

Both Definitions of *Save* · Albert Goldbarth

1. *Yiddish*

*Hand me a relic, I'll treat it up right.
Grandma, Grandma, rub it in schmaltz.
Yes hand me a relic, I'll treat it up right.
Anubis, pack it in natron salts.*

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Another nostalgic vignette with a grandmother canning—in this case, Nettie. It's 1960. I'm twelve. She has one year to live. You'd never guess it: her hair done up in a durable Old World bun, her hands in their finicky repetitions. Everything's sure and fluid; the gnarls and florets she's pickling in viscous brine are one with the movement that lifts and deposits them. A garnet peel of beet, an inbunched clump of cauliflower, slices, slices: cameos and medallions. She incorporates a flicked taste into her rhythm.

She hums some mouthful Old World mutter-of-a-song, and this scene is so seamlessly one piece that, finally, these twisted and whiskery vegetable nibbles can't be told apart from, *are*, the Yiddish on her tongue.

It takes her back. I'm only twelve, and maybe not the sharpest twelve at that, but I can see the wings and gutturals of her song reverse the current, take that kitchen and its passenger and soften all of their borders by fifty-some years. She touches the locket around her neck—a curl of his hair inside. She might be waiting to hear him fumble open the door, it's evening, he's home from a twelve-hour hell-day of ghetto peddling, eager to rest in her flesh . . .

I know: this has an overlush and suspect glow, I can't help it. William Kittredge says that “back deep in the misty past there is this land inhabited by dreams and passions, and you love it . . . you want it to be all perfection, bronzed in your memory like baby shoes.” Canned. Sugary and canned. That's nostalgia—a marmalade.

Was she quarrelsome, ever? Did she meddle? Oh yes. Could she whine? Was she stubborn? Intuitively did she know how to slip it between the ribs and twist, and then coo guilefully for forgiveness? Of course.

But time has saved a saying from the rubble of her people: *Alleh kalles zaynen sheyn, alleh meyssim zaynen frum.* — All brides are beautiful, all the dead are holy.

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Donkey pizzle! he thinks at his rival, *worm turd!* Then he burbles his heavy lips in frustration. Oh he wants this drawing by Seghers, really just a sketch not even the size of a varnish rag, but done by one of the great impassioned masters of Dutch art (now, alas, discredited in an age of taste for daintier fare than Seghers of the wild, winding lines . . .). “One hundred florins.”

“One hundred and ten.” Some fey young bidder, in a beaver-collared suit of bottle green, is baiting him higher by tens, and more for a lazy afternoon’s game than for any understanding of the life behind the drawing. That’s the prickle of it: this fellow would rather pay florins than homage.

So, “One hundred and—” Rembrandt is about to say “twenty” but why continue dancing stupid little two-step boxes with this irksome heifer? He’s brought two hundred florins in his purse. The only other bidder had dropped out at eighty. “One hundred and sixty florins.”

There’s that half-a-breath of stillness in the warehouse. Clearly Beaver Collar is done; he fingers a wiffley dismissive gesture through the air in front of his nose, as if to say he’ll be competitive, yes, but not *foolish* . . . “Well bid,” the auctioneer sings on the brink of disbelief, “well bid by master Rembrandt van Rijn of the most discerning eye . . .” and then a maundering trail of oilier compliments, as if in fear the sale might otherwise never become official.

But Rembrandt has shut off his ears. He isn’t in the warehouse, and the warehouse isn’t in Amsterdam or anywhere on God’s Earth. There’s just this one aspatial burning bridge of vision between his eyes and the drawing, he owns it, he can enter it, he could wander its charcoal lanes all day, could stretch his hand and rest it on a charcoal railing Seghers sketched, and when he lifted it off, he’d see his whole palm colored charcoal . . .

In the essay “On Collecting,” Jed Perl admits and details “the grubbiness of the collector’s life. Breakage, exaggerated or inaccurate descriptions, boredom, petty betrayals, overspending, regret,” and of course “the terms of the marketplace.”

But he also reports a small talk by Sam Wagstaff (“probably the most interesting photography collector in America”), a talk that was “a deeply serious defense of collecting, a kind of ethics of collecting. Collectors, Wagstaff argued, often labor to preserve aspects of the past—ephemeral publications, marginal works of art—when these things are headed for the trash bin, overlooked by the traditional custodians of culture . . . Wagstaff’s collector was a kind of odd man out, conservationist of the man-made past, and Wagstaff’s remarks took a trajectory that made collecting seem a strangely pure, clean pursuit.”

I’m not claiming this sufficiently explains each miniscule classified ad in an antiques newsletter’s swatch of back pages: someone’s seeking “Nazi daggers & other SS paraphernalia,” someone (I’m not inventing this) is in need of “old rubber enema bags w/nozzle, for private collection,” someone: “PAYING TOP DOLLAR FOR 1920’s LADIES IRON HAIR CRIMPERS!!!”

But who *wouldn’t* care to dawdle in the lavishdom of that five-story rosebrick house on Sint Antoniebreestraat? Charles L. Mee, Jr., gives a sense of the wonderful jumble amassed by the later 1630s, worth quoting in full:

“Among many other things he had a little painting of a pastry cook by Adriaen Brouwer, a still life of food by Brouwer, a candlelight scene by Lievens, a moonlight scene by Lievens, a raising of Lazarus by Lievens, a hermit by Lievens, a plaster cast of two naked children, a landscape by Hercules Seghers, some small houses by Seghers, a wooded landscape by Seghers, a Tobias by Pieter Lastman, a small ox by Lastman, a portrait head by the great Raphael of Urbino, a mirror in an ebony frame, a marble wine-cooling bucket, a walnut table, a copper kettle, an embroidered tablecloth, an oak stand, some rare Venetian glass, a Chinese bowl filled with minerals, a small backgammon board, a large lump of white coral, an East Indian basket, a bird of paradise, a marble ink stand, a bin filled with thirty-three antique hand weapons and wind instruments, a bin of sixty Indian hand weapons, arrows, javelins and bows, a bin of thirteen bamboo wind instruments, a harp, a Turkish bow, seventeen hands and arms cast from life, a collection of antlers, four crossbows and footbows, five antique helmets and shields, a satyr’s head with horns, a large sea plant, seven stringed instruments, a giant’s head (a giant’s head?), skins of both a lion and a lioness, a painting by Raphael, a book of prints by Lucas van

Leyden, ‘the precious book’ by Andrea Mantegna, a book of prints by the elder Brueghel, a book of prints by Raphael, a book of prints by Tempesta, a book of prints by Cranach, a book with almost all the work of Titian, a book of portraits by Rubens and others, a book full of the work of Michelangelo, a book of erotica by Raphael and others, a book of Roman architecture, baskets full of prints by Rubens, Jacob Jordaens and Titian, a book of woodcuts by Alfred Dürer, a painting by Frans Hals, a pistol, an ornamented iron shield, a cabinet full of medals, a Turkish powder horn, a collection of shells, another of coral, forty-seven specimens of land and sea animals, a Moor’s head cast from life, an East Indian sewing box, several walking sticks . . .”

Now he jingles the forty florins left in his purse, and won’t head home without the sea monster cleverly sewn together from the taxidermied carcasses of a monkey and a shark.

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The question isn’t one of ownership, but stewardship—enabling separate objects, maybe even separate *moments*, to travel inviolate for a stretch, untouched by Time.

Isn’t that my attempt? I’m twelve: I’m sprawled in the livingroom, forcing my gaze from a comic book page to watch her flurry of easy expertise at the lineup of Mason jars, half-listening to the Yiddish warble under her breath.

And: I’m forty-two, I’m looking and I’m listening back at the same.

Between those poles-of-me, a charge of preservative arcs, in which I hold her, soak her fully in it, make of her a collected thing.

The size of a saint on a dashboard: Grandma Nettie Pickling in Kitchen-light.

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Held static by these various amperes and saccharines, historicized, that scene reoccurs unchanged when I want, its details clear through thirty years of episodes that otherwise grow astigmatically jagged or erode at their edges grain by grain.

The comic book is the current *Green Lantern* (number 3, December 1960; he was my favorite superhero then, with his “power ring” and his “emerald oath”: I’ll tell you about him later).

Her song is a bittersweet undulation, de-DAH, de-DAH, de-de-de-

DAH, oi-YOY, the last a plaintive phrase stretched thin to nearly breaking: *mine liebe, mine liebe*, my love, my love. The light is the light of late afternoon, and it denses itself in tufts of her hair that have unsprung from the bun as if a blossoming of memories are escaping her head, on fire.

In the basement below us, my father, her son, is “doing the books,” as he called it, sitting hopelessly over a ledger of accounts that, opened, seemed to me to be about the size of a refrigerator, and just as cold: an oblong you could enter and have the door lock on you. Once a month, that happens to my father. He goes to take a quick look at the rent and grocery holding, and we need to drag him out hours later, back into the land of the human.

The basement is where we’ve stored ill-fitting clothes and miscellaneous linens, where the dog pouts overnight, with his bowls of liverish mush and water, with his “pissy post” surrounded by fanned-out newspaper. Here, in a corner, my father positioned a desk and a thrift shop pea-green file cabinet. This is where he comes to corrugate his forehead over the angst of household expenditure.

I know it doesn’t sound pretty but, if I think of its loss, a sticky affection sludges through my system. I love the aisles in old-fashioned office supply shops. Here, I’ll find similar ledgers; when I lightly run my fingers over the deep-imprinted mottling of their fake black leather covers, or when I look at the stacks of spools of paper tape of the kind he’d use in his clunker Neolithic “adding machine,” punching numbers clumsily in with his forefinger, I can feel the profound emotion—the raw, familial *caring*—that kept him in place at that desk until the job was done. And I can’t help but feel, gawking through some sleek new CompuCenter with its blipping “electronic money management programming/entertainment monitors” ready to forcibly cure me of a barbaric dependence on paper clips or a sentimental attachment to those docile flocks of “jumbo” erasers the pink of bubble gum . . . I can’t help fear, luddite me, that replacing the world of Frieda Garfunkle’s Paper Goods & Office Notions with these *très* trim temples of hi-tech engineering means replacing, too, the simple generousities and ritual perseverance with which he safely saw our house through choppy fiscal waters, down there with the tape of the adding machine unspooling entry by entry into the night like a captain’s log.

It’s the same willful application of love I’ll see through the cracked-open bathroom door when he’s testing her pee for diabetes, dropping the tablet

into that richly-amber vial and waiting for its alchemical play of color change—this, twice a week. Or helping her with her antiquated button-hook shoes. (Could she be belligerent, *noodg, noodg, noodg?*—oh yes.) Or helping her, long past the days of her need for vanity, unwrap the equally-antiquated iron hair crimper, heating it, curling the last sad skimplets of gray. I remember the smell of singed hair floating over her folding-bed.

Amol iz geven un haynt iz nito.—Once it was; today, no more.

2. *The Theory of Hawthorne's Notebooks*

“Something like this happens, it’s crazy—then *everything’s* crazy.”

I’m silent at my end of the 750 miles; the phone line fills with pinprick crackles.

Craig tries clarifying his grief: “I mean, we were together *fifteen years*,” and he goes on (and on—I’m paying) to talk about missing the sharing, or helping Gaylene pack up for the move to her own apartment, “I still talk to her, do you know that?—to an empty space that follows me around.” The day before, I’d phoned Gaylene. She’d said, “It hurts inside, like twigs are snapping all of the time. I’ll start some smart rejoinder at a conference, and: *snap*, and then I’m just staring ahead with waterfall eyes like a loony-toon.” I’ve known them for ten of those fifteen years, two people as snugly hinged as the wings of a diptych. Now this. It *is* crazy.

“Then,” he says, “dividing up the collections!” These were the signs of their love, toy *taj mahals* by which their hearts’ ineffable whoopdedo was made visible.

Miniature books (the giantmost four-postage-stamps size), each scouted out indefatigably with a strictness of passion that matched the passion that fashioned those thumbnail marbled endpapers. 1920s and ’30s Mexican handcarved carousel horses (seven, madly champing along one wall of their second-story apartment); they were chanced-on in the early days when even pinchpenny graduate students might corral these eternally fiery-maned lime and coral beauties. And (convened beneath the Big Top patiently over a decade of crosscountry hunting) one entire set of inchling Schoenhut circus figurines from three generations ago, not only the clowns, the trapezists, and dancing bears, etc., but the tents, the banners, the cages and feed troughs, the comet-painted center ring—the giraffe and the zebu, *everything*.

“Albert, listen”—I’ve called Craig up from a roadside telephone booth in the middle of Nowhere, Oklahoma: of course I’m going to listen—“we’re nearly forty, even now we care about each other’s feelings, we’re civilized human beings, and there we were at four in the morning, back in the alley, howling the living piss out of our systems, fighting over the ringmaster. Over the goddam three-inch ringmaster.

“Gaylene was going to punch me one, I could read it in her musculature, but halfway there she turned it into the crack of an invisible whip, see?—*she* was the ringmaster, I was down on my knees in the glass and the burger wrappers, I was an animal being tamed, and then *I* was the ringmaster, she was on her back . . . The only saving grace is, nobody called the police. It’s *crazy*.”

These are the people whose friends consult them regularly for reasoned advice. This is the couple that sleeps like spoons.

“Last night . . . I thought if only I could find *some* sensible thing to hold to, *anything*. So I looked in the newspaper.” Over the roll of dustbowl wind, I hear the soft rattle of *Daily Clarion* pages, the clearing of stagey phlegm.

“‘In London, a pedestrian was killed last night when an unknown assailant threw a turnip at him from a passing car. Also hospitalized was a woman who suffered severe stomach injuries after being hit by a cabbage. London police’—blah blah blah.”

Page-turn. “Stamford, Connecticut. ‘Tattoo artist Spider Webb has opened a Bra Museum, exhibiting *100 Years of Brassieres*, including a tin-foil bra, a Plexiglas bra, and a cockroach bra.’ Then he’s quoted.”

Page-turn. Voice is going watery now. “‘A 21-year-old Phoenix woman was sentenced to jail for leaving her 18-month-old daughter locked in a closet for eight days, when’ *get this*” (his voice is only the thinnest gurgle) “‘she went to the hospital to have another baby . . .’

“It was all like some system for *amplifying* the craziness I was feeling. Albert, really: what kind of a cosmos *is* this?”

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The answer from the start of Hawthorne’s *American Notebooks* is: the cosmos is clear, and calm, and considered in partite, in language equally clear and calm.

“A walk down to the Juniper. The shore of the coves strewn with

bunches of seaweed, driven in by recent winds. Eel-grass, rolled and bundled up, and entangled with it, — large marine vegetables, of an olive color, with round, slender, snake-like stalks, four or five feet long, and nearly two feet broad: these are the herbage of the deep sea.”

These are the book’s first words, from June of 1835; its entries continue for eighteen years, and not once is the great task flinched from: looking the world in the eye, and then finding the words for its sharpest delineation.

“The village, viewed from the top of a hill . . . It is amusing to see all the distributed property of the aristocracy and commonality, the various and conflicting interests of the town, the loves and hates, compressed into a space which the eye takes in completely as the arrangement of a tea-table.” That same day, he writes of “the one-armed soap-maker, Lawyer H——, [who] wears an iron hook,” and, later, he bothers to note, “The green is deeper in consequence of the recent rain.”

He’s always ready to capture Nature: sunsets, tidelines, rainstorms, flocks and swarms, “and an enormous eel . . . truly he had the taste of the whole river in his flesh, with a very prominent flavor of mud.” But really *all* of the things of this world are made space for. “A withered, yellow, sodden, dead-alive looking woman, — an opium eater.” “Objects on a wharf — a huge pile of cotton bales, from a New Orleans ship, twenty or thirty feet high, as high as a house. Barrels of molasses . . . casks of linseed oil . . . iron in bars . . . Long Wharf is devoted to ponderous, evil-smelling, inelegant necessities of life.”

And there’s another world, also accommodated. As naturally as noting afternoon’s lengthening shadows or fall’s first russets, Hawthorne writes that “the spells of witches have the power of producing meats and viands,” that “when we shall be endowed with our spiritual bodies, I think that they will be so constituted that we may send thoughts and feelings any distance in no time at all.” For every update on a sunrise, there’s some awe-struck trapse through a landscape forever in haze, a “body possessed by two different spirits,” “a book of magic,” “a phantom,” “a prophecy.”

It reminds me of random paging through a huge volume of Rembrandt’s unprejudiced eye. Here, Christ preaches, backed by an angle of sunlight as substantial as a newel-post. There, a woman brusquely raises her orchidy underskirts, to squat to piss. The angel appears to Abraham. A rat-killer peddles his service.

The many worlds are one world, finally; Hawthorne can't draw the line. He says, "I have observed that butterflies—very broad-winged and magnificent butterflies—frequently come on board of the salt-ship, where I am at work, where there are no flowers nor any green thing. I cannot account for them, unless they are the lovely fantasies of the mind."

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I called Gaylene from a town that consisted, it seemed, of a gas pump, the pump attendant, and two thin chickens that looked as if for years they'd been used to wipe dipsticks. One half-hour down the highway, I called Craig. A man *should* worry, at the frailty of strong friends. Even their casualness disturbed me, it was something like a teapot beat out from battleship plating: its origin couldn't be hidden. Yes, I've promised them both at their separate numbers, I'll call again that afternoon, from Austin, Texas. A few minutes later, I pass an overturned crew-car of tar, which has spread to be a black circle about the size of a major resort hotel swimming pool—and even so, the landscape I'm driving through dwindles it to a demitasse serving.

I live in Wichita, Kansas now. For ten years, though, I lived in Austin; when I left (at the end of one of those enervating bouts of post-divorce-carouse-cum-depression) I left near thirty cartons of miscellaneous books, old mail, and papers in Jim Magnuson's keeping stored in the UT English Department's lock room.

"They want to make it a lounge now, buddy." And so I was coaxing the Dodge Colt south through Oklahoma, past the beckoning exit for GENE AUTRY, past the A/A rhyme scheme exit sign for the brother cities WAYNE PAYNE, through the ironed-flat plains of that state, in a bad August lull where the heat sets up shop in your marrow and deals its product from there, down memory lane, up caffeine rushes, eventually past my favorite Dallas exit sign, CAMP WISDOM RD.

I could have used some of its wares. I only vaguely remembered what dead notes and doodads were hodgepodged into those cartons, and I'd done without them smartly enough for two good Wichita years. I should have had Jim order them hauled to the dump.

Except I *couldn't* have, of course. They'd been mine and the ghosts of my fingerprints eddied, countless tiny weathermaps of storms, above them yet. They'd been mine, and they called, and I hearkened. I came with fresh

flat boxes and tape, to redo it all fitted to my car. Ten hours there, ten back. An idiot's errand.

I couldn't let go.

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"Three-pronged steel forks . . ." "The soul . . ." What Hawthorne's notebooks do is give us such a rich collection from this *olla-podrida* planet of ours, the craziest elements fit. Rembrandt's *oeuvre*, the same.

"The thing is, you and Gaylene, your story is just one page, and you're stuck on it, reading it over and over. That's what your psyche needs to do now, read it over and over. Maybe another extraneous paragraph or three drift in from . . . a newspaper, say; but not enough to give you a sense of the whole collected *shmeer*.

"But later, a day, a year, who-knows-when, *later*—you'll read the big picture. Your own page won't seem so crazy, believe me."

Back in my divorce days, Craig would call up three, four times a night, delivering similar pep talks. So: I'm phoning him from Austin.

Louis Simpson has a poem that starts

The first time I saw a pawnshop
I thought, Sheer insanity.
A revolver lying next to a camera,
violins hanging in the air like hams . . .

but eight lines later he's come to see the Theory of Hawthorne's Notebooks; he tells us, "Each has its place in the universe."

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But Craig is little comforted by my theory, as it turns out. "Albert, listen: I want my unhappiness *over*, I don't need to hear that it has its own niche in the Scheme of Things." Well, maybe. But it was my best shot.

"Late last night I couldn't sleep, my arm kept stretching into her space in the bed, like extending it up-to-the-elbow into an alternate dimension.

"Just to take my mind off everything, I whammoed *They Saved Hitler's Brain* into the VCR. You remember."

I remember. Years ago, when I was sore in need of cheering up, we watched it: a '63 Z-level piece of schlockola that (wouldn't you know it?) by now has attracted its own "cult following."

Edited from footage shot in the Philippines (we *think*) and in America (though neither looks to have been aware, when the cameras were rolling, that it was made for wedding with the other), and with a car crash “borrowed” from *Thunder Road*, the plot is incoherent; but as I recall, a scientist’s beautiful daughter and stalwart son-in-law (the love interest), somehow adventure through “Mandoras,” a Latin American banana republic, saving civilized life from a band of retired Nazis who own the head of Adolf Hitler, and hatch big plans for finding *der Führer* another body and taking over the world with stockpiled cannisters of nerve gas. A book on spliced-tripe cinema puts the title character’s contribution this way: “Through it all, the brain of ‘Mr. H.’ (as he is respectfully known) is represented by a gooey, waxed face poured into a pickle jar and hooked up to bubbling, crackling, hissing life-support systems.” Got it?

“Albert, get this: I wouldn’t tell anyone else: but I was worn so ragged, that when the dewy-eyed glances that passed for a love scene started, I began sobbing, dry sobbing, right there in my underwear. That’s right, you heard me.

“Seriously sobbing.”

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Gaylene says: “Maybe it was 5 A.M. Did he tell you? I got the circus. Big deal. But you should see how we battled about it.

“I sat down in front of it, thinking it might help me forget. I *willed* myself, my whole self, to be just the size of my eyes. Do I have a screw loose, or what? And then I walked through the midway.

“I thought—how can I say this?—I thought I’d talk to my favorite ones. The clown with the pompom cap, who juggled oranges and tenpins. The woman who does ballet on the rump of a galloping horse. The lion tamer. I even heard the calliope music. OOMPahpah, OOMPahpah. But all of them: I’d bought them with Craig, they each had a story. Who we had to haggle with, what cobwebby corner of what slopped shop we rooted through, where we were in our lives then. Whole summers, in some cases, fish fries and walking the pier.

“It rose up from each of the figures, gradually, this foggy twin. Do you see what I’m saying? The majorette couldn’t twirl her baton without this hurtful majorette-out-of-fog coming up behind her.

“And a me-of-fog, and a him-of-fog . . . Anyway,” pulling herself together, “by that time it was morning. I dressed and left for work.”

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Hawthorne is filled with ghosts.

In groups or singly, claiming a protagonist’s share of attention or simply weaving between the lines like old smoke in a pillow, black-hatted, primly bonneted, dour, they bow in sacerdotal greeting from the past, they accuse, they won’t be polished off the brass like any common smudges, they mist at the window, they well up the throat and brandy won’t help, they linger. On some pages, walking the streets of Concord or Salem means walking through ghosts as heavy as opera drapes.

A classically imagined one: “A ghost seen by moonlight; when the moon was out, it would shine and melt through the airy substance of the ghost, as through a cloud.” What might he have done with a later, westward sensibility? Ghosts of disenfranchised Sioux and Comanche, ghosts of passenger pigeons flocking as thick as a pudding, showing visibly, as moisture on the cheeks.

In every culture there’s some version of the tale where the monkey is trapped—his fist in the cookie jar, robbing it overmuch, is too full, and he can’t slip out. But he won’t give up even one cookie. *He* thinks it’s the *jar* that won’t let go.

Every ghost has a jar that keeps him here.

We see them at night; or on damp and bleary days, rain making gray twill of the air. *Let go*, they’re saying, *let go of us*.

There’s a promise from three generations back that needs mending; there’s an unopened trunk; there’s an axe; there’s a locket. *Let go-o-o-o of us*.

3. *Language Lessons*

Fun yidishe reyd ken men zikh nit opvashn in tsen vassern. —Ten waters will not cleanse you of Jewish talk.

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My grandmother took an H (it meant *heart*: she’d have to be checked); they started to lead her away. The enormous receiving room was a brutal assault of confusion: clamor, tangles of lines, you didn’t know for what,

but ahead a woman was crying out *No, no, no*, like a child. Close to fifty immigrants sprawled in a corner in different degrees of lassitude. A girl about eight, with a shaved scalp, played with a filthy rag; you could see dull welts, from scratching, lined her cranium, as if she were some kind of medical chart.

“By the basket at the window,” my grandfather said. These were his first words since they’d been sent to this line an hour before. The total of all the words he’d spoken since docking early that morning couldn’t have been much more than three times that. They’d learned, on the long way over, to hold such luxuries as speech, or even obvious shows of affection, in reserve. It was a faith: that their affection wasn’t dead, but in abeyance.

Now she wanted to weep at his brief and sudden Yiddish. A hunger for more of it washed through her, she wanted him shouting it at these *fer-shlooginer* men and women in their soiled green uniform jackets, she thought if he stopped speaking Yiddish right now, he’d be dropping the one frayed rope that still attached them at all to the world she was born in.

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In 1881, Alexander III pursued what Irving Howe calls “a steady anti-Jewish policy”—this is a translation of what was often a drunk foot-soldier ripping intestines out of a freshly savaged sixteen-year-old girl, and waving them overhead for a trophy. “The *shtetl* began to empty a portion of its youth into the slums of Warsaw, Vilna, Lodz, Minsk, Bialystok . . .” and, eventually, New York.

Once just a word for the hellish section belowdeck, *steerage* has come to mean, for my grandparents’ people, the whole of transition experience: homeless, hungry, cut and stunned, and then the narrow oilstained stairway down to a hard dark shelf, for being stored like sacks of coal above where the stirring-screws trembled twenty-four hours. “Someone above me vomited straight upon my head . . .” “. . . the babies throwing up even their mother’s milk . . .” “. . . in their berths in a stupor, from breathing air whose oxygen has been mostly replaced by foul gases.”

The language went with. “It was the word that counted most. Yiddish culture was a culture of speech, and its God a God who spoke . . . Neither set nor formalized, always in rapid process of growth and dissolution, Yiddish . . . acquired an international scope, borrowing freely from almost every European language . . . intimately reflecting the travail of wandering, exile.”

It's not singular to the Jewish tradition, of course, that *naming* it *causes* it to be (in the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, for instance, "the first word" precedes "the face of the earth"). "Let there be light," and everything hierarchically follows, out of this ur-nanosecond utterance. When Adam names the animals on Eden's plains, he specifies that general creation: *kudu, dodo, cassowary, tapir, lemur, axolotl, emu, kiwi, kodiak, koala, narwhal, dog, lamb, snake* and *angelfish*. Noah repeats this original naming at the gangplank, checking them off by twos. They're herded aboard, the crowded and terrifying journey begins, and then they're brusquely disembarked, wobbly and needing to start the world anew.

My grandparents knew this concept as The Diaspora. The clouds broke and they landed at Ellis Island. They had one paper satchel of clothes, some Yiddish proverbs, and their names.

*

What he meant, she understood, was "We won't leave this room until we both meet at the basket, then we'll leave together." She shook her head *no*: "Under that picture of ships." The basket might disappear, a picture hung up was a safer bet. She'd learned, the last few years, to make these swift decisions in favor of a half-degree's greater assurance. He was too worn even to wink at her savvy modification. Then, led to her line, she was lost inside another hundred just like her.

The picture was of two faint-sepia steamships, ironing out some sepia waves. He waited patiently, crumpling his hat, then carefully shaping it back again. To left and right, vast numbers of even newer arrivals were being processed. They fixed 5,000 a day as the official number, but some days the truth was closer to 15,000. People were being questioned, for retardation. In one room, he knew, he'd been there, a medic was lining up the men and "doing" their asses as casually and quickly as if sorting mail; he only jerked his glove in the dish of disinfectant each ninth or tenth case.

"Oyyy . . ." A woman, in line to have her eyelid creased back. (The eye disease trachoma caused more than half of all the medical detentions.) Where was Nettie? Women out of sight were whimpering. He tried to listen but none of the words in the air made sense, and most of what he heard as "talking" shaded off, immediately, into noise.

Now Nettie's arm was folded lightly in his, from nowhere it seemed, from out of the barracks dinge, and by her face he knew she'd passed what-

ever arcane cardiac gauntlet was required. Without a word, they walked to the outside rail and breathed New York over the water. She looked back: of course, the basket was gone. Did she have the right wall? — even the sepia ships had disappeared.

They were off: the hawsers whipped up, the ferry bucked. What did he see, with his okayed eyes, and his okayed wife beside him? Not much, fog was low, you couldn't see three feet ahead. The harbor reeked, and the ferry chopped through it with equal pungency: feta cheese in splotchy wheels, old mattress ticking, sausage in hogbowel casings, tins of greasy feathers, sheaves of leather, wrinkled dried fruits knotted up in a kerchief, babies' bottomrags.

They docked. Somewhere he'd lost his hat. The dockworkers' voices, more strange than the gulls'.

Then they were at "the Pig Market," Hester near Ludlow. The streets were . . . you see? They didn't have the words.

A welter of pushcarts sorted the little late-afternoon light: peaches a penny a quart, alarm clocks, cucumbers floating in milk tubs, watch it buddy, faster, kapow, by the hundred, whores, look move it, wagons hauling the Christian proselytizers, a boy not over twelve distributing cards with the whores' addresses, neckties straightened just *so*, that's my place mac, cracked eggs, the boxing match this, hey sugar, the boxing match that, beneath these new American angels: pigeons, gray and mean.

Says Irving Howe, "The density of the Tenth Ward . . . shortly after the turn of the century was greater than most of the worst sections of Bombay." And, "The first English expressions that struck my foreign ear as I walked through the ghetto that day . . . were 'sharrap' (shut up) and 'garrarrehere' (get out of here). It took me a little while to learn that the English tongue was not restricted to these two terms."

They rested near the scissorsman, his grindstone throwing off sparks. Nettie sat on their single satchel. She wished he hadn't lost his hat, the way his hair was thinning. She knew how he could be about that. *Draikop*, she told herself, "silly head." How *much* had they lost, this last year, and here she was worrying over a hat.

"They gots some help for greenhorns." He'd put down a scissors to motion across the street, then he repeated his statement in Yiddish—a *landsman*! Was she *tzedráyt*, insane? She wanted to reach at his lips and catch it all leaving, as if they might be tiny birds.

“They’ll get us rooms? A job?” My grandfather knew of such agencies, even had some names folded into his pocket; still, in the midst of the tumult, this news appeared incredible.

“Sure. Now, please . . .” (switch to English) “I dunt gots da time.” And back to the turning wheel.

That evening, as boarders in a tenement flat, they each unscrewed a door and set it on two low fish-smelling crates, and so had side-by-side beds in a room where four other people already snored. The room was dim, but she could see one sleeper’s upturned cheek was fissured with scars; they were thin, as if maybe a knife. My grandfather tied a string from his leg to the satchel.

Whispering.

“What’s Sarah doing back home, do you think?”

He thought. “I don’t know.” Silence. “This is our home.”

“It was some day, yah?”

“Yes. This ice with the flavor in, it was good.”

“But still, it was some day.”

“Yes.”

“Sarah must be closing up the shop by now, with the new goods.”

“I said I don’t know.”

“I only . . .”

Harsh: “I-said-I-don’t-know.”

(Already the trouble was starting. In that dim room you could still see it coming.)

Silence.

Then, making light of his ire: “Ah, why don’t I sharrap.”

They held hands, slab to slab. When it was clear that their roommates would sleep through a *pogrom*, he slurred her a lullabye in his late-night after-some-vodka voice of the old days, *Netteleh, Netteleh, zing mir a lideleh*, tracing tightening circles over her breasts. But he fell into sleep the first, a weary man on the fidgeting end of a string.

She couldn’t sleep, there was this plank inside her as stiff as the door beneath. She walked the two flights down to the stoop, too weary herself to feel caution. For a while she only stared with passive fixity at the scraps of moving moonlight on a trickle of filth in the gutter across the way. She started singing then, a childhood tune in a lightheaded hush, *Mama makes with the tea for me, Papa makes with the honey, When I grow up I’ll dance all*

day, *And buy white lace with my money.*

A street dog trotted up and forthrightly rested its head in her lap. It was ragged and, from what she could tell in the half-dark, seemed to be the color of a wen. She stroked its snout.

“Dat’s a pretty song, lady.”

“Yah, yah, pretty. Pretty-schmitty. From a long time back.”

“Dun’t be so cynical, kiddo. A voice like yours, like a lark on da ving, troo’ da fields—*hoo!* You could rule dis crapped-up vorld.”

“So show me this lark. So show me this field, Mr. Big Shot Dog.”

“Vell . . . howzabout I show you da crapped-up vorld part? I gots mit plenty of dat.”

“From that, I don’t need seeing no more.”

“Oh, like it or not, you gonna, *tsahtskaleh*. Up and down, morn to moon, vork and a liddle more vork. May as vell face it down mit your tail up, dat’s vhat us dogs say. Look, I come by sometime, I show you around.”

“Yah, sure, why not?”

“Mr. Loner Dog, Mr. Boner Dog, Mr. Howler mit Growler mit Groaner Dog—dat’s me. You’ll *zing* me some more? *A lideleh?*”

“Yah, yah.”

“Okay by me. So tell me: you ain’t puzzled, a dog should be talking like dis here to you?”

“First, *hoont*, you’re a dream. The second, you make me more sense in my head than any talk yet in America.”

“Fletterer. Go back now. Go, sleep by him.”

“Yah, sleep . . .”

sleep . . .

(joking:) “Garrarrahere.”

*

It was a mongrel.

It razzed the fatcat boys, it blatted out its ass, it danced in circles with God for a partner, it boozed and it shmoozed and it prayed all night in the coal cellar under the buttery light of a few thumbs of tallow—this Yiddish.

It resourcefully lopes into History, from the basin of the Moselle and the banks of the Rhine, around 1100, a quadruhybrid: Rabbinic Hebrew,

Old French, Old Italian, and Middle High German, a language in search of a saint and an all-night poker game, this Yiddish, this mongrel, this backstreet patchwork creature, suspect, coupling in the alley crannies, thieving, lean and wry and rolling a phlegm in its throat as rich as spermwhale oil. Somewhere in between the blazing gates of Heaven and the backstage door of a burleyque joint, its *oy* and *ich* are bickering, dickering, giving a *yoo-hoo* out the window, scented with a breathy mishmash of lox and *kasha* and stomach bile.

Over five hundred Yiddish words have officially crossed into *Webster's*. From the earliest days, the New York ghetto was home to a flexible "Yinglish." Say one affluent week you scrounge an extra nickel or two, you saunter to the soda parlor. Restauranting, foreign to a *shtetl* Jew, "is spreading every day," the *Jewish Forward* reported in 1903. You take the missus's arm, you go for a double dip: *oyesen*, "out-eating."

But language lags. The trolleys swoosh their first fierce time before your greenhorn eyes, with the confusing force of Ezekiel's roil of wheels, and the words for it don't catch up for a while.

Our sense of the future *requires* that wait, Bronowski says. Once input flashes whambang into the brain, it enters a period of "reflection, during which different lines of action are played through and tested." Memory, which Bronowski defines as "the storing of signals in some symbolic form, so that they may be used to revive our senses in the future," is possible only "if the initial response . . . is delayed long enough to separate some abstract marker and fix it in the brain. This is basically a linguistic mechanism."

In this way, language and memory enable—in some sense, even may *be*—each other. William Gass: "I remember—I contain a past—partly because my friends and family allow me to repeat and polish my tales." In a Louis Simpson poem, "Profession of Faith," the speaker understands that a memory of his wife "in the garden . . . reaching up, pulling a branch," and of a purely fictional figure spectrally "floating in mid-air," really are equivalent: "The things we see and the things we imagine, / afterwards, when you think about them, / are equally composed of words. / / It is the words we use, finally, / that matter, if anything does."

Gass again: "To *know* is to possess words . . . we name incessantly, conserving achievements and customs, and countries that no longer exist."

She stands in the kitchen, preserving. Light goes sea-green in the Mason

jars, the smell of brine pinches the air. Or she's not there at all, no, she's humming her Yiddish ditties and it's 1911, her hair is an inky plait to her waist, his lips are idly jittering over the small of her back as she's singing for him, a low, slow, soulful version of a village tune they'd do together reining the wagon up to its rail at Sarah's shop for tannery goods, and then she'd invite them for sweet tea, with the samovar winking the lees of the sun off its sloped copper shoulders, an heirloom, she insisted, from the grandmother she most missed . . .

conserving countries that no longer exist

4. *Bundles*

They paid for a one-room apartment by now, a crate that nightly floated them over the *dreck* and commotion. Both of them worked, though hers was part-time seamstressing for a shopfront two or three removes from the major garment district mayhem. And, in slack times, she could bring her baskets of rough cloth home: they'd play that she was a lady of leisure.

"Shit!" She'd pricked her thumb. She didn't so much learn the word, as have it simply seep into her from the streets, an ineradicable brown dye streaking her standard lessonbook English. He tried to, but couldn't, drum home its difference from her other, native imprecation, "Feh!" and in time it replaced the earlier word completely. Once, when they were having an argument: "Can it!" she blurted, no less surprised than he was, "Baloney!"

But nothing stopped Mr. *Hoont* from visiting. Loneliness could summon him, or wearying toil; she suffered both, and through her hazed half-wakefulness, he'd gradually materialize, always with a harmless leer or with made-up news from the Old Country, Yasha was doing this now, Sarah that. At these times, English shinnied out the room's one window and down the drainpipe. Yiddish filled the room then, every sentence like a burning-red bouquet set into a milkglass vase, until the space around her was roses and fire.

And my grandfather? — he had his own companion, not a dog, a *dybbuk*, a spirit, a streetwise guy in a slanting derby. Anyway, that's what the voice was like. It hovered outside the window some nights while she was asleep, it hovered there as if on a cloud of streetstink-and-squabble. *Forget the pack*, it told him. *You can leave it all behind you, guy. It's easy, just trust me. Let go-o-o-o-o of it . . .*

About the pack:

"In the cities of the North," says Howe, "during the years of industrial expansion, peddling was backbreaking and soul-destroying work." He quotes Morris Witcowsky on his merchandise pack: ". . . weighed about a hundred and twenty pounds, eighty pounds strapped to the back and a forty-pound 'balancer' in the front." Then you walked, you climbed, the tenement stairs of the ghetto blurring to one enormous treadmill. Knock. Who is it? DryYYY GooOOOoods. Get out of here you show your hook-nose face again I'll kick your ass clear back to Roosia. Twelve hours a day of this, until at the end the pack was the brain, the rider, and you were its well-whipped beast.

"You want a *bisseleh* ice cream?" he asked her.

"No, but I come with." She set down the sewing—a yellow strip of buttonholes in a basket of strips of buttonholes. "Maybe just for the air, yes? Some fresh air."

He was silent.

The light in their single room was often lost halfway to the floor, so giving it the thick look of an aquarium of ill-kept water. Even with the window opened, the feeling was often one of uncut murk.

"It would be nice, the fresh air."

"I *heard* you, Nettie!" He spoke, though, in the direction of the pack. It filled one corner. There was a night when she woke, he was snoring exhausted beside her, and she thought she saw it twitch in the gloom, then grow in front of her eyes.

Too much was new, "the way people walked, the rhythms of the streets, the division of the day into strict units of time, the disposal of waste, the relations among members of the family, the exchange of goods and money." And Howe continues, "That symptoms of social dislocation and even pathology should have appeared under the extreme circumstances in which the early Jewish immigrants lived seems unavoidable."

Gangs were common, especially gangs of pickpockets, "grifters," and up to 30 percent of all delinquents brought before the Children's Court of New York in 1906 were Jewish. On some streets—Allen, Rivington, Stanton, Delancey—prostitution flourished. "Dancing academies" trained young girls and recruited pimps, "cadets." The Yiddish term for "whore," of course, a *nahfskie* or a *koorveh*, long preceded the wave to America; and still, for some, it's surprising to see such obviously Jewish

names appearing on lists of offenders: “Lena Blum, Ida Katz, Sadie Feldman . . .” They squatted on stoops, exhibited thighs that bulged like overripe bries. Some knitted, some chewed Russian sunflower seeds, they squeezed their breasts with rude duck honkings. And here, the famous hoodlums—Legs Diamond, Little Kishky, Spanish Johnny, all Jews—concocted their apprenticeship swindles.

Husbands abandoned their families. Pressures and temptations were extraordinary, after all. Of requests for financial relief made to United Hebrew Charities in 1903 and 1904, 10 to 15 percent came from deserted women; by 1911, a National Desertion Bureau had been established. For years, the most popular features of the Yiddish newspaper the *Forward* were the “Bintel Brief” (the Bundle of Letters”), where readers wrote in with their crises, and the “Gallery of Missing Husbands,” where, as a typical instance, Bessie Cohen would be “looking for Nathan Cohen my husband, an umbrella peddler, 22 years old, the little finger of his right hand is bent. He abandoned me and a five-month-old baby in great need. I offer \$25 . . .”

The *dybbuk* was busy. *Let go-o-o-o-o of it . . .*

The air down in the streets *was* fresher, marginally. The great machine-tinged winds of the elevated’s passing clatter quivered those dense heated blocks of aroma that rested above their designate pushcarts: fish spillings, hardening butter, mushbodied cabbages. A broomstick-and-tin can game of baseball hogged one corner. On Allen Street, the girls yoohooed and flashed their ankles in playful scissoring kicks.

“No, Nettie. We go down some other way.”

“Yes, hokay.” She’d been distracted by the ragtag game of ball, the ganglier older players, and one befuddled six-or-seven-year-old who was waddling about with a sopping pantsfull—for a while now, she’d been thinking of children. But then: “Oh, wait. It’s Lena. *Leeena!*”

“Nettie.” A tug. His hand like a mastiff at her black sleeve.

“Wait, it’s Lena. Lena!”

Halfway down Allen, Lena crossed her meaty calves and waved back.

“You know such a woman?” The pack had been heavy all day with a thousand weights, and now this.

“This is Lena,” she said, beginning to sense the enormity of the situation, what she’d started in crossing a social boundary for companionship’s sake, her English beginning to stumble under the stress, “from Cracow.

Nu? She *geb* me butter, to her I *geb* salt." Something in his look. "She makes my friend." You traded butter for salt, back then, and there, it made you a friend. Prouder in repetition, and as if the naked fact of it undid a net of lesser considerations, "She makes my friend."

This extra weight, this thousandth-and-one. He felt his eyes grime over with some emotion he had no word for, not in any of his languages.

"Come, Nettie. We go now." The el rattled past; this close, they both could feel shiverings inside their bodies like dishes and ewers precariously shelved.

"We go down Allen Street, yes? It would be short. To say hello Lena. Salt I give her, is all. For the pickled herring."

"You do not know such women."

"I have eyes, I see things. *You* know such women."

Then he called her a name.

In the wake of the el, the silence became like a third party standing there with them.

"I think you go back, for the pack," she said. "In it you put your clothes and your *chuchik* for the cigarettes and your knife." She paused. "You will not no more live inside my house." She'd never before said anything so softly, and by this he knew its sincerity.

He was gone that night.

She stepped in the space where the pack had been. Its absence ordered the room around it, as definitely as its presence had. "Shit! Shit!" and she pulled her hair. Then she fell to the floor and was weeping into her basket of cloths, she wept now for the first time since he'd shouldered his belongings and stepped through the door. Her eyes poured it lavishly out, she imagined the basket spilling it onto the boards. Her last thought, right before sleep: that Lena could come for this bundle of salt now, could borrow as much as she wanted.

*

The monster came flying.

It missed his head by inches, unstitching apart in mid-air, the shark half falling gracelessly into a puddle on the after-rain clay, but the monkey half continuing in a high arc, with its stuffing showering out of its undone bottom, and a swag of dirty linen trailing out of the same, snapping like a pennant.

“No! And no! And no!” Hendrickje was screaming at him from where she stood in the doorway, each deep-throated *no* volleyed into the lane with the angry strength she’d given to pitching the curio.

Rembrandt shuffled there, speechless, angry in turn (the 200 florins was *his* commission, not hers) and shamed (but wasn’t it true she’d been counting each carrot these days, each seam in a hem, and what could he expect when she returned from the market with fishtails for the broth because anything savorier was beyond their meager means this week, and waiting for her in the hush of the parlor, on a teak base, was Mathilde, as he’d taken to calling his purchase, Mathilde wearing an overturned tulip on her head to crown her “Queen of the Deep” . . .) and then angry again, no not at Hendrickje posing with her hands on her aproned hips in classic pique, and not with himself, but simply with circumstance, that had brought them together, and then had brought them to this. He gingerly lifted the shark-half, shrugged at its lumpishness, sighed once (histrionically: she was watching, still), then turned and shambled off. He’d snugged Mathilde’s wet netherpart under one arm, and a sketchbook under the other.

Somewhere in between the house on the Rozengracht (for this is where he lived now, having lost the earlier showplace-of-a-dwelling) and the synagogue (for that was his destination) he let go the ratty remnant of shark; he couldn’t even remember where or how.

But the sketchbook he gripped as if it would float him over these recently troubled waters. The sketchbook was where he would stay for the afternoon, until he was healed of ire and guilt. He eased himself up to the shadow-side of a pillar (they didn’t all like being sketched, these Sons of David), unwrapped a stick of charcoal, and let the nimbleness that lived in his fingers run free. “Going Jewing,” a neighbor of his had derisively termed it. Alright then, he was. The faces here were creased and hurt and determined in ways he’d never seen in any other Amsterdam face, though sometimes they reminded him, crazily enough, of an unworldly gaunt-cheeked bearded look he’d seen in certain fish at the market he privately thought of as “High Priest fish.”

“ . . . no other Amsterdam painter did as many portraits of Jews as Rembrandt. One scholar has guessed that about a fifth of Rembrandt’s portraits of men are Jews—this at a time when the Jews represented perhaps one percent of the population of Amsterdam. This would fit with the gen-

eral impression that Rembrandt gives of a temperament moved more by personal warmth than by ideology.” [Charles L. Mee, Jr.]

Some of his friends were Sephardic Jews, educated, assimilated denizens of the cultural life. But today, at the synagogue, Rembrandt is sketching furiously at the faces of Ashkenazim, newly arrived from Poland: the women in shawls and slipping wigs, the men in tunics concocted of grain sacks tied by rope at the waist, and their faces! —inward-looking, ethereal and yet tuber-like faces! One is cantankering with a compatriot now, and he places a finger alongside his nose, for every point of logic he scores . . .

Because I’m trying to write of how and why we save things over time, I’ll quote what Kenneth Clark says, “He had always loved painting Jews: he saw in them repositories of ancient wisdom and an unchanging faith.”

. . . and almost as quickly, a finger in charcoal takes shape alongside a charcoal nose.

5. *Zamlers*

“Because I’m trying to write of how and why we save things over time,” I wrote, and meant both definitions of *save*: “to collect” and “to rescue.”

“The word for it is *hemshekh*,” Aaron Lansky says, “‘continuity.’” Lansky sweeps an open hand at 700,000 Yiddish-language books on the floor of a renovated paper factory in Holyoke, Massachusetts; there are 200,000 more in the National Yiddish Book Center’s primary office, and six- or seven hundred donated volumes a week are still received. “This is from the world Hitler tried to destroy.”

In 1980, when Lansky was twenty-four, he founded the Center with earnings from a summer of migrant blueberry picking in Maine. The Center consisted of a government-surplus typewriter and a picnic table. Ten years later, Lansky heads a network of 100 volunteer *zamlers* (“collectors”) and 8,000 dues-paying members. Not all of the titles are warehoused; some already have “been returned to circulation, restored to the life of books” for readers in Brooklyn, Thailand, Guam, or Tokyo. “As native speakers pass on, the books become the sole access to the last thousand years of Jewish history.”

It’s as if he lives in a sentence, at exactly the inky atom of a sentence, where the word *razed* puns into *raised*. “They’re giving up a library,” Lan-

sky says of his typical elderly Jewish donors; for them “it’s like a moment of transition.

“They’re giving up the library before they die. So they often cry and tell stories.”

*

Time loves a book—to fox its pages in lovely rust, tea, sepia, and fecal starclusters; to brittle it; to riddle it with pin-width insect labyrinths; to fade, chip, buckle, cockle, scrape, and in general tick eternity away by units of wholesale decomposition; Time loves to suck a book as clean as a chicken wingbone.

A. D. Baynes-Cope’s *Caring for Books and Documents* reads like the opening speech of a five-star general to his troops in time of war. He is stern, and exact, and his epaulettes flash like artillery in the parade-ground sun, as he tells his ranks, “We know what books and documents are made of, and how these materials can be expected to behave in various climatic conditions, what their enemies are and how to outwit them.” The foe is legion. “Light is an enemy of books . . . Heat can also be an enemy of books . . . Indirectly windows are an enemy of books . . . Fire and flood are obviously major enemies.” The ugly truth is, “every solid, liquid or gaseous object in this universe is a chemical or a mixture of chemicals,” and so of course is suspect of constant attack.

Cats are enemies, and the fleas on the cats are enemies, and the microbes on the fleas are eager to swirl across a library’s spines in garish fungal sargassos. “Indeed, the enemies may be internal”—a book’s own traitorous acids can eat it into oblivion, like a man’s heart’s being lapped by that man’s own bile. Need it even be said that “we can include human beings as an enemy of books through sins of omission and commission”?

There is no question but that the war must be fought. But Baynes-Cope refuses to euphemize the privations that await us: “Time, thought, trouble and money must be expended.” For instance, if insect damage is merely hinted at, “the treatment must be designed to cope with the likelihood that all four stages of insect growth—egg, larva, pupa and insect—are present. Even if only one book is affected, those books on that shelf, and the ones above, below, and backing onto it, must be examined thoroughly, preferably out of doors, and the infected books brushed with a soft paint-brush or gently with a vacuum cleaner fitted with a softish

baluster brush”; the latter “is a little fierce but the suck can be reduced by drilling a few $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (6mm or 9mm) holes in the tubing.” Bats require yet greater effort. Sniffing for dampness earns its own dense paragraph of instruction. Never let the size of the battlefield mislead you into underestimating the toil required: “the problems of producing a safe climate in a single case may be more difficult than those for a single room.”

Is it worth it, this endless seriocomic operatic clash of the forces of Entropy and Conservation? The answer is wholly serious. Aaron Lansky recounts his first book-gathering mission, to an 87-year-old man named Temmelman, in Atlantic City: Lansky arrives at noon, to find the man in his apartment building’s lobby. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long.” “Oh I been here since seven this morning, young man. I diddin want I should miss you.”

Every volume has its history. “You know, my wife and I . . . this book we bought in 1925, yes! We went without lunch for a week we should be able to afford it.”

*

Everybody’s saving, from cereal boxtops to souls.

Imagine standing in the restorer’s lab as the first dabbed fraction of night in “The Night Watch” cleans back into the patchily almondine daylight of Rembrandt’s palette. Banning Cocq, Van Ruytenburgh, Vischer, Engelen, Kemp, and the rest of the musketeers are gridded-*nth*-of-an-inch-by-*nth* revisioned, as the very molecular bonding of midnight breaks, swabs off, and clears the fine-crazed stage for an intricate play of the effects of sun on their faces and antique costumery. That room must have been an enormous held breath.

Reviving hither, regilding yon, the World Monuments Fund is endlessly busy—fifty restoration projects in fifteen countries. Sculpture on the portal of the Collegiate Church in Toro, Spain . . . Diego Rivera murals in Mexico City . . . Easter Island . . . Angkor Wat . . . One current project is the Château de Commarque, which sits on a cave of wall engravings and paintings 20,000 years old: a leaping horse, a profiled human head, and so many obvious male and female symbols that prehistorians call the cave “the sex shop.” Hubert de Commarque: “Our lives are a bit lost today because we have lost the knowledge of the earth, of the sky . . . That is

what I want most from this work—to give to the people that connection that’s been lost.”

For some, the glory days of burlesque—the legendary plumed glitter-queens and their retinues. For some, the lone orchid pressed in an album; its oils have long past stained the paper around it translucent, a wimple of spectral sheen.

*

“It’s history. It’s art. It’s culture. It’s dying.” — On page 24 of this issue of *Amtrak Express*, the Lighthouse Preservation Society asks for your help to “Keep It Shining.” Page 9, the Save the Manatee Club suggests you “ask about our ‘Adopt a Manatee’ program.” Who *wouldn’t* want to halt their extinction? Seal-bodied hippos is what they look like, a ton of sea-grass-munching rotundity. Only 1,200 or so remain in U.S. waters. The California condor needs saving, and our culture may never again see the like of the smokily peignoir-petaled bodies of 1940s Vargas-style pinup art. Fountain pens. Cuspidors. Bauhaus.

Someone’s brushing crumbs of dirt from between two tiny marble toes. That’s all: two tiny marble toes, unattached to anything. The brush is correspondingly tiny, and softer than a cosmetician’s rouge brush. What is it about the Past? We’re down on our knees at two of its toes, and it’s beautiful, the way the veins in the marble simulate veins in the flesh. Send in your money. Help save the toes. They’ll be photographed, labeled, and wrapped in seven layers of cotton and styrofoam sheeting. Somewhere: marble legs and a torso (where, though?). Somewhere: marble wings.

*

Angels. Since 1976, Joyce Berg has collected 8,366 figurines of angels. One sits with its legs crossed, reading a book, and looks like a seven-year-old on the potty. A somberly religious one raises its fingers in ritual benediction. Angels in crystal, in wood, in ceramic. One, in clay, is carrying a halo on its head like a balanced doughnut. One is clearly a cat, in a celadon ballerina’s getup. Lowell Berg says, “She writes down where she bought it, when, what she paid, whether the clerk was bald; you know, all the important stuff.”

George Logue owns fifty working two-ton Caterpillar tractors (in-

cluding — his most prized — a 1932 diesel model), arranged like a pasturing herd, on his family farm. Ken Soderbeck: a dozen antique fire trucks (including the 1912 Knox piston pumper) with subsidiary uniforms, equipment, and Tisch and Ike, his two dalmations. Tom Bates: 30,000 soda and beer cans, amassed in his and his sister Ginnie's Museum of Beverage Containers and Advertising. Jim Hambrick: wowee! an assemblage of Superman figures, banks, comic books, board games, pinbacks, clocks, etc., 40,000 superitems large.

Whenever I'm glum these days, I go to this photo in which Bob Malkin sits amid the icons of his passion. "It's all I thought about. I'd go to flea markets before dawn with a flashlight." He collects giantdom — oversize advertising memorabilia. Here, he's perched in a chair that diminishes him to a two-year-old's size, though a two-year-old in a business suit and tie. One foot rests on top of a shoe (a natty wingtip brogue) with the bulk of a motor scooter; the other foot's in a gym shoe you could coddle a papoose inside of spaciouly. There's a birdbath-diametered coffee cup, a pocket watch like one of a 16-wheeler's tires, a telephone you could straddle for a carnival ride, and Malkin's wearing this silly grin sized perfectly for his face, and signing a legal pad, roughly of loveseat-length, with the Fountain Pen of the Gods.

*

"Pull in here." And doughty Kit Hathaway did — a comic book shop we were passing by chance in Saratoga. I was his guest for two days surrounding a reading I gave at Union College and, stout heart, he was striving mightily to cater to my trashorama needs. You never know what you'll find in a back bin of yellowing paper. Not Kit, not two customers browsing t-shirts, or the clerk heard the clarion blasting through my cochlea. But there it was, from thirty years back, exactly as I remembered: *Green Lantern* number 3, December 1960.

As you may know, Green Lantern is "really" Hal Jordan, test pilot for the Ferris Aircraft Company in Coast City. One day, a trainer plane he was testing lifted into the air mysteriously, and was guided to where a spaceship lay crashed in the desert. Summoned inside, Hal met the dying extraterrestrial Abin Sur (bald, angle-browed, and jellybean-red), who with his final words decreed Hal Jordan his successor as this sector-of-the-universe's "Green Lantern." He had the costume prepared, and the power

ring, and he taught Hal Jordan the sacred Oath Against Evil that must be recited when recharging the ring at the Power Lamp every twenty-four hours. Through the ring, green psychic energy made the leap to solidity, and many is the ne'er-do-well who found himself, in the midst, say, of a bank heist, lifted by limousine-sized green tongs, then slammed by a man-high green hand efficiently into a green cage, and then whisked on a flying green platter straight to the calaboose. The Oath was stirring: In brightest day, in blackest night, / No evil shall escape my sight! / Let those who worship evil's might / Beware my power, Green Lantern's light!

That's the genesis story I must be referring to here, in *GL* number 3, on page 2 of "Green Lantern's Mail Chute": *Dear Editor: I think Green Lantern is one of the most exciting and different action magazines on the market today. However, I was disappointed when half of the exciting lead story, "Planet of Doomed Men," was devoted to Green Lantern's origin, which already had been printed in the first issue. Albert Goldbarth, Chicago Ill.*

I plunked down thirty dollars for what was once a ten-cent comic book, and left the shop whistling.

My First Published Work.

. . .

*it is not what a thing is
but what you feel about it that counts.*

—Louis Simpson

*

I'm twelve, I look up from reading that page—or I look up from my writing about my reading that page, it really doesn't matter—and see her working in light the kitchen curtains texture. Fussing at all of those jars mechanically. Her mind in a circle of othertime.

And when I see my father, in this same replaying retrospective scene, he's always down at that desk, embattled by numbers, the spiral of tape from the adding machine having frozen his pose, and me, and Grandma Nettie, and by extension every mote of 1960—like a watchspring having frozen the hands of its watch, or like the coiled soul of a wind-up toy having frozen its colorful body into a single gesture forever.

In that block of stalled chronology, she's stopped to touch the locket at her throat. The counter is rowed with crocks of cucumbers canopically floating. I see it as if a bolt of green power has leaped from between my

hands and, charged with all of the voltage of human wishing, has zapped this picture permanent. Lascaux won't fade, Hal Jordan won't fail, the diabetes won't eat her away.

6. *Kishef for the Swigman*

In six months he hadn't uttered a word of Yiddish. And the words he'd learned—! A clown is a "joey." A fistfight with the locals is a "clem." Here he'd learned "cunt," and that his cigarettes were "coffin nails." He was called a "razorback" or "roustabout"—he'd help the elephant push their handful of gaudy, gewgawed wagons out of the backroads mire. Godiva said he could work up to joey one day, but when? Godiva in her bareback rider's flouncing tutu. Godiva was a "star."

"Hey, mac": it had happened this simply. "Think you can handle a hammer?" So he'd pitched in, on that first day nearly half-a-year back, as they hoisted the canvas, guying-out its violently flapping sides. It was a sixteen-pound sledgehammer—it was, as he'd learn to say here, "no picnic"—but, as he sweated his *kishkes* out, he sweated out everything bitter inside, that horseradish taste on his tongue, he sweated away the last dust of the pack and its prisoning ghetto world: he couldn't have been farther away, here with The Human Cannonball, and Mad Marie the Mule-Faced girl, and the uric tang from the one sad tiger's groin-shag weaving around its wagon as palpably as the one sad anaconda might.

"Your name?" the ringmaster had asked. And he'd said "*Vhat?*" in his accented English in response, not expecting the question, and intuiting immediately that a new life required a new appellation, that he would need to keep a line between the two people he was, and yet he hadn't had the time to think this over. "Walt?" said the ringmaster, "Walter?" So he'd been put on the payroll that way. *Walter* was entered alongside Barko the Ape Man, and Lisette, and Hi-Step Hank, and Wonder-O.

And there was Godiva. Her hair was gold and ringleted, as perfect as torquing in some machine. She shamelessly worked her butt when she walked. He'd seen her bend with her ass in the air, a spangled tutu framing it; she'd uncork a bottle of wine between her knees. His first day there, she threw him the look. But he was careful. He was new, a Jew to boot, and far from home. He hadn't imagined it, though—the second day, a look. One night he drank too much. When? he asked her. He even fell to his

knees. Not yet, she told him. She fingered a ringlet. Later, when he'd proved himself, when he moved up in rank and they made him a joey. This was probably true, he reasoned. There were three clowns and she granted her favors to two of them. (The other was Mad Marie's.)

For now, his primary duty was catering to Professor Oink the Educated Pig. A pig!—if he wanted to turn from the world of the rabbis, he'd certainly managed. He also hauled the wagons, as I said, and watered Jumbo, and did a bit of whatever ball-busting and ego-eroding drifter's labor was required. But lately Professor Oink, who added, subtracted, and told the future, was a special draw, and so was provided with special attention.

My grandfather brushed him and hand-fed him cabbage, and just before showtime wiped the shit he'd been rolling in from his flanks and rump. It never failed: every showtime, shit. A few weeks into this assignment, and it was the moment he thought of his wife most tenderly. *Shit, shit, shit*, he heard her clumsily saying, and smiled. He thought of her often. He sent money every week, no note but money (all he earned, in fact). She'd be seamstressing, he knew. He felt the needle in his heart.

But always, Godiva was there. And always, something new was happening. Sheriffs were running them out of the county. Hellfire preachers, with burning crosses and monkeys dressed up like devils, would join forces with them for a town or two. The tiger, Bengali, escaped once and they found him on top of a wagon of hay bales, terrified: a yapping dog about the size of a handkerchief was streaking about the wheels. It was a shabby excuse of a circus; the one-time parakeet-green of its handbills and banners had faded to a color that looked coughed-up. But they attracted crowds, in back-bend towns where funerals and shotgun weddings were usually the only diversion. One day, flies and itch and nothing else. The next day, TOOT-TOOT-TOOT, hey, the circus!

And he had a plan. He was learning magic. Canchak the Great had quit the show, in Salliesburg. The story included the mayor, the mayor's wife, and the circus's dancing bear, and no one agreed on the details, but the following morning the bear and the mayor remained, while the other two featured participants disappeared into the moonlight.

No matter: now there was clearly an opening. He practiced in secret. The day was hot, and everybody else was sprawled in the relative cool of the wagons. He was sitting in the shade of a stunted maple, alongside Professor Oink. Tell me, pig, pick a card. Okay, now wait, you see here?

look—*your card!* But Oink, from a line of professionals, was singularly unimpressed.

*

And Nettie?

She didn't need him. She could buy her grapneled chicken legs without his help, she'd even finagled a new (used) feather mattress. Once a week, the envelopes arrived in care of the Jewish Women's Organization, and every week she slipped the twelve dollars into a celluloid whatnot box, refusing to spend it, to be so demeaned—and with the emptied envelopes she lined the birdcage. *Pisher'l*, that was the bird: Little Pisser.

"Nu? He's a bum, a no-goodnik."

"Yah, yah, Lena."

"Yah you say, but you don't *listen*. He's a bum, *a shandel un a charpeh*." A shame and disgrace. "Now you say it."

"Lena . . ."

My grandmother chopped in the kitchen—or what saved space in the room, by the red-and-white check oilcloth's declaration, became the "kitchen." He'd been gone six months and she'd moved, though leaving a message behind, with the new address. She was happy here, some days she hummed to the onions, *mine liebe, mine liebe*; once Lena unexpectedly knocked, and found her dancing in circles, with a shirtwaist from her basket of work. This new room had sun; it filled the window, making gilded Russian domes of the onions. In one corner Pisher'l, himself the shape of a gold note, sang and dipped to his dish of gold seeds.

Irving Howe: "Never having regarded herself as part of a spiritual elite, she did not suffer so wrenching a drop in status and self-regard as her husband. She was a practical person, she had mouths to feed, and, by and large, she saw to it that they were fed."

And "large" is the word. At night, without the sun, and while Pisher'l balled up into sleep, she wept—she rubbed her burgeoning tummy, slowly, singing, *mine liebe, mine liebe*, as if its thickening fetal waters could broadcast her longing and reach him, like a shortwave set.

In the dimmest stretches, she wouldn't doze for days. Nor would she admit to Lena the visceral toll of the garment shop—where now, on her own, she needed to spend some full days. Of 25,000 Jews employed on the East Side in 1890, more than 12,000 were garment workers. By 1899 the

growth of the industry, “measured by number of workers and value of product, was two or three times as rapid as the average for all industries.” But by 1911, the standard female garment worker nonetheless earned under ten dollars a week.

The shops were ill-lit, poorly ventilated, and some shops supplied a single toilet for up to 85 workers, that “passed odors directly into the work space.” The gas lighting leaked. The hand-operated pressing irons caused curvature of the spine. Not infrequently, managers hinted for “favors” from the girls. The shopowners often were fellow Jews—that stinks especially, that stinks like a sweatshop toilet late in the shift, in August. By her sixth month, my grandmother couldn’t even squeeze behind her machine without a painful intake of breath.

“What you do, Lena—is easy?”

“Not so easy, no. They come, these *shlooms*, they don’t know if their breath is like a *chazzer’s tuchus*” (a swine’s ass) “but their head is filled with the *shtup shtup shtup*, so nu?” She shrugged. “So I get filled with the *shtup shtup shtup* a *bissel* mineself. But I tell you, Nettie, I don’t got no *troggedik pupik*” (pregnant belly-button) “and every night with the crying *oy g’vald!* for a bum like this what he leaves you, a tramp he is!”

“Lena . . .”

“A tramp he is, a *shmootz*, say it!”

But the more the censorious Lena inveighed, the less sure my grandmother grew.

Sometimes she’d stop her chopping to listen—some foot on the stair. On certain days she’d think she could hear a hand along the bannister. She remembered those hands.

Every day was piecework and onions. Every night, the feather mattress (such luxury!) that she started to wish was a door set hard on two wood crates with his set by it, touching.

And if then, when she returned to the knife and the vegetable row of work to be done, she didn’t hum but under her breath she called the onions “*Tz’drayt-en-kopf! Meshoogeneh!*” like curse words, I can understand. Crazy-in-head! Dummy! Crying, losing track, and dicing the light itself. “*Nar ainer!*” You fool, you! (Him? Herself?) *You-Stupid! My-Fault! Shit-Shit-Shit!* Or more directly—for this was his name—*Albert*.

. . . like a *shortwave set* . . .

*

Names, and their powers. Names, and their link to the named.

The names of scalawags, by their occupations, in England in Elizabeth's time: a prigman, a ruffler, a whip-jack, a queer-bird, a doxie, a palliard, a tinkard, a kinchin mort, a gyle hather, a nunquam, a dummerer, a demander for glimmer, a bawdy basket, an apple-squire, a scrippet, a nip, a troll hazard of trace. My grandfather, then, was a swigman: "A swigman goeth with a pedlar's pack."

In his study *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, Joshua Trachtenberg says: "The essential character of things and of men resides in their names. Therefore to know a name is to be privy to the secret of its owner's being, and master of his fate . . . To know the name of a man is to exercise power. One Hebrew text says 'his name is his soul.'"

Even the angels hearkened when they were called. "To set them to work the magician must know the *names* of these angels, for the name was the controlling factor." For instance: "I command you, Haniel, and Hasdiel, and Zadkiel, by these names, to do (*thus and thus*)," and so were they summoned: Benevolence, Grace, and Mercy.

She'd saved a wisp of hair from his brush, and twisted it into a locket. If she slept at all, she slept clutching this.

*

Here is how it happened.

Women filled his dreams, his head was a candle-lit *bagnio*. Sometimes, Nettie's face; sometimes Godiva's. He was embarrassed to wake in front of the other workers, bulging.

Over time, the face was more and more Nettie's. What, what, what to do? "Here." Hi-Step Hank handed over the bottle. "You look like yesterday's bearshit." This was true. This was also, my grandfather knew, an enormous expression of friendship—in terms of its primary roustabout medium, hooch.

So he was drunk that night, approaching Godiva's wagon. Not *too* drunk—voices stopped him. He stood behind a pyramid of water barrels. She'd been drinking too, and Hap the joey.

"Fuck you, mister."

"Fuck you, *sister*. Fuck you and your momma and your momma's momma, with a dry tent pole, and fuck that grunting asshole you make the googoo eyes at."

"You're crazy, you know that? A lard-brain." When she laughed to show disdain, it ran a rich, theatrical scale.

"I ain't blind, we none of us are. You know who."

"The kikey? Oh."

"C'mere." Then there was a minute of urgent breath-sound and nebulous wriggle. When she spoke again, it tumbled quick and emotionally pitched to perfection, as if she'd practiced this set-speech in her own head many times already.

"I like you, Hap. I like to suck you, I like to feel your grubby little fingers spreading my crack. Do you know why?"—she didn't wait—"All day I stand in my cherub outfit and twirl on a white horse for the Jesus-drooling citizens of Clean Ass, Kansas, and when they applaud they lift me out of the ring to the Throne of God Himself, and God Himself admires me up on one pink toe and praises my perfection." You could tell, she was posing herself all the while.

"At night I need to get myself filthy, to balance it. You're my filth, Hap. You're my animal-stud-fucking-filth. And on the day I think the kikey man can handle the job"—she posed again, to emphasize what *the job* was—"he can be my filth too."

"Oh yeah? Well you're—" But he was gone, my grandfather. He didn't need Hap the joey's retort.

Godiva knew something was wrong, when she woke. Through booze-haze she could hear the usual fracas, the bear, the calliope practice . . . something else, though, a terrible wail. She wrapped up in a chenille robe and strode outside. Professor Oink was strung up in back of her wagon, by his aft trotters. He was making one hell of an unacademic squeal. Someone, whoever the lunatic was that did it, had fastened her spangled tutu around him.

*

But there's another version.

My grandfather woke, so late that even The Great Gambooni was passed out now, making the thrum of a snare drum in his throat.

Come here . . . It was fuzzy outside, and fuzzy inside my grandfather's head. The damn pig seemed to be calling him, that was crazy of course, but after all it was a circus. *Come here* . . . He started in that direction.

Wait . . . Another voice. A dog had gently clipped a loose fold of

pajama-leg in its teeth. Then it let go, and spoke again. *Come mit me.*

"Who are you?"

I'm a hoont, you can't see? Then: Who are you?

"My name is Walter."

Come mit me, Albert. Come, follow mit me.

*

A foot on the stair. A hand on the bannister.

*

They have too much of anger and healing for us to consider nakedly. I leave them for now on the feather mattress, his first night back. I only want to quote from the *Zohar*, a Jewish mystical text of the *Kabbalah*. It tells us that when a man journeys, his "heavenly wife" is with him all that while—a spirit-form of his matrimonial union remains continuous, and "he is now male and female in the country, as he was male and female in the town." When a man returns from journeying, "it is his duty, once back home, to give his wife pleasure, inasmuch as she it was who obtained for him the heavenly union."

He strokes her taut hill-of-a-belly.

Oi-YOY, mine liebe, mine liebe.

*

Downstairs, on the table where Mathilde the Queen of the Ocean Deep once held court, they'd left a loonily-piled Ararat of Hendrickje's underthings. Moonlight through the room's huge windows dappled over it, silver and shadowy blue.

Upstairs, he unfolded himself from the musty cup of her arm. She'd sleep if a meteor hit the garden, now, in the after-exhaustion of sex and a flagon of wine. She always slept well, after reconciliation. He watched her, a moment: here, the moonlight lay like a rosin around her, a malt.

Then he slipped to the studio. There were candles enough. Sleep beckoned him too, but wooing him more imploringly than that was a face from his sketchbook. With the canvas sized from last week, he could start it into oils tonight, while the burning was on him. A Jewess's face—it had broken out of a small complacency of faces by the tumult of emotions it wore. And this excited him, thinking the paint would soon be human

skin, and then the skin would be that mixspot where a woman's acquiescence meets her hard determination, now a tittle of indigo, gray, red, thickly squiggled salmon . . . particularizing the chisel-edge of light along her nape and then into the tassels of hair below one ear, and over the jaw set slightly off-center in thought . . .

Preserving this one face—doleful, triumphant, whatever—as best he can, and while he can, while it still isn't doused from his system.

*

She turned. The half-moon lit her face and would have made it timelessly lovely, except an upright from the fire escape flung one long bar of shadow across her.

"I think we will call him the name of Ervin."

"Yes, a good name." He sighed, immensely. "Such a day, Nettie . . . !"

"Such a life."

"Yes." Then he paused, he was ashamed. "With this *kaddishel*"—this baby boy—"he'll be here soon . . ."

"Or a girl, yah. Then Hannah we call her."

". . . but the money, I don't have this. From a circus, they don't give the money so much. A place to be, peoples you talk with, yes; but the money, no. So . . ." he halted, he'd never failed this way.

She opened her second-hand steamer trunk and withdrew the celluloid whatnot box. Twelve dollars a week, six months—it was a fortune, 288 dollars.

"Nettie! How do you make this for us, from nothing?"

"*Kishef*," she told him—magic.

*

"It isn't always a happy ending, is it?" Gaylene has exhibited, for my histrionic oohing, every porcelain nixie, 1920s bakelite bangle, and near-mint first-edition Oz series title in her apartment. We've even played with the Schoenhut figurines, doing seal noise (ROWK! ROWK!), tiger-&-lion growl, crowd hubbahubba. But what we can't do is conjure Craig, and what *I* can't do is love her enough in the way I do love her to make that not matter.

Later, I visit Craig. He's getting along, he says. We knock back some beers on the building's crumbling balcony, then a few more beers. He isn't

getting along, he says then. What went wrong? Didn't they *try* hard?

It's a rhetorical question; no one tried harder. We sit there in silence, surrounded by the kit-kat clocks with moving eyes, the toby mugs, the inkwells and quills, the frog and ostrich and bulldog and Martian and porcupine rubber squeeze-me toys, the turn-of-the-century printer's type, the cowboy lamps, the vastly tasteless selection of lime-green naugahyde.

They'd saved everything imaginable *except* Hitler's brain; and their marriage.

7. *Postscript: The Final Entry*

I was still in Oklahoma when I exited: some dried-out, moon-cratered place. Its squalid version of an oasis was a makeshift dump where broken boxspring mattresses and shattered toilets, unsaveable and long past any compromise with use or sensibility, wavered like bad teevee reception, in the upshaft heat of decay. I pulled alongside it, into its swimming stink. Austin was science-fiction distance south of me; Wichita, north.

This wasn't the plan, of course. I couldn't have done it, *planned*. But I unloaded the trunk, the back seat, and the U-Haul mini-hitch with a swift efficiency that normally only preparedness could account for. Thirty cartons of lousy job and soured marriage, with the scarab-green and iridescent blackberry sheen of compost-flies already in exploratory orbits.

I could have *flown* the Dodge Colt home, it felt so light.

*

You need to know when to let go. Otherwise . . .

Jeanmarie, a friend, has a story. Her grandmother's died and the family holds a traditional nightlong keening and tippling Catholic/Irish wake. Everyone slobbering piteously, getting juiced, emitting great shaken-out moans from the heartcore, throwing themselves across the open coffin as if with *suttee* in mind, and in general wreaking very grievous and merry pre-funereal havoc.

"Some time before sunup my grandfather lifted her corpse from the coffin and started dancing, *ballroom dancing*, around the room. They couldn't pry him away from her, maybe they half didn't want to. He couldn't let go of her. Dancing. His hand at the small of her back." Dancing around the room until the candles burned down as flat as wax coins.

*

In 1656, the court ordered Rembrandt's holdings catalogued for sale. He was deeply in debt, and this euphemistic *cessio bonorum*, a "surrender of goods," replaced the harsher official declaration of bankruptcy saved for the truly fraudulent. Everything went — the gold helmets, the walrus-tusk carvings, everything. The inventory taker from the Chamber of Insolvent Estates compiled 363 separate entries.

Kenneth Clark says, "It is usually supposed that the sale of all these precious possessions was a great blow to him. But who can tell?" (Mee seconds this uncertainty: "There is no way to know how Rembrandt was feeling during all this.") Then Clark philosophizes, "There is a point at which possessions become a burden: they are exhilarating to buy, but a nuisance to look after. What if moths had got into the fur caps, and the Japanese armour had rusted, and pupils had spilt turpentine on his Marcan-tonio engravings and poisoned his pet monkey (which one of them actually did). The grandest and calmest of all his self-portraits was done in the year of his sale."

He's ruminating out of the frame—but inwardly, at the same time—with a kind of understanding resignation, and this somehow doesn't negate, but deepens, poignatizes, the natural big-bodied majesty.

*

In Lewis Hyde's insightful study *The Gift*, he tells us, "A gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us." In a sense, my finding *Green Lantern* number 3 is such a gift, hoped-for but unarrangeable, surely a moment of grace in which the cosmos let me open up Time and take a step retrograde into it; and the thirty dollars is not so much the price of a commodity, as the necessary clearing-away of a space where serendipity occurs. No matter what a comics price guide says, there is no market value for such an occasion; it exists in its own green atemporal shimmer.

Hyde continues, "Thus we rightly speak of 'talent' as a 'gift,' for although a talent can be perfected through an effort of the will, no effort in the world can cause its initial appearance. Mozart, composing on the harp-sichord at the age of four, had a gift." And Rembrandt stretches his arm on the table, rests his head in its bend, and sighs his way at last into a fitful

slumber, under the half-complete painting. This is where we take our leave of him.

“Moreover, a gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation. May Sarton writes: ‘The gift turned inward, unable to be given, becomes a heavy burden, even sometimes a kind of poison. It is as though the flow of life were locked up.’ It is the talent which is not in use that is lost or atrophies, and to bestow one of our creations is the surest way to invoke the next. Bestowal creates that empty place into which new energy may flow. The alternative is petrification, writer’s block, ‘the flow of life backed up.’”

For any ongoing, then, there needs to be an equal emptying-out: the tile mosaic must leave the artist’s studio for the gallery; the lover must carry his knit wool keepsake into battle; the High Gods must look down with a gaze that meets the burnt offering wafting up on a chargray plume of sacrifice-smoke.

This is one of the ancientmost wars: a page of Yiddish, fixing the years and their passions against disappearance; and the man with the match, who needs to get on with the thousand-and-one tugs of living.

*

This is the final entry in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *American Notebooks*: “I burned great heaps of old letters, and other papers, a little while ago, preparatory to going to England. Among them were hundreds of _____’s letters. The world has no more such, and now they are all dust and ashes. What a trustful guardian of secret matters is fire! What should we do without fire and death?”

NOTE

Transliteration from the Yiddish, both individual words and mannerisms of phrasing, is not entirely consistent throughout the text, the better to account for the flexible and adaptive qualities of the language, and the confusion of the early immigrant experience. Some guiding spirits have helped me considerably. In addition to the poems of Louis Simpson, they are: William Kittredge, *Owning It All*; Jed Perl, “On Collecting”;

Charles L. Mee, Jr., *Rembrandt's Portrait*; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*; William Gass, *Habitations of the Word*; Jacob Bronowski, *A Sense of the Future*; Daniel Benjamin (on Aaron Lansky), "Preserving the Printed Word"; Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*; Kenneth Clark, *An Introduction to Rembrandt*; and Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*. There are some small instances when material quoted from these texts is rearranged for purposes of rhythm or concision.