JOE AMATO

Just Produce: A Meditation on Time & Materials, Past & Present

> *But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,*
> *that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you listen*
> *when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?*
> — Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*

Like my father, I've never been too good with money.

But I can never be my father's son.

My name? I drop the "Jr." to avoid redundancy. As I see it, I know who I am, and Joe Six-Pack, Jr., is more than a mouthful. But years later our credit ratings will still get confused—which makes it difficult for me to get credit. This despite the fact that my father, thanks to the nuns who drilled it into him, signs his name Joseph, not Joe—and not Giuseppe, the given name that becomes Joe by default on the sidewalks of Depression-era Syracuse. Joseph is the name he gives for a reissued birth certificate.

Sometimes it's best not to keep up appearances.

In spite of my father's talents, and with the exception of my rolltop, two dressers, a bookcase, and two antique piano stools he rescues from the trash heap, our furniture is a wreck. Reminds me of so many car mechanics I've known—so many of these guys drive crates. Why is that?

I do love tomatoes. Like my father.

Mike isn't too fond of them—raw. Though he's starting to eat them, now that he's turned forty, and finds them in his burritos. Cooked, they've always formed a staple of our diet, all three of us bred to simmering the berries stove-top, for hours on end.

I learn that I have bad gums, like my father—which he took to be bad teeth. Unlike my father at my age, I still have my teeth.

Sometimes it's best to keep up appearances.

Either way, appearances matter.

Still, tomatoes or no, teeth or no, I can never be my father's son.

How to measure the distance—between us, from here to there, and back.

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For one, I don't have the lungs for it. For the fumes, the sawdust. I'm asthmatic—like Mike, but worse. We've both been through the allergy shot routine as kids, all seven years of it. Not much help, finally.

Like so many of my father's generation and background, most of my generation and background smoke, and smoke—but cigarettes *and* pot. Never mind that weed speeds up my already fast metabolism—I can't inhale it without some real hacking. So I find myself somewhat out of step with the times, and with the circumstances that helped to define the times.

As far as working with wood goes, Mike picks this up from my father. He's good with his hands, part of the reason why, even into early adulthood, he loves magic tricks. Orders all sorts of stuff from Vick Lawston's "House of a Thousand Mysteries" catalog. *I'm in business just for* FUN, Vick says in his catalog. As a kid, Mike likes surprise, sleight of hand—he likes to put on a show. I'm his assistant. We both have fun.

The divorce will sober him up some—permanently.

Me, I'm pretty good with a wrench. A decent cook. Maybe even a knack for colors, elementary renderings of landscape and still life.

But both of my parents have a habit of saying that it's what's upstairs that counts. From an early age, I understand what they mean. Maybe it's the look in their eyes as they say this. Or maybe it's that I'm well fed, live in a three bedroom ranch, beneath infrequently blue suburban skies. Roof over my head. Whatever the reason, I manage fourth and fifth grades in a single year.

When we move into our second floor flat at 501 Raphael Avenue, my father brings that habit of saying along with him. Living upstairs, I understand even better.

An observation pertinent to the past century: a furniture finisher works with materials that rub off on him. And part of him, his very

tissue, rubs off on these materials. This is his stock-in-trade. He works cognitively, as in all work, and his cognitive work must process the interaction of his senses with the stuff of three dimensions. Eyes and hands are his instruments, sight and touch the qualities he judges. Even when the piece itself is mass-produced, each bears his touch. Surrounded by the odors of his trade, perhaps odor itself is a measurement taken—a sign of solvent dried, or mixture properly proportioned. You might, if you're lucky, receive a refinished piece bearing my father's invisible mark, expertly altered by him in some slight way. Lucky *and* unlucky, for such a piece will have been damaged, restored.

My father deals, that is to say, in the reparation of appearances, a beauty only and profoundly skin deep. And to the extent that each wood item is porous, like tissue, and singular—like each of us, like any *item*, so defined—it breathes his finishing touches, even as it resists his every effort.

He works through his body—as do I, as do all of those with bodies—to produce a crafted beauty. And it must be said: my father becomes, in the most literal sense imaginable, a corporeal tool of his trade, even as his trade becomes a tool of the corporation. For it is this same crafted beauty that will help to kill him.

Will help to kill him through the habitual circuits of life—inhalation, respiration, aspiration. As we—this technologically bound culture—will find more efficient ways to alter appearances.

Whatever else, my father's lesson will not be lost on me: suspicious I am and will remain of the human and social costs of a craft that binds.

I work through touch too, as a (near)sighted individual—and some might say that I deal in appearances. To be precise, North American, middle-class appearances—at this moment, *now*. Typing is not a problem for me, anymore than is holding a pen. But like my father, I sweat the details. And what I work with, what resists my efforts more than material, are the virtually two-dimensional l-e-t-t-e-r-s *here*, on this page, and their relationship to the very stuff of thought. And if my computer mediates for me these mediating words, I am, signature to utterance, no less subject to their ingrained effects and affects. In some uncertain measure, then, I participate in a shared experience, even if the text before me, on this screen I'm busy

scrolling, has not a trace more of my DNA than on those pages you're busy flipping, or on that screen you're busy scrolling, or in those sound waves you're busy processing.

People who lament the advent of things and words electronic often point to the tactile attributes of books as more befitting a creature with fingers. Ironically, however, with the exception of some vital artistic communities and their products, the production and proliferation of books has been given over largely to machines, the assembly line. Software has made even of typesetting a fraught trade. In the meantime, electronic media have opened up alternative vistas for authoring, communicating, publishing—various publics gone online, more and less purposefully—which has complicated the customary genres of writing-based products even as the business of publishing has become more and more economically tenuous, and merger-prone.

Is *this*—what you're busy reading, or listening to—a memoir, or a fiction, or an essay? It is certainly all of these, as any writer worth her salt will tell you. But what are the alternating effects of reading it as any one of these, and then as any other?

And at the level of material itself: the mass produced book—like *this* piece of writing, if it appears in your hands in print and not as electronic copy—still requires for its production and distribution the social organization of machines and people. Today, however, one may assemble with one's *personal* computer—much as one might with a typewriter, or with a pencil—a uniquely handmade manuscript, virtually infinite variation possible within the regulated limits of software, printer design, paper type and size, and so forth. Or one may compose a uniquely handmade electronic text, with similar possibilities for variation. Or one may collaborate with others, across space and time zone and national boundary, to produce a somewhat different textual product, and an altered sense of writing process, authorship, and perhaps reading process.

Like the typewriter, or the pencil, or any device for making texts, the computer itself is hardly a simple machine, like the inclined plane; not quite a tool, like the wrench; not quite a machine tool, like the lathe. The computer, as part of a network of such machines, seems more and more to represent an *event*—telephone, radio, television, and library technologies intersecting with computational technologies—an event keyed to archiving information, communi-

cating, computing, and producing texts. Composing, configuring, drawing, creating, solving, displaying, printing, copying, scanning, sorting, filtering, editing, corresponding, sharing, exchanging, swapping, discussing, arguing, addressing, confronting, alerting, assembling, simulating, arranging, combining, selecting, evaluating, saving, deleting, opening, closing, changing, searching, finding, buying, campaigning?—images, sounds, letters, numbers, graphics, data, feelings, beliefs, opinions, whims, ideas, moods, passions, wants, needs? As we find ourselves more and more interacting with, even *relying* on the range of possibilities it presents to us, the computer becomes a truly complex making machine, as complex surely as the assembly or packaging line, with its only occasionally intervening human attendant.

And whether machine or tool or machine tool, thus is process itself digitally enacted, reenacted—manually, in real time, as I type, or as I point and click. And thus does an analog world augur a digital rethinking of hand and mind, agent and actor, bone and silicon. "[T]o be as shaped as wood is when a man has had his hand to it," wrote Charles Olson of his projected experience of the word. Perhaps just so.

And all the while, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, even as my middle-class wrists ache from *these* repetitive-stress patterns. I begin to wonder whether my new-age affliction is but a misbegotten variant of my old man's arthritis, different and same as we are, as we aspire to be . . . mortal, iconoclastic, untutored in our failings.

A final consideration: aside from a couple of dressers he designs and builds for Mike and me, and a bookcase he makes upon request for my mother—all put together in the basement of our house at 112 South Dolores Terrace, with the help of his friend Dick Italia—and aside from a handful of knickknacks, my father's work with wood finishes does not alter the functional design of the piece upon which he labors. A chair remains a chair, a table a table, a piano a piano. You might not care to use an item as before simply because, through use, you might mar his restoration, but this is part of his job—to *help* you care. In my work, *this* work, the journal publication remains a journal publication, but what I do between and through its pages will seem mightily to alter its form—a place become a sentence, a sentence a document, a document a story, a story a place. And in

this living place of present memory a young man in relative poverty becomes an engineer in relative security, an engineer in relative security becomes a writer of uncertain relations. Electronic text itself complicates further this matter of form and differential place, making of "communications medium" both premise and promise—a past and present of here and there, a future of new products, new productions, near and far interrelations of solitude and community. Perhaps new processes of old, new forms of old feelings, old feelings in new trappings.

My father's chief recreation is watching TV, and wood TV cabinets and consoles play an important role both in his employment history and his vocation—all those years spent fixing damaged sets for General Electric, for his friend Johnny Palamino's TV repair business. This is General Electric—not the GE of today, that blue-chip stock that farms out its electronics manufacturing to Thomson Consumer Electronics. But in the end, what's the difference?

You're lucky, Joey, if you can make a living off of what you love to do.

He says this even as the notion of TV-as-furniture has dated badly. It will be years before the emergence of professionally polymeric, surround-sound digital home entertainment centers will recuperate this presumed center of a "living" room. So many sounds and images, courtesy of innumerable sponsors—these mixed signals seem oddly to offer us the remote chance to attempt something more than mere escape: to assign value to our liberties, each and all.

But thinking of him, sitting there on the couch, smoking, watching TV, often cussing at what he sees and hears, *talking back*, and anything but wooden—I swear, he seems the spitting image of himself.

Forget the image.

All works, wood to word, are assigned value, good and bad and in-between, even as all toil under the sun.

One thing is certain: my father knows how to work, how to pace himself. This you learn the hard way, the only way.

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Like I say, I love tomatoes. Always have. Except for a two-month stretch one summer, twenty-five years ago, following my junior year at Syracuse University.

We're as broke as ever; I'm looking for a summer job. Mike is in Schenectady, doing hardness testing for the big General Electric plant there. A job my mother manages to arrange for him. So for three months, it's just me and my old man.

I apply for something like thirty-five different jobs. No luck.

I spot in the newspaper an ad for encyclopedia salespeople. What catches my eye is a row of $$$$$ across the top of the ad. I figure I may as well see if I have the right stuff for the job. For the $$$$$.

The next day finds me walking out of the middle of a high-intensity sales pitch, pitched to a roomful of poor souls. Walking out into the bright summer air. May as well be selling Fuller brushes, or vacuum cleaners. No fucking way—poor soul or not, it's just not me.

Next thing I know I'm walking into places, cold, asking if they need any help.

One day my father and I drop in on my grandparents, down on State Street. After a plate of chickpeas and rice, I walk out front. I notice for the first time the big red brick, single story warehouse a block away, S & S Mondo's Produce. I walk in, spot a guy, walk right up to him and ask him if he needs any help.

As a matter of fact, I do. Just lost a guy. When can you start?

Tomorrow.

OK. See you 7:30 then.

Noon a week later, I'm going at it like a house on fire.

I'm standing at the end of a conveyor belt, right at the edge of a seven-foot high, six-foot wide machine that's spitting out eight-inch long shrink-wrapped packages of tomatoes, five to a package. The machine makes a CHCHUNK noise as it drops each group of five into its green plastic basket, dipping the basket down onto the plastic wrap, cutting the plastic wrap while turning and wrapping the basket, and then placing the package onto a conveyor, where it passes by two blow-dryers, one on each side of the conveyor, which immediately melt the wrapping to seal each end.

I'm twisting left to grab two packages with my right hand, and twisting right to place them—or more like toss them—horizontally into the bottom half of a cardboard box. Then I'm twisting left to

grab three packages with both hands, wedging one in the middle, and twisting right again to toss these three into the remaining space, almost simultaneously grabbing the lid to the box, furthest to my right, with my right hand. Placing the lid on, fast as I can, I grab the full box with both hands and swing all the way around to place the box on a pallet behind me, turning back around to grab a box bottom on my right, and then to my left to place the box bottom in front of me and continuing on to grab the two of the three or four packages that have popped out of the machine in the meantime, repeating the process.

CHCHUNK. CHCHUNK. CHCHUNK. CHCHUNK. CHCHUNK. CHCHUNK.

I've been doing this now for three hours straight, without as much as a pause. And for a solid hour, an older, well-dressed man, sporting neatly trimmed hair and a neatly trimmed grey moustache, has been standing to my right, eyeing carefully my every move. This is Mr. Mondo, a man my father might describe as dapper.

On the other end of the conveyor belt, on the other side of the machine from where I work, are four women, each of whom has a basket of tomatoes in front of her, each of whom is sorting through her respective box and placing the better tomatoes on the conveyor belt. Patty, Mary, Josie, and Bernice. These women are all in their mid- or late fifties. And they talk while they sort.

Mary, wanna go have a few with me at lunch?

Sure, Patty. Can't wait.

Yeah, sick of this shit already. Sometimes this machine drives me nuts.

She's right. Input or output, you're at its mercy. Suddenly the machine growls, spits out a package sideways, crushes three tomatoes, and mashes one plastic basket into the works. Sometimes I can pull things loose, get the machine back up and running.

I peer my head in. Clearly, this is not one of those times.

Mr. Mondo walks over and turns off power to the machine, yelling over to a chubby younger guy, his son Sal, to come and un-jam things, and readjust the mechanism. Sal is a decent mechanic when it comes to these machines, but not much else. I've already had to show him how to tune-up his new truck.

So I'm standing there, soaked in sweat; the women have stopped sorting and started talking with one another. Mr. Mondo turns to me for just a moment.

Pretty good work.

He says this softly, so softly it's barely audible.

Thanks.

Let's take lunch.

Lester, the forklift driver loading the pallets into the truck behind me, asks me if I'd like to grab a hamburger with him across the street, in the small tavern. A real dive.

Sure, yeah.

Gimme a minute to finish loading.

Lester is a guy about my size but leaner, in his late thirties, bearded. Doesn't say much, comes off as considerate. And he's what he appears to be—a hard, earnest worker. And nobody to fuck with. He tells me a story one time about how some guys were fucking with him in a tavern, and he walked back out to his pickup, and walked back in the tavern with his twelve-gauge pump.

That shut 'em the fuck up.

By the time we walk into the bar across the street, Mary and Patty have already downed a tall bottled Bud each, and are well on their way through their second. They order two at a time each, and place three orders during that lunch hour. They talk about their grandkids.

Lester has warned me to watch myself with Mary, who is less than five feet tall and whose shoulders are three feet across. Her sister and daughter and mother stop by one day. The four women are identical in stature.

Not that you couldn't handle her, Joe. But when she's drinking, you never know. She pinned this younger guy who used to work here up against the wall, wouldn't let him go. I had to break it up.

Yeah, OK. I'll keep it in mind.

When our lunch hour is up, we walk back over to find out how many orders have come in. If a lot of orders have come in, we may be at work till ten that night. If few orders have come in, they'll let us go early. If we've worked a lot of nights, and if the orders aren't too heavy, they'll still let us go early—they don't have to pay over-

time, no matter how late we've worked on a given day, unless we break forty hours.

Mr. Mondo informs us that a lot of orders have come in. We're in for the duration.

Around nine o'clock that night, Mr. Mondo tells me that he'd like me to go with Lester to the farmers' market and to the P&C warehouse, to help Lester unload the truck.

OK, sure.

Lester makes a quick phone call, and we get down to Park Street at half past nine. Lester's wife Deb is waiting there for us, a six-pack in her hand.

Let's unload first.

OK.

We unload the boxes, five at a time. Takes us a good half hour.

Here you go, Joe.

The three of us have a beer together. Small talk.

Be home around midnight.

OK, hon.

Lester and I get back in the truck, drive up Park Street to Hiawatha Boulevard, and down Hiawatha to the 690 entrance. We take 690 around the lake to the P&C warehouse. The lake looks pretty at night—smooth and still, the headlights on Onondaga Parkway along the other side of the lake reflecting now and then off the water.

The P&C warehouse is huge. Lester backs the truck up, with me guiding him. We both walk inside, and Lester gives the dock supervisor our delivery order. This portion of the warehouse is refrigerated, so we work as fast as we can.

By the time we get back to State Street, it's pushing eleven o'clock.

See you tomorrow morning, Joe.

Right, see ya Lester.

I hop in my car, a '68 Caprice, and drive home.

This goes on for two months or so. I'm making pretty good money, at $3.50 an hour, plus the overtime I work.

Some days my father drops me off at work, and I phone him when we're through to come pick me up. One evening he arrives just as my boss walks out front. I introduce him to Mr. Mondo.

The two men are about the same age, both first-generation Italian Americans, both smoking cigarettes. My father is respectful, as always.

Hello Mr. Mondo.

The two men shake hands.

I notice that Mr. Mondo is wearing a brand new pair of Nettleton wingtips, a fine pair of wool-blend trousers, and a neatly pressed short-sleeve oxford. I see that my father is dressed much the same way, his wingtips scuffed and worn, his shirt dotted with finishing stains, a few threads unraveling along the cuffs of his trousers.

I see.

I don't know when, exactly, but sometime during this period the smell of raw tomatoes begins ever so slightly to nauseate me. It may have something to do with the garbage cans in the warehouse, which I have to clean out every week. They're encrusted with a sweet-smelling, moldy layer of rotted tomato. Whatever the case, I find that I just can't stand to eat the raw material.

I can recall, when I was a kid, picking tomatoes right off the vine along the side of our house. I'd have a salt shaker and eat them right there, on the spot. My mother was always smiling.

The tomatoes we sell at Mondo's, most of them, are OK. Some are not OK. Sometimes we can't sell what we purchase.

Tom, I want you to place those pallets in the back room and gas 'em.

OK, Mr. Mondo.

In the back of the warehouse is a small air-conditioned room, fitted with nitrogen. The nitrogen keeps the tomatoes from spoiling, even as they gradually become tasteless.

Tom does what he's told. He speaks with a drawl, is difficult to understand, talks to himself at times, and walks all twisted-up. Lester and the women say that he's "simple," but I'm not so sure. Once in a while someone will crack a joke at his expense, but usually he's left alone. He's a hard worker.

Some days Tom's wife drops in to see how he's doing. I notice that she's not like Tom. Nor are his two kids. But I never make any effort to get to know Tom—I keep to my kind, or to the kind I perceive myself to be.

Our best tomatoes are what we call *chefs*. Each is wrapped in a small square piece of tracing paper with the S & S Mondo logo, for effect, and then placed by the women individually in boxes.

Be careful with those tomatoes, ladies.

I can hear Patty whispering to Mary under her breath.

Go on you old decrepit bastard you.

End of July, orders trickle off, and they let me go for good.

It's right after this that my grampa dies, in his sleep. The official cause of death is a stroke, of "natural causes." But he dies at roughly the same moment that Besden's Furniture, less than a mile away in the heart of downtown, explodes with a terrific concussion, so powerful that its huge storefront sign is propelled across Salina Street and into the parking lot of the new Herald-American/Post-Standard building. The explosion is officially determined to be "of suspicious origin." My grampa is 87.

My gramma and my father are visibly upset, and my father consoles his mother. I'm not sure what to say or do. Mike and I attend the funeral parlor visitation hours, meeting a number of relatives we've never before met. My father tells us not to bother coming to the wake, which has been arranged by his three brothers and their cousin, Francis, a woman who has money and a strong sense of social propriety. Mike and I are relieved.

When my father gets home from the wake, he's slurring his words slightly, and I notice that slight odor. Been drinking, heavy.

How was the wake, Dad?

He tells us that the long-standing bad blood between him and my uncle Frank has finally surfaced—at the wake.

So everybody is eating dinner, and I tell Sam, quietly—Sam, don't you *ever* volunteer me to drive you and your friends all over Christ's creation. And Frank, he's sitting next to Sam—you know how he is—he pipes up and says, to the entire table, *Why you good-for-nothing asshole you*. So I turn to Frank and tell him, Y'know Frank—one of these days—one of these days, bad arm or no, I'm gonna knock you on your ass but good. *Oh is that a fact?* he says. Yeah, I says, as a matter of fact—

My father jumps up off the couch.

—as a matter of fact, this is as good a time as any, I've taken your SHIT for the last time—

My father doubles his fists now, fuming.

—C'MON YOU SONOFABITCH, I tell him, and he gets up comes at me saying *Why you* but before he says another word I grab him and toss him on the floor I coulda CRIPPLED him, and Sam and Dominick jump on my back and I toss them offa me and to the three of them I says C'MON! And I walked right the FUCK outta there, the hell with Francis and her BULLSHIT!

My father is furious, shouting, his entire body giving voice to his narration, and Mike and I are trying like hell not to laugh hysterically.

Fifteen years later, when my gramma turns 90, Francis will throw a birthday party for her, invite a local Monsignor. Mike and I will go, and our three uncles will be there. My father won't show. And he won't be around to attend my gramma's 100th birthday party.

Shortly after the wake, the Caprice starts to go bad. I've sunk what money I can into it, but I can see that it's rapidly on its way to becoming history. My father has been out of work for a month, so we've had to let repairs go. Bad brakes. Really bad—takes fifty feet to stop at 20 mph. So it's touch-and-go driving. And this shitbox puts out more smoke than a chimney. If you get pissed at another driver—as my father often does—you can bury them in a white-blue cloud.

To complicate matters, no money for insurance, or for registration. So four eyes out for the cops at all times.

Even grocery shopping with this shitbox is becoming a source of considerable stress, and my father comes as close as ever to looking into work at Marcellus Casket Company. Marcellus caskets are locally renowned for their beautiful woodwork and finish, and the company pays quite well. But my father just cannot conceive of putting himself to work on that which will be buried in the earth, and he literally wrings his hands over this. The way he sees it, it's working for the dead, not for the living.

When I die, just throw me in a plain pine box, that's all.

He'll get something a bit fancier—but Mike and I will respect the sentiment behind his wishes, and we won't have the money anyway, so we'll opt for metal.

Maybe a TV cabinet and a casket are alike, finally, something my father just can't seem to get a handle on. Inanimate objects, inanimate people. Does it have to be this way?

I land a job pumping gas part-time for a west-side accountant, Dennis Needham, who's trying to make a go of it as a businessman. Dennis is a real prick to work for—rides your ass every chance he gets. He's the kind of boss who'll ask you, casually, to sweep the lot if you have the time, then stop back in two hours to make sure you've swept it. He's always out of sorts, always high on his accounting horse. Even accuses me of not knowing what an "expo-Tential" is—that's right, this is how Dennis says *exponential*—simply because I'm having a difficult time using his late-nineteenth-century adding machine.

My father is dropping me off each afternoon at the station and picking me up evenings. Like I say, it's touch and go, and I figure after two weeks that it's not worth the effort, especially not at $2.50 an hour. Not even at $2.60 an hour, which Dennis says he'll pay me if I wear regulation blue polyester trousers instead of jeans. *It's your choice*, he says. But I'm so sick of the bastard that I figure I'll push him on this, and if he gives me any shit, I'll up and quit. We'll see who's the *real* prick.

So one afternoon I push him.

Where are your blue pants?

Sitting over there, on the windowsill.

I point.

But I didn't have time to put them on, Dennis, so I thought I'd just wear my jeans.

Well I don't give a shit *what* you thought—I want to see you with your blue pants on.

But you said this was up to me—*my* choice.

I don't give a shit *what* I said. I want to see you with those pants on.

Uh-huh. Well then, Dennis, that's OK—*I quit*.

Just like that, and the pumps are full of customers. Feels good seeing his jaw drop.

A week later Dennis shuts his place down—he tells me when I phone him that he was losing money—and I stop out to his home in Camillus to pick up my last paycheck. Nice place, with a private

office in the basement. He apologizes for his poor behavior, ends up writing me out a check for a few bucks extra.

It's like my father says: you treat assholes like assholes. It's the only way to earn their respect.

My father gets a lead on a job just this side of Solvay, on the west end. A place called Craftsman Interiors.

We drive there together. From the exterior, it's not much of a place. A beat-up storefront that serves as an office of sorts, and a loading dock out back.

My father walks in, and comes out a few minutes later.

We've got the job.

Turns out that I'll be making half my father's wage, which is just shy of ten bucks an hour. We're both under the table. They want us to refinish all the dorm room furniture from Ithaca College. We're to set to work immediately.

We drive around back, park the car, and walk with our spray guns and a few supplies up a few steps and through the door alongside the loading dock into the once-and-future finishing area. It's a large room, perhaps fifty feet square, dust all over everything and dimly lit. Before us are a couple of sawhorses, three fifty-five gallon drums of clear lacquer, lacquer sealer, and thinner, and a large industrial air compressor and tank outfit in the corner, pneumatic lines leading to the work area. In the background, through another set of doors, we can hear table saws, band saws, rotary sanders—this is where Craftsman actually makes commercial furniture—bars, wood storage cabinets and the like.

I can tell that my father—who is not a patient man—is not pleased with this arrangement. The workplace is a mess, and it's abundantly clear that, prior to our arrival, there has been at best only a half-hearted attempt in these confines at laying anything resembling a finish on something resembling wood. It's a wonder this guy, whom my father refers to simply as James, was even awarded the Ithaca College contract. My father begins to arrange the sawhorses, but gets so flustered after a few minutes that he kicks one over.

C'mon Joe! Let's get the fuck outta here! I'm gonna tell that no good Arab bastard that he can stick this job up his ASS!

Dad, wait a minute—we've come this far—

Gradually he calms down, and within the hour we're moving the small dressers and drawers from an adjoining room into the finishing area, lining them up on the floor and preparing them for a finish.

The furniture that we're working on has been stripped in another area. Our job will consist of sanding the surfaces, prepping them for sealer, and after an undetermined amount of sealer, laying on a coat of semi-gloss lacquer. We'll be working on something like eighty drawers, and forty small dressers, at a time. It's up to my father to decide what constitutes adequate sanding, sealer, lacquer—adequate for this sort of assembly line production work. An assembly line that runs by hand.

And it's also up to James, because James leans on us—hard sometimes. He's got a deadline—end of summer. And he wants to beat his deadline. So he spies on us, peering through the crack in the doors that separate our area from the furniture construction area. He's constantly coming into our work area, checking up on us.

James Mahmud doesn't seem like such a bad guy, actually—a handsome guy of around forty, married, with kids, who also owns a restaurant at Armory Square. But he behaves like most entrepreneurs I've run across—as if you're stealing their money, jeopardizing their undertaking. So it's only a matter of a few days before it becomes my father the Sicilian against James the no good Arab bastard.

At first I learn by mimicking my father. Sometimes he tells me things I already know, things I've heard all my life. But I try not to object—I try to learn.

Hold the block like this, Joe—and move it with the grain.

Joey—move the gun back and forth steadily—not too slow, the paint'll run!—release the trigger quickly and press again firmly as you reach the end of each coat. That's it—

I learn, as I've learned on other jobs, that I need to relax into these muscle movements—I need to let them become a part of me. The rhythm is a pulsed whisper, a shhhhh/shhhhh/shhhhh/shhhhh, and a swinging arm and hand becomes visual accompaniment. As it is, my hands and forearms tire quickly. I'm tensed up, my reflexes haven't yet established the right feel for the work, for the material.

But after a week, my father tells me that I'm as good as any pro. It's not exactly an overstatement—I have a great teacher, and I learn what corners can be cut without sacrificing quality. The gun

becomes an extension of my hand, and I adjust the spray width to suit my own peculiar motion. I even monkey with the compressed air-paint mixture to determine what seems the best setting given the mixture of paint and thinner we've made for a given batch, and the humidity and temperature on a given day. Eventually I begin to decide for myself when a piece is finished. I begin to make this work mine, and it happens quickly simply because we're doing so much damned work, and because my father trusts me.

One thing I don't need my father to teach me, perhaps because he's already taught me, by example: when to sound off, and at what volume. And once in a while, I do—but good. I finally tell James just what I think of him spying on us.

What you mean?

I saw you over there—spying. Who do you think you are?

Who you think *you* are?—I own this place, I'm the boss.

There's something almost endearing about this guy. He's like a spoiled kid, uses baby logic on us. But he's got *money*—

Joey! Listen, James—I don't care if you're the boss or not. You go away and let us do our job.

James storms off.

Bastard!

In addition to my father and me, James has working for him a handful of cabinetmakers: a Greek guy, Pavlos; a Sardinian, Armand; a Jewish kid, Jacob; and a few other guys who keep to themselves, and who speak hardly a word of English. During breaks Pavlos will walk over, and we'll shoot the shit together. He talks under his breath, and quickly, is a bit difficult to understand. But after a while you pick up his accent—or more properly, his inflected English.

He's a talented woodworker, but wants to open his own bakeshop. So he's working his ass off, saving his money. Like a lot of immigrants I've known.

Once in a while we'll all get together after work, before heading home. The shoptalk is animated and confusing, the place a circus of hand signals. And somehow out of this tangle of dialect and gesture, work gets done. Good work.

As always, I make mistakes. And my father covers for me.

After finishing a large batch of furniture, we'll drive the company truck—an eighteen-footer—around back and up to the loading dock, and carefully stack the furniture in it. Takes an hour or so. Then we drive a quick mile over to the warehouse, where we unload the furniture with the help of a few other guys. James will store the furniture here until the job is completely done.

Joey, why don't you drive today.

OK, Dad.

Today I decide to have some fun, make it a *really* quick mile. I gun the truck this way and that around corners, my father yelling at me to slow down, take it easy. But I'm laughing my ass off, and I can see that he's smiling too.

When we get over to the warehouse, James and Pavlos and a few others are standing outside, waiting for us. It's a beautiful, warm day. I back the truck up, and get out and walk around back to open the rear door. As I release the door and it flies upward, I jump back. The entire load has shifted backward, and is hovering over the edge of the truck, about to topple onto the asphalt.

Nobody moves. Nobody knows what to do. Suddenly a drawer drops off the top of the tottering wall. I reach out and grab it, catching it in my right hand. Then another, which I catch in my left hand. And then a wall of drawers. I jump out of the way, and the entire heap comes crashing to the ground, smashing the drawers, some of them reduced to splinters.

James is furious. Pavlos and the other guys are silent.

Me, I don't know what to say. As it is, I have a hard time not laughing. And if *I* say I'm sorry to James—whatever he thinks of my apology—I'll implicate my father in my own foolishness. Because it was my father's decision that we would take turns driving.

But my father—he's serious, resolute.

I'll take care of it, James.

Nobody says a word. Not a word. We unload the rest of the furniture. My father and I get back in the truck to drive back. He's driving.

Sorry Dad.

Just take it easy next time, Joey.

Back at the shop, my father sets to work after hours, with his clamps and glue. Within a day, he's reassembled the broken furni-

ture, touched it up, refinished it. Good as new. In fact better, sturdier.

One thing: while my father and I are spray painting, you can't see ten feet, the spray fumes are that thick. And there's no exhaust fan. All we can do is open the overhead door, and hope the fumes drift outside. James never visits us during these phases of the operation. Nor does anybody else.

In fact my father has *never* worn a respirator—spray mask—to help filter out the fumes. In fact he smokes *while* he works. In fact I believe that smoking has increased his *apparent* tolerance to fumes. In fact it *is* a bit difficult to work with a mask wrapped around your face. But in fact you *can* get used to it. And in fact you *should*.

Still, fact or no, should or no, asthmatic or no, I decide to follow in my father's footsteps, knowing little of the science of solvents—which solvents are soluble in body fluids, which are not, and what their effect on the body may be.

I should have taken an educated guess.

Reminds me of when, as kids and like so many of our generation, we'd chase behind the mosquito spray truck as it made its seasonal runs down Dolores Terrace—a couple of evenings in early summer right after prime time. This was before they installed streetlights. We'd play hide-and-seek in the aromatic plumes. I'm still awaiting the results.

Doesn't take so long at Craftsman Interiors. Four weeks in, around the time I spot and swipe an old Binks 7 from the shop—bring it home, clean it up, rebuild it, fuck you James you were using it for *glue* for Christsakes—I begin to develop a slight pain while breathing, on my right side. At first it goes unnoticed—I'm not sure what I'm feeling, think it to be a muscular pain. But shortly after the pain surfaces, I detect as well a faintly bad taste in my mouth, especially when I cough from the fumes.

And one day, one cloudy rainy day, I begin to get the chills. I'm standing near the overhead door, and the cool damp air is making me shiver. And I have a knit cap on my head as we work.

The next day I'm in a sweat, and it hurts like hell to breathe. My father doesn't mess around, takes me right to the doctor. Who himself doesn't mess around, has an x-ray taken.

It's pneumonia—a classic case, as I learn from the books I'll read years later. Books that warn of the hazards of working with such solvents. My father—after work each day, he spends five minutes blowing the black shit out of his nose onto his ever-present hanky. And he sneezes six or seven times hard every couple of days, kicking the shit up and out of his system. Doesn't seem to bother him—not yet anyway.

I spend the last two weeks of the summer in bed, weak, feverish. It's a slow recovery, even with my father's full repertoire of dishes—chicken soup, macaroni, escarole, chops—even with the penicillin, a substance that I'll come to understand better when my studies lead me out into the working world of engineering professionals, anaerobic and aerobic fermentation processes.

Sometime during my recovery, I regain my taste for raw tomatoes.

...

It's mid-decade, and the public era that will in retrospect be stereotyped as *the seventies* is in fact just beginning. A new president sits in the White House, and the political upheavals that served as the backdrop of my first two years of college are all but over.

No more public affairs courses with Prof. Cope, the registrar of the university, a wise old man who understands the law, political action, and social reform, and who holds classes in his conference room. Cope strikes me as a conservative politically, but he always challenges me to think through, and to commit.

No more English—even if all I can recall is a dry discussion of Whitman's poetry, and a few lines from "Howl"; no more history of religion, which opens my eyes to the multiple authoring of the Torah; and no more philosophy courses, which I love for what I find at the time to be a certain purity of thought. I no longer have to take any but math and engineering courses, which are often more than I can handle.

There's talk of Hank Aaron retiring. Aaron, my last sports hero, a guy who can hit the long ball off a bad pitch—they say he has

strong wrists. It's something I aspire to, but my wrists are on the small side.

Saturday Night Live is making a splash; the word *video* is on the tips of more and more tongues.

And school is eating up more and more of my time, the disjunction between my life of the mind and my life at home growing more pronounced with each new semester. That the old wooden structures lining College Avenue are being torn down, that much-needed but more monolithic edifices are replacing the older, itemized accretions of the campus—no matter. I can see the university only in terms of its relative charm, its embodiment of what seems to me, green as I am to a world cultivated so, a finer set of symptoms. I am grateful to the university for this golden opportunity, and yet—

It will take another two decades of gutting out faulty social and secular and free-market institutions before I'll realize, still hopeful—as hope springs eternal, and dies last—that charm is exactly what the trustees of the university *want* me to see.

I'm beginning to hang out with a few of my classmates from my engineering courses—Gerald, Kent, Bill. And once in a while I'll have a beer with a guy I meet in the campus gym, where I work out with weights—Steve, an electrical engineer, or what we call a double-E. Steve and Bill are townies, like me. Gerald is studious, but a bit of a tightass. He rooms with Kent, who has a good sense of humor, and hails from Poughkeepsie. Kent's folks are—according to Gerald, who says it each time with resentment—*filthy* rich.

Mike is himself a sophomore in the engineering program at S.U., and he and I will head up to campus on the odd Saturday to party with some of our friends, or to crash a party. Because of my uncertainties about settling down, my relationship with Julie will falter—again—and I'll begin to go sweet on a poli-sci major I meet, a Jewish girl named Hilary, who plays guitar and sings "Anticipation" with feeling. Not much will come of this flirtation, though, and Julie and I will get back together. As commuters, Mike and I will remain somewhat removed from campus activities, campus life.

Back on the quad and still a bit weak from the pneumonia, I stand among the throngs who watch the streakers streak by. Six men and one woman, all white, extremities bouncing in the cool autumn

air. Activist energies rechanneled? I wonder what my father would make of all this.

Winter drags, courses drag. In the spring, I receive in the mail a small manila envelope. Inside, a fifty-page pamphlet, off-yellow cover, accompanied by a letter.

> Dear Fellow Engineer:
>
> As a senior in Mechanical Engineering you should soon be entitled to the privilege of promotion to the Associate Member grade of The American Society of Mechanical Engineers.
>
> The Old Guard is a group of dues exempt members of ASME dedicated to assisting the student to become an active Professional Engineer.
>
> As an initial effort in this direction, The Old Guard offers you a copy of "The Unwritten Laws of Engineering" by W.J. King, and we recommend a careful reading of this pamphlet as it will help you understand that professional relationship which makes a man a real engineer in his community.
>
> Do not be put off by the language of this paper. It was not written today. But like the Declaration of Independence or some of Lincoln's speeches, the intent or philosophy of the writing applies equally well today as it did the day it was written.
>
> We trust you will enjoy it and profit from an application of its teachings.
>
> Sincerely,
> Chairman, Old Guard Committee

I flip open the pamphlet. "*Copyrighted 1944 by* The American Society of Mechanical Engineers *when published in May, June, and July, 1944, issues of* MECHANICAL ENGINEERING." I browse through, spotting a few lines toward the end that give me pause:

> It is very much like the design of a piece of apparatus. Any experienced engineer knows that it is always possible to secure

> substantial improvements by a redesign. When you get into it you will find that there are few subjects more absorbing or more profitable than the design and development of a good engineer! As Alexander Pope wrote many years ago:
>
> "The proper study of mankind is man."

The proper study of mankind: I think of D-day, months prior to my mother and father meeting, in Europe. I think of history, private and public, of my father's palpably creative process, *then*, and of my intangibly mimetic representations, *now*. And I think of the work of art as an artifact in the offing. Whatever its appearance, I think it is never finished. I think it does not simply or proportionally represent, or work against representing. Instead, it *presents* in some present moment a past endeavor, making of the past what Gertrude Stein articulated, years before my parents' budding romance, as a *continuous present*. A continual presentation, a presentation that foregrounds—*here, now, mine*, and I trust in some sense yours, and for the future—processes of representation, presence of absence of presence, simultaneity of here and now and then again, loss and gain but above all, that time-worn cliché of enduring hope. The sun and moisture spotting, the yellowed aging, the sheer damage that touches wood and paper and flesh alike, and the urge to renew. Alike in reproducing materially this process of representation—whether as pixel or laser draft or print run or digital distribution or daughter or son or garden growth—a falling ever, ever into the representations and presentations of process, whorls of fine-tuned processing. Endless spiraling of the generations regenerated, steadfast inklings and shimmering noninklings, surfacing and deepening alike differences of kind and kinship and degree.

And at this moment and forever, for and against me: the tactile more the province of my father, whose hands, calloused yet soft, would that he could but rest occasionally on my shoulder. And—it must be added *here, forever*, in species blood-script: the fifties crimp-and-solder piecework, the seventies and eighties typing, the endless sewing and knitting—of my mother, whose fists would curl inward at death.