

Vijay Seshadri, from The Long Meadow

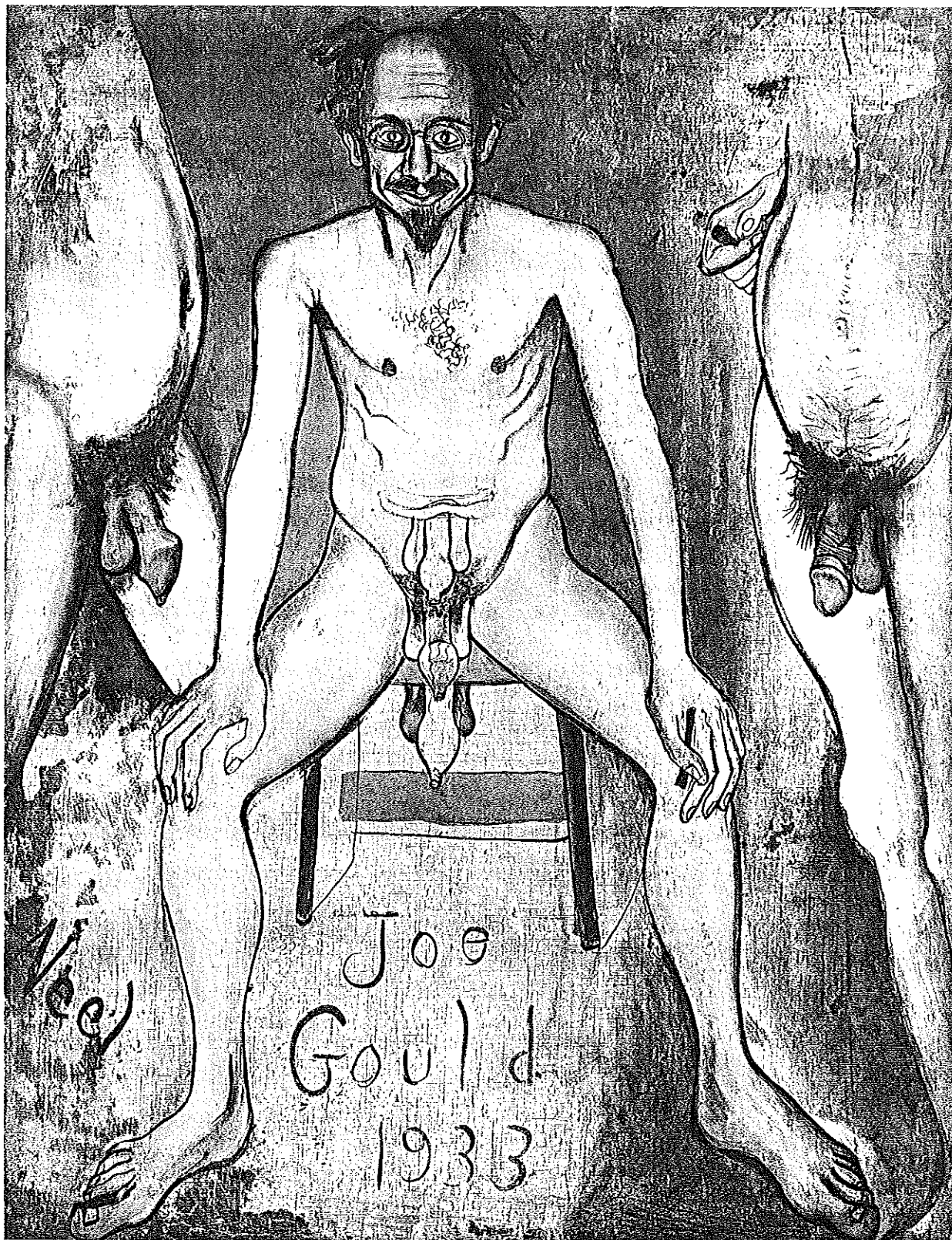
Superman Agonistes

“When my X-ray eyes look through the humans
to the need inside,
glowing red and green,
my blood cells collide,

my lungs collapse,
my cortex rebels,
and my heart wraps
a bomb around itself

and threatens to kill us both.
But I can't stay away.
I have to fly down
to watch them pray,

to watch them couple,
to watch them fight,
exposing myself
to their kryptonite.”



Alice Neel
PLATE 15 • Joe Gould

1933, oil on canvas, 39 x 31 inches (99.1 x 78.7 cm). The Estate of Alice Neel. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

E. E. COMMINGS
39 100 Selected Poems

little joe gould has lost his teeth and doesn't know where
to find them (and found a secondhand set which click) little
gould used to amputate his appetite with bad brittle
candy but just (nude eel) now little joe lives on air

Harvard Brevis Est for Handkerchief read Papernapkin no laundry
bills likes People preferring Negroes Indians Youse
n.b. ye twang of little joe (yankee) gould irketh sundry
who are trying to find their minds (but never had any to lose)

and a myth is as good as a smile but little joe gould's quote oral
history unquote might (publishers note) be entitled a wraith's
progress or mainly awash while chiefly submerged or an amoral
morality sort-of-aliveing by innumerable kind-of-deaths

(Amérique Je T'Aime and it may be fun to be fooled
but it's more fun to be more to be fun to be little joe gould)

vulgar topaz pin I have ever seen, and was strangely silent and thoughtful, was the day that marked our relationship for the rest of his life. We were driving back to New York—it is strange that almost every memory of Arthur is connected to a restaurant or to a car—and I had not talked to him very much because I sensed that he was on the verge of a temper. (I was to realize in the years to come that sadness often looked like temper, often turned into it, as if he were rejecting despair for something healthier.) As Arthur slowed down from his usual speed of a hundred miles an hour to avoid hitting two other cars, he said, "I'm the only good driver in America. Sons of bitches." Then he sighed. "Well, I might as well tell you, that's that. All my friends last night think you're too old for me."

I laughed. "Too old for what?"

"For me. They think that wouldn't be any good. I'm five or six years younger than you are." This was to be accepted throughout the years I knew him.

"What wouldn't be any good?"

He shifted around. He was uneasy, embarrassed, and that was always one step in front of irrationality. I should have been ready.

"You know what I'm talking about. Stop pretending."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Arthur." "You know damn well. You're a combination of shyster lawyer and Jesuit. I mean you are too old for me to marry. That's what I mean and you made me say it."

I said, "That's not the way it is or ever could be." "It's always the way it is. For every Goddamn broad that ever lived. Marriage, marriage, marriage."

"Not for me. Twice in my life, maybe, but not about you. I wouldn't marry you, Arthur, I never even thought about it."

Arthur W. A. Cowan

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"Like hell you wouldn't, like hell." He stopped the car in the middle of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. "You're lying. You'd marry me in a minute. Maybe not for anything but my money, but I'm not marrying you, see?"

I opened the door of the car and got out, getting home late that night by walking a long way to a place that suggested I call another place for a taxi.

But this time, the next day, in fact, I called him. I had not slept much that night, waking up to read, and to think about Arthur. I was what he wanted to want, did not want, could not ever want, and that must have put an end to an old dream about the kind of life that he would never have because he didn't really want it. We have all done that about somebody, or place, or work, and it's a sad day when you find out that it's not accident or time or fortune but just yourself that kept things from you. Years later, when Arthur was telling me about "a beautiful model who double-crossed me when I'd have given her the money without the double-cross," I told him what I had thought that night when he blamed my age and his friends for not wanting to marry me. He patted my arm and said, "Aah. Aah. Sometimes you're not an ass. Why don't I buy you a pound of caviar?"

But when I say years later and things like that, I am not sure they are accurate. I did sometimes make notes in a diary. I have a large number of letters from Arthur, I remember more about him than I do about most people, and I know I can put together the order of his words with accuracy, but time, in his case, skips about for me, and I often mix up the places where we met, so that something that might have happened in Paris I have possibly transferred to Martha's Vineyard or Beverly Hills. The passing of time, the failure of memory, did not cause those confusions: they were always there. Perhaps because we

and colours springing up even out of the ditches primroses and violets nature it is as for them saying theres no God I wouldnt give a snap of my two fingers for all their learning why dont they go and create something I often asked him atheists or whatever they call themselves go and wash the cobbles off themselves first then they go howling for the priest and they dying and why why because theyre afraid of hell on account of their bad conscience ah yes I know them well who was the first person in the universe before there was anybody that made it all who ah that they dont know neither do I so there you are they might as well try to stop the sun from rising tomorrow the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now yes 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say yes and I wouldnt answer first only looked out over the sea and the sky I was thinking of so many things he didnt know of Mulvey and Mr Stanhope and Hester and father and old captain Groves and the sailors playing all birds fly and I say stoop and washing up dishes they called it on the pier and the sentry in front of the governors house with the thing round his white helmet poor devil half roasted and the Spanish girls laughing in their shawls and their tall combs and the auctions in the morning the Greeks and the Jews and the Arabs and the devil knows who else from all the ends of Europe and Duke street and the fowl market all clucking outside Larby Sharons and the poor donkeys slipping half asleep and the vague fellows in the cloaks asleep in the shade on the steps and the big wheels of the carts of the bulls and the old castle thousands of years old yes and those handsome Moors all in white and turbans like kings asking you to sit down in their little bit of a shop and Ronda with the old windows of the posadas glancing eyes a lattice hid for her lover to kiss the iron and the wineshops half open at night and the castanets and the night we missed the boat at Algeiras the watchman going about

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serene with his lamp and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figures in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

Trieste-Zürich-Paris, 1914-1921

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DOCTOROW

THE WATERWORKS / 123

Sartorius . . . whom you know so far only as a name. I'm concerned that you should not have your first impression of him as a tactician . . . who had made a mistake. Sartorius mentioned his requirements and left it up to others to fulfill them . . . on the model, I suppose, of God giving free will to the human race. It was a measure of the degree of loyalty this doctor inspired that everyone in his employ was free to create what was needed to serve him. The driver of the omnibus and all-around handyman of the place . . . or the cooks, the nurses . . . the members of the board . . . and his hospital—if you want to call it that—administrator, Eustace Simmons, formerly in the employ of Martin's father as slave-trade expediter . . . all of them lived and worked with the relish of free people.

I withhold here the circumstances of our first sight of Sartorius. I want to keep to the chronology of things but at the same time to make their pattern sensible, which means disrupting the chronology. After all, there is a difference between living in some kind of day-to-day crawl through chaos, where there is no hierarchy to your thoughts, but a raucous equality of them, and knowing in advance the whole conclusive order . . . which makes narration . . . suspect. I want you roughly in the same suspension we were in, as family and friends and counselors of the family, who understood this as a Pemberton matter, when in fact it was far more than that.

The first actual details we had of this doctor, more than the sound of his name, came from the practitioner it was said he had replaced—Dr. Mott, Thadeus Mott. What happened is that Sarah Pemberton, acting upon Captain Donne's request, wrote to Dr. Mott and asked him if he would provide her with his records of her late husband's medical history. Another example of Donne's love of documentation. . . . I don't know how much she confided of her lamentable circumstances, but Dr.

families already breaking out the lunch from their hampers. Three rows down from me, Coleman, his head tipped slightly toward hers, was talking to Faunia quietly, seriously, but about what, of course, I did not know.

Because we don't know, do we? *Everyone knows* . . . How what happens the way it does? What underlies the anarchy of the train of events, the uncertainties, the mishaps, the disunity, the shocking irregularities that define human affairs? *Nobody* knows, Professor Roux. "Everyone knows" is the invocation of the cliché and the beginning of the banalization of experience, and it's the solemnity and the sense of authority that people have in voicing the cliché that's so insufferable. What we know is that, in an unclichéd way, nobody knows anything. You *can't* know anything. The things you *know* you don't know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing.

Philip Roth.
The Human Stain p. 208-09

one of a team knocking on doors in a council estate. "Canvasser: A. Lang."

I was more irritated than anything. It certainly didn't strike me as sinister. Everybody tends to heighten his own reality. We start with a private fantasy about our lives and perhaps one day, for fun, we turn it into an anecdote. No harm is done. Over the years, the anecdote is repeated so regularly it becomes accepted as a fact. Quite soon, to contradict this fact would be embarrassing. In time, we probably come to believe it was true all along. And by these slow accretions of myth, like a coral reef, the historical record takes shape. I could see how it would have suited Lang to pretend he'd gone into politics only because he'd fancied a girl. It flattered him, by making him look less ambitious, and it flattered her, by making her look more influential than she probably was. Audiences liked it. Everyone was happy. But now the question arose: what was I supposed to do?

It's not an uncommon dilemma in the ghosting business, and the etiquette is simple: you draw the discrepancy to the author's attention and leave it up to him to decide how to resolve it. The collaborator's responsibility is not to insist on the absolute truth. If it were, our end of the publishing industry would collapse under the dead weight of reality. Just as the beautician doesn't tell her client that she has a face like a sack of toads, so the ghost doesn't confront the autobiographer with the fact that half his treasured reminiscences are false. Don't dictate, facilitate: that is our motto. Obviously, McAra had failed to observe this sacred rule. He must have had his suspicions about what he was being told, ordered up a parcel of research from the archives, and then removed the ex-prime minister's most polished anecdote from his memoirs. What an amateur! I could imagine how well that must have been re-

ceived. No doubt strained.

I turned my head. She was a strange kind of woman, stranded in that time, the twin cultures of the past looked far closer than they are. long lacy dresses, straw hats to keep women's heads cool. In the champagne in the other; a ghost in the background.

The biggest group of people grouped together if they had just finished a cabaret performance in a striped blazer, a woman in leotards, fishnet hair, the other possible to tell from a man apart from a woman, the other a postgraduate.

Glued to the performers, along Innes (Pembroke), A. D. Martin (Girton), A. P. J.

There was a

Robert Harris

THE GHOST

ing to take down the words of the chief prosecutor but really studying my client for any insights I could use later. *“Reaches hand out for R: she doesn’t respond. Glances at her. Lonely, puzzled. Withdraws hand. Looks back at screen. Shakes head. CP says ‘was this just single incident or part of systematic pattern of criminal behavior?’ AL flinches. Angry. CP: ‘justice must be equal for rich & poor, powerful & weak alike.’ AL shouts at screen: ‘What about the terrorists?’”*

I had never witnessed any of my authors at a real crisis in their lives before, and scrutinizing Lang, I gradually began to realize that my favorite catchall question—“How did it feel?”—was in truth a crude tool, vague to the point of uselessness. In the course of those few minutes, as the legal procedure was explained, a rapid succession of emotions swept across Lang’s craggy face, as fleeting as cloud shadows passing over a hillside in spring—shock, fury, hurt, defiance, dismay, shame . . . How were these to be disentangled? And if he didn’t know precisely what he felt now, even as he was feeling it, how could he be expected to know it in ten years’ time? Even his reaction at this moment I would have to manufacture for him. I would have to simplify it to make it plausible. I would have to draw on my own imagination. In a sense, I would have to lie.

The chief prosecutor finished her statement, briefly answered a couple of shouted questions, then left the podium. Halfway out of the room, she stopped to pose for the cameras again, and there was another blizzard of phosphorus as she turned to give the world the benefit of her magnificent aquiline profile, and then she was gone. The screen reverted to the aerial shot of Rhinehart’s house, in its setting of woods, pond, and ocean, as the world waited for Lang to appear.

GUARD DUTY
Thomas Transfrömer
trans. Robert Bly

I'm ordered out to a big hump of stones
as if I were an aristocratic corpse from the Iron Age.
The rest are still back in the tent sleeping,
stretched out like spokes in a wheel.

In the tent the stove is boss: it is a big snake
that swallows a ball of fire and hisses.
But it is silent out here in the spring night
among chill stones waiting for the dawn.

Out here in the cold I start to fly
like a shaman, straight to her body—
some places pale from her swimming suit.
The sun shone right on us. The moss was hot.

I brush along the side of warm moments,
but I can't stay there long.
I'm whistled back through space—
I crawl among the stones. Back to here and now.

Task: to be where I am.
Even when I'm in this solemn and absurd
role: I am still the place
where creation works on itself.

Dawn comes, the sparse tree trunks
take on color now, the frostbitten
forest flowers form a silent search party
after something that has disappeared in the dark.

But to be where I am . . . and to wait.
I am full of anxiety, obstinate, confused.
Things not yet happened are already here!
I feel that. They're just out there:

a murmuring mass outside the barrier.
They can only slip in one by one.
They want to slip in. Why? They do
one by one. I am the turnstile.

Robert Francis

Pitcher

His art is eccentricity, his aim
How not to hit the mark he seems to aim at,

His passion how to avoid the obvious,
His technique how to vary the avoidance.

The others throw to be comprehended. He
Throws to be a moment misunderstood.

Yet not too much. Not errant, arrant, wild,
But every seeming aberration willed.

Not to, yet still, still to communicate
Making the batter understand too late.

From
Baseball I gave You the Best Years of My Life
ed. Kevin Kerrane & Richard Grossinger
North Atlantic Books 1977

CZESAW MIKLOSZ
PREPARATION
(The Collected Bem's

Still one more year of preparation.
Tomorrow at the latest I'll start working on a great book
In which my century will appear as it really was.
The sun will rise over the righteous and the wicked.
Springs and autumns will unerringly return,
In a wet thicket a thrush will build his nest lined with clay
And foxes will learn their foxy natures.

And that will be the subject, with addenda. Thus: armies
Running across frozen plains, shouting a curse
In a many-voiced chorus; the cannon of a tank
Growing immense at the corner of a street; the ride at dusk
Into a camp with watchtowers and barbed wire.

No, it won't happen tomorrow. In five or ten years.
I still think too much about the mothers
And ask what is man born of woman.
He curls himself up and protects his head
While he is kicked by heavy boots; on fire and running,
He burns with bright flame; a bulldozer sweeps him into a clay pit.
Her child. Embracing a teddy bear. Conceived in ecstasy.

I haven't learned yet to speak as I should, calmly.

With not-quite truth
and not-quite art
and not-quite law
and not-quite science

Under not-quite heaven
on the not-quite earth
the not-quite guiltless
and the not-quite degraded

Seamus Heaney - The Spirit Level

Postscript

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.