I first learned about jazz, smoking dope and gambling. I played basketball with Chico. We are hanging out on a Dorchester street corner with other friends, watching our teenage lives drift past us like a river gone sour. Eddie's older brother Charlie is in the mob and we all look up to him. Late at night he shows up at the corner in \$50 shoes and manicured fingernails, and treats the lot of us to coffee and sandwiches at the G&G delicatessen on Morton Street in Dorchester. One day Charlie is found shoved in the trunk of his car with his genitals stuffed in his mouth, a variation of the Colombian necktie, where an incision is made in the throat and the tongue pulled through. This is a method that wise guys use for squealers, and to deter others from talking out of turn. Our admiration begins to wane.

We spend our youth "holding up the corner," debating the merits of the Boston Red Sox over the New York Yankees, and betting on which team would win. Our bets now included the Boston Celtics as we took the points or gave them, hoping our choice would be correct. The bookmaker took the vigorish, a piece of the action.

Monty, we called him that because his parents moved to Boston from Montana, was backing bets as a young bookie while still a teenager. His destiny seemed to be written. He had the uncanny talent of looking at a dollar bill for just a few seconds and repeating the serial number backwards. He could reel off the names of the presidents whose engravings appeared on all the bills. Monty

would close his eyes, as if he saw these people in his head, and sing out, “George Washington, one dollar bill, Thomas Jefferson, the two, Abraham Lincoln, the fiver, Alexander Hamilton, on the ten, Andrew Jackson, the twenty, Ulysses S. Grant, the fifty, a non-president Benjamin Franklin, the one hundred dollar bill (we had seen all these bills but never the remaining ones), William McKinley, the five hundred, Grover Cleveland, the only president to occupy the office twice but not in succession, the thousand dollar bill, James Madison, the five thousand dollar bill and Salmon Chase, the ten thousand dollar bill.” I don’t think they print anything larger than a hundred today and I don’t know anyone who has pocketed the others. Hanging on the corner with Monty was like entering a house with six doors.

Our crew has two corners. One in Roxbury and the other in Dorchester and each has its special flavor and attitude.

It is dusk. We are all hanging at the corner in front of Fast Eddie Dean’s Pizza joint when Sheryl, blonde and beautiful (she was the dream of us all), but Chico’s girlfriend, steps out of a car her dad was driving, and is sent flying twenty feet in the air, landing on the pavement, after being struck by a speeding Ford driven by a lame school teacher at dusk. We watch her lifeless body lifted onto a stretcher, later to be pronounced Dead On Arrival at Boston City Hospital.

The corner has its stories. Albie Farber is 6’6” and built like a line backer for the Cleveland Browns. He is as gentle as he is huge. They beg him to play football for the high school team but he keeps refusing out of fear of injuring someone. He knew his own strength. The coaches finally get their way and Albie suits up for his one and only game for Roxbury Memorial High. In the first play he sends three members of the opposing team to the hospital. That ends his high school football career. He simply quit.

Albie has another talent. Diagonally across from Fast Eddie’s store is an old three-story wooden house. Albie takes a copper

penny with President Abraham Lincoln's image engraved on it, balances it on his thumb and index finger, and with a flick of his wrist sends it soaring to the rooftop of the wooden house. I am not certain whether it is uncanny strength, magic, or a miracle. I have often wondered what happened to this decent giant of my youth.

Eddie Dean was already a broken man when he opened the Pizza joint on the corner of Humboldt Avenue in Roxbury. We called him Fast Eddie, a bit derogatory, in memory of the fastball he never could hurl when he pitched in the Minor League for the Philadelphia Phillies franchise. Now he was slinging pizza dough in the air and overseeing the three pinball machines tucked into the far corner of the store. In those days the pinball machines were a form of gambling. If you mounted a certain number of points, the house (Eddie) had to pay you a sum of money. The more points amassed, the more cash received. It wasn't easy, and we spent hours of the life we didn't know was precious, cheering our friends to nudge the machine just a little to the left or right to gain extra points without tilting it and crashing the game. Of course Eddie could whip a fastball harder than any of us, but he just couldn't make it in the Big Leagues. Sometimes one of us would don a catcher's mitt and he would slide a few quick ones straight into the pocket right there on the street amidst the traffic.

As weak a pitcher as Eddie was, that was how good Marty Garber was at making that baseball jump with speed as it left his right arm and took the quick journey to leather. Marty was a few years older than we were and a lot bigger. At 6'4" with a body like a boxer and a heart of gold he was destined for the Majors and stardom. The Cubs signed him one day out of high school and he went straight to the Class A League.

Someone said that in an exhibition game Marty struck out Ted Williams, the Red Sox star hitter who was the last ballplayer to reach a batting percentage of .406, and that was back in 1941.

Williams took a hiatus from baseball to become a fighter pilot in the Korean War. The day he returned to Fenway Park I was in the stands just behind the Red Sox dugout, when Ted emerged on the dugout steps. The news cameras flashed, and there I was in the next day's sports page of the Boston Herald Traveler, right behind one of the greatest hitters in baseball history, and the nemesis of Yankee slugger Joltin' Joe DiMaggio, who later married screen actress Marilyn Monroe. Ted had no idea at that moment about "Cryonic Suspension" or fifty years later when he died on July 5th, 2002 that his family would squabble about dipping his lifeless body in a tank of liquid nitrogen. But that is just what happened. "The Splendid Splinter," as he was known to all of baseball, became a pendulous form frozen in time, in a state of neuroseparation. His head was severed from his body and placed in a steel can filled with liquid nitrogen. Even after death one's fate is not always one's own.

We followed Marty's progress with news from his brother. About six months went by and Marty's fastball hopped past incredulous batters, and his curve danced around bewildered opponents, and the pen was dipped into Major League contract ink when we heard the news.

It happened somewhere in the South. Marty was pitching a no-hitter. It was the eighth inning when a minatory, drunken fanatic leapt from the stands, raced to the pitcher's mound, and slashed Marty's neck and arm with a razor-sharp Buck knife. He recovered from the attack but his career faded, the Major League contract ink dried out, and Marty never grasped the red stitching and horsehide again.

Hard Time

I went on to art school and left the corner for other friends. Years later I read in a book on the Boston Irish Mafia that Chico had become one of the smartest sports bookies in New England, had amassed millions in cash, which he secreted in a number of safe deposit boxes, and was continually plagued by both the FBI and mobsters, until he died of the Big C. Jimmy, another street corner friend, who had spent some “hard time,” finally gave it up and went into the witness protection plan, emerging occasionally to attend the wedding of one of his children.

Cub Reporter

While at art school I worked for the Boston Record-American as a copy boy and later as a cub reporter. Joel Ostroff, one of my pals at Roxbury Memorial High had an in with the paper because his father was one of the photographers. These were the days of speed graphic cameras and flashbulbs that popped. One day one of the copy boys didn't show up and Joel called to ask if I was interested. It turned into a job and I stayed with it through my art school years. As a copy boy I ran errands, worked the wire machines linked to the Associated Press and the United Press International, hung out with photographers and reporters, and learned how to read metal type upside down while the pages were being composed.

The city room was filled with rows of metal desks that were occupied by unshaven, green visored men, a Camel cigarette dangling from the lower lip, shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow, pecking, with their index fingers, at lettered keys on black Monarch typewriters that sang out with the sound of a bell at the end of every sentence.

I stayed at the newspaper during my high school and art school

years. Bill McSweeney was the leading sports reporter for the Record-American. Bill was a soft spoken, bespectacled, adept writer who could bang out a story on his black Monarch with the speed of a racer. He became my mentor when I was still a teenager and has been a friend for over half a century. His good humor, fairness, talent and consideration of others was a guidance in my youth and a model in my maturity. He went on to become an advisor to President Lyndon Johnson and then the President of Occidental Petroleum International.

Courtroom Artist

The editor learned I could draw, and assigned me to cover the Willem Van Rie murder trial as a courtroom artist. Van Rie was a handsome Dutch ship captain of the “Utrecht,” who was accused of hurling a woman into the sea after an argument. He had flaxen hair and a mild composure that appealed to the jury. Because the ship was from Holland the story got international attention.

I attended the trial every day at Suffolk Superior Court in Boston and several of my drawings depicting the ongoing court procedures appeared in editions of the Boston Record-American. Insufficient evidence, the body was never fished out of the ocean, leaned the jury to allow the sea captain to fly back to Holland.

All And Everything

I attended class in the daytime and worked the Saturday night “lobster shift” and weekends as a reporter. In the police cruising car at night I rode with a seasoned reporter and met gangsters, celebrities, saw jumpers fished out of the Mystic River with ten-terhooks, met John F. Kennedy when he was a young and lanky senator, talked to Bob Cousy in the Celtics dressing room, listened

to plangent music, ate insalubrious food, became a voracious reader, read *All and Everything* by G.I. Gurdjieff, entered a world of comparative religion, became George Lockwood's apprentice in his lithography workshop located at the end of Public Alley Number 10 in downtown Boston, met Willem Nyland, a profound disciple of a great mystic, who became my spiritual teacher, and the photographer Walter Chappell who became my friend and mentor, and experienced many other things which have slipped out of memory and slid down the cracks of forgetfulness. It was an unusual college education.

November 22, 1963

The White House in Washington has had a resident psychic since the presidency of Abraham Lincoln.

Vincent Ragone had the gift of being able to see incidents that others could not. He was clean cut, in his mid-thirties, and was already advising Washington. John Fitzgerald Kennedy was the focal point of a parade in Boston just before the 1960 presidential election. Vincent Ragone was seated in the VIP area alongside the Governor of Massachusetts and the Mayor of Boston.

Kennedy stopped and greeted the VIPs. He shook hands with Vincent Ragone. Ragone smiled and greeted him as "Mr. President."

"Not yet," said Kennedy.

"I see it. You will win by a small margin."

That is what happened and Vincent Ragone was invited into the White House as a psychic advisor.

Two years later he telephoned Jackie Kennedy. "The president shouldn't go to Dallas. I've seen a black screen in Dallas." Jackie told her husband.

"I am the president. I must follow my destiny." He went, much

the same as President Abraham Lincoln went to the Ford's Theatre, in April of 1865, where he was assassinated.

The next day, November 22, 1963, a bullet smashed into the president's skull while he rode in an open car in front of the Texas School Book Depository. Parts of his brain splattered from his head onto his wife's lap. Lee Harvey Oswald had pulled the trigger and within days was himself shot dead by Jack Ruby, a known gangster. I watched the first live murder on television. To this day there are questions and no clear answers.

It was the middle of a brisk autumn day. I was in a Boston restaurant when I heard the news about JFK. My food became tasteless, and my body was stunned. The pit of my stomach felt like the aftermath of a well-placed punch. The world was about to change.

The Destiny of JFK

I am in art school, working the night shift and weekends at the Boston Record-American. Five editions of the tabloid printed daily in order to report the sports and horse racing results.

John F. Kennedy is elected as the Democratic nominee for President of the United States in 1960. He is a Boston boy from a wealthy family but was born on Beale St. in Brookline in a simple wooden one-family home two hundred yards from where I live.

The nominee was returning home. I am assigned as one of the reporters covering the homecoming speech. Logan Airport is packed with well-wishers. They are anxious to hear Kennedy's tarmac speech.

I am on the tarmac in a press car with a photographer and a radio connected to the city desk. I am young, with little experience under my belt, or anywhere else. The huge crowd of Irish, Italian, Catholic, and Jewish faces in the crowd dismay me. JFK is their hero and they want him in Washington. He has become the great

hope of the people.

It is an impenetrable crowd. How would I get close to the president-elect? I wouldn't. Something in me changed course and I deduce that in some nearby building members of the Kennedy clan would be waiting for embraces.

I discover his mother Rose Kennedy, a sister and cousins seated in a VIP room. I enter.

"An auspicious moment for the family and the country. Tell me how you feel. Did you expect this victory? A new page in your already crowded family album."

The answers flow and I scribble in my reporter's notebook as fast as they speak while the photographer snaps some images. I thank them and rush to the press car; phone in the story that is printed and on the streets before Kennedy's plane lands.

C. Edward Holland, a thin, distinguished, erudite man, whose grey hair is slicked back, is the editor-in-chief of the Boston Daily Record. When I return from Logan Airport to the city room, he walks me around its periphery with his arm around my shoulder. Typewriter keys are clacking and bells are ringing. Re-write men are composing stories. The continuous sound of the Associated Press and United Press International teletype machines join in the symphony of the newspaper city room.

"Your actions today were professional. When you graduate I welcome you as a staff reporter. But as a friend I advise you to stay in the art world."

He points out the dun faces of reporters and rewrite men perched before black Monarch typewriters. "The city desk is as far as you could go," said Holland. "You are destined for more. But if you decide on being a reporter after you graduate, the job is yours."

Obituary Of An Inanimate Object

Back in 1975, the Boston Globe published an obituary that indicated the beginning of a change in communications as powerful as the invention of moveable type by Gutenberg in 1450.

Typewriter Era Comes to End, Remembered and Mourned

The Smith Corona Corp., the last major U.S. typewriter manufacturer, has filed for bankruptcy.

Its clatter was the voice of the newspaper office at deadline, the typing pool at high noon and the dormitory at midnight. It was the doorway to the computer.

The typewriter was democratic. Mark Twain wrote on it. So did your older sister. If you aspired to be a writer, you took your first draft and, in a phrase that is completely meaningless today, put it through the typewriter one more time. It was also the medium of the ransom note and the anonymous threat.

The computer, with its discs and chips and operating systems and other gizmos, is mysterious and inaccessible. The typewriter had visible bolts and keys, and a ribbon and springs. The ink got on your fingers when the keys jammed, the bell sounded at the end of each line. All this was a reminder that the work of the writer is a craft, not unlike the work of the joiner and the carpenter and the watchmaker.

Embracing Reality

Isaw Vincent Ragone in his nondescript apartment outside of Manhattan several times. Once I had a ticket to California in the inside pocket of my jacket. "You are travelling West," he remarked before I could even sit down.

Another time he advised me where to dig a well and how far down

to go before we would strike water on a country property I had purchased in upstate New York.

Probably the most important meeting I had with this uncanny visionary was when my first wife Barbara gave her appointment to me. We had been having a rough time in our marriage but couldn't let go of one another. Vincent convinced me that the work we had to do together was over, and it was now time to release one another and move on. Somehow this conversation and his gentle demeanor reached me, and I realized that I could not cling to illusions but needed to embrace reality. Barbara and I have remained close friends for the nearly forty years since that day. Sometimes we marry women who should be our sisters rather than our wives.

Vincent slept little and at night went to children's hospitals to work and meditate on cancer kids as they slept. At the same time he attempted to balance the troubles within himself.

Public Alley Number 10

Behind Boston Police Headquarters on Boylston Street was Public Alley Number 10. George Lockwood, a young peripatetic artist, whose long silver hair fell over his right eye, opened "Impressions," a lithographic workshop for artists on the second floor of one of the loft buildings. Many of the local artists created lithographic editions of their work in this space. Public Alley Number 10 had a cleaner smell than the trafficked Boylston Street, and was flanked by loft buildings inhabited by artists and writers. You could hear the bells of the firehouse down the street. A few melancholy trees gave off the smell of green, and in winter a skin of snow covered the alley. Our footprints were evidence that we had been there.

Lockwood taught me painting at the Massachusetts College of

Art. The day I met him I knew he was different and would play an important role in my spiritual life. I was determined to be his apprentice at "Impressions." When summer edged out the school year Lockwood asked if I was still interested.

"More than ever."

Jim Forte, a sensitive music composer who ate nothing that had a face, and was a follower of a Hindu master, was the other apprentice at the workshop. We became fast friends and shared ideas about philosophy and meditation.

We were having coffee in a Harvard Square café in Cambridge one night when Jim suggested he call his friend Eduard and ask if we could visit. I had heard about Eduard, who had an ability to read one's past and see the color of auras that surround the body. I was interested. Eduard served us coffee in a dimly lit room decorated with oriental furniture and carpets. Jim and I sat opposite him. After greetings and introductions Eduard faced me and said, "Your grandfather worked with animals and in later life he was blind." I could not verify either comment as my father's father died when I was two years old. Eduard continued, "Your mother's sister had no children, everyone thought she was barren but it was the inability of her husband."

Eduard soon turned to Jim and made some comments about his life. The evening had worn on; we thanked Eduard and entered the dark Boston night.

The next day I asked my father about the profession of his father.

"He was a tanner, he worked with the skins of animals."

"In his old age did he have trouble with his sight?"

"Yes, actually in his last years he became blind."

I asked my mother why my aunt never had children. "She wanted a child, but it seemed that her husband was not capable." Eduard was right regarding all his comments.

The Man Who Ate Flowers

Sarah was a tall gray-haired woman in her sixties who stood like a sapling. In my art school days I thought that was old. I met her through the Lockwoods. She had been a vegetarian for over forty years. “Isn’t that difficult?” She looked at me through peaceful blue eyes and said, “Nothing is difficult if you believe it is right.” She taught me a meditation and I would occasionally visit her when I needed calm and peaceful moments in my life.

During one of these visits Sarah told me of a sage she knew who wrote poems about food and only ate flowers. The smell of freshly cut apples on the kitchen table filled the room.

She said that the world could be rebuilt from the Names of God, then added, “If you have the Cloak of Faith, and do not use it, it becomes like a raincoat in the closet on a rainy day.”

Chappaquiddick

George and his wife Margo, a poet, are vegetarians and follow the path of Ruhani Satsang, a spiritual group based in India, and led by the renowned Indian guru Kirpal Singh, who I met in Boston during his world tour in 1963. The Lockwoods will summer on Chappaquiddick, a small island off Martha’s Vineyard on the tail of Massachusetts, later made famous when, on July 18, 1969, Mary Jo Kopechne, a twenty-nine year old teacher and political campaign specialist, drowns in a car driven into the ocean by U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy. He escapes and swims away from the underwater scene, leaving her behind.

Before leaving for the summer, Margo asks me to return Kenneth Walker’s *Venture With Ideas*, to the library. I begin reading it on the streetcar home and finish in two days. I am filled with questions, and am anxious to see the tree whose fruit I can shake down.

Who is the mysterious G. in the book, and what are the hidden teachings he gave in London to the likes of C.S. Nott, A.R. Orage and other literary and artistic figures?

I am given P.D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*. A more tedious read, but now I know of Gurdjieff and *All and Everything*, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*. A door is opening.

That summer I spend a week with George and Margo in their rented Chappaquiddick cottage. There is no electricity. Fields of wildflowers, reeds, and a variety of tall grasses surround the house. It smells like the sea. We eat vegetables, drink herbal teas, read, sleep, talk of spiritual matters, and George and I make lots of drawings. I discover a large dead bird among the grass, and make a sketch that later becomes a lithograph drawn on stone. Among the flowers of sobriety, George and I became as close as honeysuckle to a fence post.

I am studying drawing and painting with George Lockwood, calligraphy and typography, anatomy and perspective drawing. The doors of my life in art are opening. There are spiritual talks with some of my art teachers, but it is George Lockwood who becomes my guide into a sacred world, where I still travel over smooth and rocky trails. George moved from Boston to the countryside in Pembroke, Massachusetts in 1968 and died of a heart attack a year later at the age of 40. Perhaps his work here was done.

Willem Nyland's Visit

A few weeks into the autumn that followed the Chappaquiddick summer George told me a man was arriving from New York to talk about the ideas of Gurdjieff. I am invited to be among the small circle of listeners that include George and Margo, the photographers Paul Caponigro, and Marie Cosindas, the artist Nina Bloom and the photographer Walter Chappell, who arrives