

Goodnight Whoever's Listening

by
JOSEPH HARRINGTON



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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#20

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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Introduction

For the last 12 years, I've been working on a project about my mother, who died when I was 12 years old. Her birth name was Elizabeth, or "Lib," Peoples. I didn't know her that well, and I wanted to know more about her. Or maybe I wanted to reconstruct her. I talked with people who knew her and recovered all the documents and artifacts relating to her that I could find. I digitized her art and scanned her photo album. And I consulted a raft of secondary literature—women's history, Southern history, oral narratives, government records, medical books and more. I then cobbled all this together, and ended up with a sometimes sober, sometimes wacky document combining text and pictures, experimental prose and verse, narrative and theory, original writing and "found" material.

The main topic is my mother's life, which lasted from 1920 to 1974. But it quickly became apparent that this project was also an inquiry: into language, as both bridge and gap between present and past; and into history,

especially that of American women in the early and mid twentieth century; the history of racism and racial politics in the U.S., especially the South. Lib "escaped" her small Southern town for Washington, D.C., where she studied art by night, and by day served as personal secretary to Sen. Albert Gore. But at age 39 she attained her lifelong dream, marriage and (at 41) motherhood—as it happened, in Memphis, where I was born.

The first part of this project to be published, *Things Come On (an amneoir)*, deals with the last two years of my mother's life: she was dying of cancer as the nation was undergoing Watergate (she died on the day Nixon announced his resignation), and the languages of the two stories intertwine. What follows is an excerpt from the prequel, as it were—the third section of my biography of her (overall working title: *LIB: ruins of a life in progress*). I expected the most recent part would be easiest to research: the most people still alive to talk with, fresher memories. But quite the reverse was true. Many of her hometown childhood friends stayed in her home town, and had been Part of the Town. Later, she had a community of unmarried women friends in Washington. Her secretarial work exists in archives.

But her life in Memphis in the 1960s was like a lot of middle-class white women's stories in the 1950s and '60s coast-to-coast: that of a relatively isolated housewife in

a nuclear family in the nuclear age in a quasi-neighborly neighborhood. So I turned to documentation (secondary and primary) to try to fill in the gaps: the life of the '60s homemaker; the lives of Southern white women; home audio tapes.

Of course the Big Gap in Memphis was race. As a kid growing up, I had very little contact with African-American people. I had a lot of contact with white attitudes about race. It was de facto apartheid. So, in part, "Goodnight Whoever's Listening" is a kind of grudge-match with my home town and a confrontation with the collective biography of white Americans. Alas, contemporary events have proven that this history has relevance beyond mere antiquarianism.

The style of the poems is influenced by my interests in classical satire, mash-ups and speculative poetry. If the present looks a lot like the past, the past can seem futuristic, in a dystopian sort of way.

A huge thank-you to the Millay Colony for the Arts, which provided me with a month of uninterrupted time to put this together, and to the Hall Center for the Humanities for a Creative Work Fellowship, during which the research was completed. Many thanks to Rosa Alcalá, Denise Low, Susan M. Schultz, David Lazar and MariaAna Garza for their insightful critique. None of this is their fault.

GOODNIGHT
WHOEVER'S
LISTENING

*Ten distinct Squares here seene apart,
Are joyn'd in one by Cutters art.
Marke well: If't be not as't should be,
Blame the bad Cutter and not me.*

The Swiss Cutter

A swiss man was in a art musuzen
He saw magnifasant makeings
(Cuttings) He got an instrinst for it.
A piar of manaquir scissors made
beautiful dezins. non of us could
do it.

Cotton Still Tops In Area Economy

"The only difference between Memphis and Hell is
that Memphis has a river running along one side of it."
[sic (so does hell)]

"unhealthiest city in the nation"

"the most rural-minded city in the South"

"buckle of the Bible belt"

"the northernmost city in Mississippi"

"a small town with a lot of people in it"

"decaying Mississippi River town"

"the Sunbelt's dark spot."

"the leader of evil things in the world."

“Oh—Memphis! They’ll kill you on the street down there. Kill you on the street!” This from a cab driver in Washington, c. 1980. It puzzled me until I realized (a.) his only association w/Memphis might be the King assassination or (b.) Memphis was in fact the murder capital of the country in the 1920s, and reputations die hard. Especially if deserved.

Satan Employs Hate Weapon To Ruin Men

I. C. R. R. Pays Tribute To Two Negro Employees

The vote split almost completely along racial lines

& little obelisk on bluff:

TOM LEE

A WORTHY NEGRO

inculcation of racist ideology...inadvertent...
happened almost organically...

The vote split almost completely along racial lines

In the lobby of the Peabody, around its marble fountain, over mint juleps, Mason and Faulkner delineated north and south, Mississippi crackers cracking jokes about the “n——s,” avoiding the Yankees, who “put sugar on their meat”

The vote split almost completely along racial lines

“an open detestation of things un-American
which essentially meant un-Memphian” [which
essentially meant un-white—ed.]

Your mission should you decide to accept it, o favored son:
“give meaning & narrative coherence to Memphis.”
Vaya con dios.

The vote split almost completely along racial lines

“Race-Mixing is Communism”:
“a fearful growing race once
removed from the jungles. My
yardman went to his mother’s
funeral in Mississippi. She had
104 grandchildren. How many
have you?”

The vote split almost completely along racial lines

In the ‘30s, the Cotton Carnival paid black men to sit on
cotton bales on street corners, play banjo,
perform the eating of watermelon

a calvinist cracker version of carnival:

no hierarchies inverted,
no relief from routine for the peasants, no
rituals of reversal here

among racial lines

if he has “the right attitude,”
if he comes with his hat in his hand
he may humbly beseech Us to “end the use of
the term “n——r” on the police radio.”

split almost completely

“Memphis is beautiful with Spring, as you remember,”
with the azaleas and dogwoods flowering,
here & there

Riders Stalled By Court Order

"Wave to General Forrest! Wave!"

: my mother to me, each time we passed the Park.
Soon I waved of my own accord.

*"Memphis, Athens, Sulfur Springs,
Pulaski, Carter's Creek—fields
upon which you have won
fadeless immortality"*

said Forrest, whose image,
a daguerreotype, floated in white
over his signature, above the telephone.
My father put it there

and told me stories of that gallant redneck
Ivanhoe in Prussian grey—

how he sounded the charge at Shiloh
with a rebel yell, dashed
far ahead of his men, into the enemy host,

slaying and scattering them, until
he realized he was alone—
the Yanks saw it too and started to shoot,
so he picked a Yankee soldier up
—just picked him up—by the scruff of the
neck!—

used him as a shield and fought
a path for himself back to his men, his eyes
like a panther's springing on its prey

how big rough looking men, coarsely
appareled,
covered with mud, a pistol in each hand,
smashed in the doors of the Gayoso Hotel,
as Forrest rode into the lobby on his noble,
dapple, iron grey, looking for General Hurlburt
who had fled down Main Street in his
underwear.

And they charged the pickets on Main Street
and they charged down Beale and

...it had all the markings of a Cotton Carnival party ...the anticipation and excitement before the presentation of a queen... Carnival dignitaries and royalty...the stirring strains of "Pomp and Circumstance"...and a packed room of guests in a party mood....heavy and cumbersome, but magnificent, robe of jeweled red velvet and ermine was placed on her shoulders...



“Hambone’s Meditations’:

‘Ain’ nothin’ evuh jes’ right—

hit’s purty nigh alluz too sump’n!!!”

Little Knit Shell Fast Achieving Fashion Status

The Bomb will kill Daddy, Mommy, everybody. Then God will have to make new people, like last time. But God and President Kennedy take care of the whole world. Esp. God. He’s up in the sky already, so He can shoot down the bad bombs w/His magic gun. Pres. Kennedy shoots down real bombs with his real gun. We trust him because he has to have a Brain Trust to tie his shoes but that doesn’t mean in the meantime we should make snow cream, ‘cause snow has a piece of the bomb in it. Question: Who is now the Third Person of the Holy Trinity?

I hear parents ask, How can I make my child feel secure when everything's about to go up in smoke?
Well, just smile and say, "We're not dead yet, are we?"
Make like the early Christian pioneer martyrs,
and others who were sure their cause was right.
This is the kind of spirit that makes great workers
and even the finest soldiers. Just keep the trunk full
with provisions, in case the President's aim is poor.

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C.

March 13, 1962

Dear Jack and Lib:

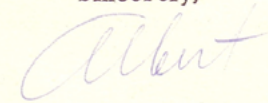
I am just so delighted...congratulations!

Congratulations!

Lib, the greatest thing that a woman
can do in life is to give life -- you've made it!

With the very kindest of personal
regards to you both, I am

Sincerely,



Mr. and Mrs. Jack Harrington
209 South Cleveland
Memphis, Tennessee

Debutantes' Formal Presentation Is Tomorrow

They committed the maternal patient; birth pathologized her (sorry, Mom!), so they prescribed hexachlorophene: it does so much more than just "wash" your baby, they said. It will cleanse healthy suburban tissue of violent cells; just dunk him in an antibacterial basket, head first, hold him by the heel. Always be alert for fighting germs (a little percutaneous absorption never hurt anybody.) Look at me: I closed the inter-teratogenic missile gap, riddled the body politic of gametic infection. "There is no evidence that it will harm baby if the mother drinks coffee or tea, smokes, uses alcoholic beverages in moderation, or goes in for athletics," the Dr. said. Live long & prosper, he said, with Karo Syrup—it gives your babe the wholesome kind of sweetness that can only come from bacteria-free corn. Sure, there's no evidence of breast-feeding

harming your infant, but your modernity or maternity badge may tarnish the breast. That's not what the neighbors paid to see when they leave the house that daddy built.

"17 debutantes of the season will be formally presented by their parents...dancing to two orchestras and a midnight breakfast. The debutantes will wear elaborate white gowns."

Census Director Praises Memphis as an “Ideal” City

Sat. Eve. Post’s typical American woman 1962	Lib Harrington in (April) 1962
35 years old	41 years old
2 children, wants 3	1 (newborn) child, that’s it
completed 3 years of high school	completed 2 years of college
married 14 years	married 2 years
full-time homemaker	full-time secretary
[white]	white

Popular Entertainers:

Jack Parr—Sophia Loren—

Fashions and Fads:

Ivy League—for men

The “Jackie Look”—for women

The most popular Song:

The most popular Dance: The Twist

“Our enumerators didn’t run into the problems many congested cities with large slum areas faced. The unstacking of population through slum clearance programs here since 1950 has helped a lot.”

Play Pen Is Fine As Long As Baby Isn't Prisoner

Spock, second in command, continued:

"Above all, parents must maintain the hermeneutic seal around the bubble, so that their own emotions, such as grief or anger, do not contaminate the child. Emotion is contra-indicated precisely because Your baby is born to be a reasonable, friendly being, despite being human in origin.

So in the end,
simply tell the child you don't want to get up
and go to work. You just decided to stop being alive,
so now it is the child's turn to do so instead."

Thus, with merely a raised eyebrow, he would gently, ingratiatingly intensify the mother's responsibility to tend to the subtle unfolding of the infant unit. With his faux-Amerind gravity, Spock caused all mothers on the planet to quiver with guilt—fairy tales made children nervous;

fairy tales provided a wholesome outlet for fear; fairy godmothers restored the princesses to their natural state, while the grandmothers gobbled them up like a wolf. The mother should put nothing above her children; but she should avoid smothering them. It was not illogical to Spock, who perceived the higher consonances of the whole, as he left his Vulcan wife and child behind, and vowed never to interfere with history.

Phones Ring of Political Hard Work

Two members of the Women's Department of The Commercial Appeal spent a day at Shelby County Republican and Democratic Party headquarters last week...

[Democratic] Headquarters co-ordinator is Miss Jowanda Shelton, who worked for the late Senator Estes Kefauver and is active in Ross Bass's campaign to succeed him. She is enthusiastic in her praise for the women volunteers.

"They're the ones who actually run the headquarters," she said. "They do all the work, and I don't know what we'd do if we didn't have them." Another key worker is Mrs. Elizabeth Peoples Harrington, who is back on the political scene after a four-year leave of absence.

Mrs. Harrington worked for Representative Robert A. "Fats" Everett (D., Tenn.) when he was administrative assistant to Gov. Gordon Browning and

then for Senator Albert Gore (D., Tenn.) until she got married four years ago.

"I've been in seclusion since as a housewife and mother. My son, who is 2½, is in a nursery now, and I'm working every day. My husband says my disposition is much better since I've been out in the world."

One young housewife said "This certainly beats washing and ironing—and I even got my husband to wash dishes this morning."

[Oct. 1964]

Students Protest Vietnam Policies

"Most dear the absent husband...
[my great, great grandmother's hand]
I still hope that the Good Lord will send you
back to me and our little children to live
in pece as we once have lived
Oh grant kind father that I may be spard
to raiz our dear little children"

Jefferson Davis and the Confederate States of America
both have parks in Memphis; while on the Mall downtown
a heap of rusty steel represents a mountaintop;
the satin wreath on the second floor

how he ripped up railroads,
put the torch to ties, then
tied the ends of rails to asses' reins,
put the metal in the fire to soften it,
folded the softened rails around the trunks of
trees

and put confusion to his enemies. Today
you can see the tree trunks grew to hide
the twisted tracks

"I taken them by surprise
they run like Suns of Biches
I captured the Rev Dr Warin from Ilanois
and one fin Sorel Stud
Cant you come up and take a hand
this fite wil do to hand down to
your childrens children
I feel confident of our success

your Respect
N. B. Forrest"

Hurt GIs Take 10-1 Odds, Fight Off 40 Vietnam Reds

"By the early 1960s...[c]rime began to replace communism as a threat to individual security....General Telephone & Electronics took out a two-page ad in *Time* magazine, promoting its new intercom system, asking: 'Who's downstairs ringing your bell? A friend? Or the Boston Strangler?'"

Reading in bed

A boy went to bed his
mother told him to stay.
but he sniked up in his fathers
room and got a fash litg and a
book. he got in bed puld the
cover over his and read. Joe

*

Play Time provides an opportunity to: Experience
real joy

GUNS AND SHARP INSTRUMENTS: We do not advise
that guns be brought to school, but if the child feels
lost without guns, etc., they may be brought to
school but will be checked with "sheriff."

U.S. Brass Flying To Hawaii To Expedite Vietnam Buildup

We give them different toys to tell them apart;
that's why mummies aren't boys, cleaning the places

historical markers never talk about. The cherub face
beneath the cowboy hat melts and plasticates itself

into the shit-colored Halloween mask it always wears
under the covers of flashlight, that makes female

hold male within it, "penis and scrotum big—
out of proportion" to its syllable. The mommy

stays home, is a door that is always "on"
that you can go through, turn back on and yell at,

serving as marker of everywhere at once, pocketfulls
of incompetent money. Don't ask the real half-life

of Santa Marmoria what for: complete daddy +
complete mommy corroborates the bath itself.

Son: May I have that bracelet?

Mother: Well, now let me put it on you.

S: What is that for [?]

M: Well, I've got to look at it, too. There. Uh, oh—wait
a minute—ah, not yet [?]. There, you can go show
papa the bracelet.

S: Whoo hee.

Father: What are you all doing, going through mama's
treasures?

S: No.

M: Yeah, and I found a necklace that's broken.

F: Aw, I wonder how it got broken. That's pretty, isn't it,
Joe?

M: It just came off.

F: You don't like to wear bracelets, do you, Joe?

S: Yes, I do.

F: Do you really?

S: I'll wear it.

"See, I was an only child, so they didn't have to be sure that I only played with fire trucks and not dolls. I wasn't involved in that; I only had the fire trucks. They didn't buy me any dolls."

"Secrets Of Charm"—

Be A Forceful Male: Insist On A Family Savings Plan

For high marital adjustment in a woman, you will need:

- 7 years or more of employment
- 2 years or more of college or professional training
- 22 years of age or more at time of marriage
- 100 cubes of DR. SPOCK BRAND SPAM

(brain food—makes you "logical" causes Lib to write, "for once, am trying to let reason rule rather than emotions.")

Freud discovered spam during his lifelong work. It has been well confirmed by others that spam-lack causes:

- the suit you bought your boy to make a monkey of him
- his prime impulse to make stinks or explosions with chemicals
- him to act out by whirling whirly-whirlers if not checked

Upon administration of DSBS,
play becomes increasingly impersonal;
your little oedipal murderer
changes overnight into an eager
admirer of the Law of the Father.

Dr. Spock communicates that children learn what they live,
that the newly democratic home-front calls for approval,
bribes, praise, punishment, rewards, threats of damaged
credit ratings, just like real life. But wait—this *is* real life,
remember?! [bemused; chuckles]

Just make sure that father doesn't get irritated or impatient,
lest he drive his little man into mommy's lap, thereby
making a lifelong sissy Momist out of him.

Make him feel

good

as a little version of a manly man, shooting his own meat
before consuming it.

Then there is no need for spam,
hams, hands, mans, or mom. Your boy will grow up to be
a fully adjusted and loadable adult.



Plan To Raid Saigon Halted By Roundup Of Reds, TNT

[This is early spring—pre-Easter—1966.]

Father: Now that's your ugly laugh. That's your ugly laugh, I'n't it? Nobody wants to listen to that. [Turns]

Mother: Oh, listen now, the tape recorder's hearing all that ugly talk.

F: You better get your hand out of my pocket!

M: He might be a mouse back in there! You might get your hand caught in there!

Child: Ouch!

M: [Laughing] Ouch! Joe, listen, do you want to have a tummyache? You eat too much candy, Darlin', you make your stomach hurt.

F: Joe, get your hands off that candy! Joe, I'm gonna—!! [Tape cuts off]

Grandmother: Joe, let me see your face look real pretty. Oh, that's such a pretty face.

F: Let's just keep that devil off your shoulder.

G: Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could have the two children, and have angelic little cousin Matt down here with our angelic little Joe.

M: Well, let's all get ready and go to Memphis.

spatial commotion “1st-class citizen”
on Beale turn corner onto Main
you had to be on guard & never
as far as Union if it wasn’t yr job

“I’m going to clip this article so
I can ride in front” to E. Memphis
(where we wld live) to work. “What
has King Cotton done for the Negro?”

We don’t have the Problem here
(why, they went right in the library
& art museum!) “They talked
to you like you was their child”

which you weren’t “Who is his
daddy?” after wiping the doorknob.
“Green uniform customary for Negro
nurses” (Mrs. M. wore white to care

for me) 17 strikes & wildcats over
oppressive heat in the plant “I AM
a MAN”—not a garbage man
worked just like farmhands can

to can: early as you can, late as you can.
Called “walking buzzard” while rot
dripped down yr shirt until you’d
had it when someone got crushed

literally. So the last came first. But
nowadays? still “de facto” schools &
the plants gone to Mexico & Beale
like Disneyland amid the vacant blocks

Housecleaning, Never A Pleasure, Can Be Made Bearable—

“The social highway to middle-class status ran through construction and growth of suburban communities,” to propel children out of the city, away from the earth, little Elroy Jetson with his rocket pack on the way to a floating school. Never tell a story about futuristic children in past tense: it’s always Now in the family of tomorrow, long past the need to organize larger bodies like the union or the universe. Everyone is middle-class in space, since nothing changes when you live in zero G. They’ve traded Hattie McDaniel for Rosie the Robot, but she’s an older model, so we’ll place the body in the Labor-Saving Hall of Fame. Judy Jetson

reminds us that this way of life will last forever, the atomic domestic mother in a bottle (tho we suspect the kids are cloned), who’s never heard of concentration camps, will recur in syndication. “I would like to be what I am a few hours a week,” says Judy; “not a Stepford Wife, but a cartoon Stepford Wife—

producer of ego-sustaining results for the other characters.” She doesn’t know there’s a button for that, too, ‘cause it’s hidden under the others. George yells “Stop this crazy thing!” every week, & everyone gets to laugh, while Elroy tries to hammer a square peg into a round hole, screaming, “They ought to be bigger, these holes! These holes aren’t right at all!”

This Is The Season For Golden Touch

The life she always wanted? Poems
feel cleaner than the streets; the in-

visible people age and are aged,
the greening of regrets.

Maybe the dead don't want a voice:
nothing but trouble, an empty subject:

maybe giving them one just gives
one immortality as the giver.

Don't you know not to write about
your mama, boy? says Dr. F.

Just pull down your shades &
do the work of morning.

Little red leaf

this fall Little red leaf will fall. and another leaf will be
ther. little red. leaf has fell. and his firnds too. nixe fall
thir will be another Little red leaf.

We shell bushels of pecans from the tree in our back
yard, using a "piston" nutcracker with an enormous
handle. She wore a turquoise-colored vinyl jacket as
we gathered them. What comes next? "For example, I
remember the blue coat with the red piping but I don't
remember myself in it."

Gore Plans Memphis Office

Sen. Albert Gore will open a branch office in the new Federal Building in Memphis as soon as the General Service Administration gets the space ready. This is expected in June.

"The office will be on the 13th floor, overlooking the Mississippi River and Memphis," Gore said. "I am fortunate in obtaining Mrs. Elizabeth Harrington to be in charge. She is the former Elizabeth Peebles [sic] of Dyersburg, and was my secretary in Washington about seven years. Before that, she was with Sen. Tom Stewart and Gov. Gordon Browning. She has lived in Memphis about five years."

Gore said he never had a branch office before, except for a "cubby hole in my home town, Carthage. The metropolitan area of Memphis constitutes about a fifth of the state's population. With the growth of Memphis, the problems grow. I hope I can serve better with a branch office."

*

—So are you trying to please her by doing this book?

—If she were going to be pleased, she would've been already.

—Because the dead can see the future and the past.

—Because they really don't care. Being dead = being w/o past/present/future. This is what is known as enlightenment.

—And meanwhile, the living body writes, and having writ, the mind doubts its own substantiality, can't even come up with its own précis. Is that it?

—Well, what the subject writes will be repeated. Hence it clings to the personal.

—Until it runs out of cash.

—Until it runs out of cash.

Mrs. Harrington

1965

3593 Kenwood Ave.
Memphis, Tenn.
June 4, 1965

Dear Bill:

Want to report that I went down today to see the office and it is almost ready for occupancy. The contractor has one or two minor things to complete, but nearly all the furniture is in place. The Senator's desk, coffee table and costumer are expected to be delivered Monday. The furniture is very pretty and similar to that in the office there (course, I haven't seen his desk yet).

Only one telephone has been installed and I'm sure we will want at least extensions, but this can be worked out.

Would you like for me to send a list of needed office supplies, or would you prefer to have the staff there just bundle up the necessary things? Or am I being premature with this. I'm ready and eager to start in whenever you give the signal.

First person I ran into in the Federal Building was Lou Silver, reporter for the Commercial Appeal. He wanted to know when the Senator wants publicity about his office being open. As he anticipated, I said the Senator would have to give that information. So, if he hasn't already called there, he probably will soon!

Tell the Senator everyone I've seen is so pleased he is to have an office here - one commented "Now Memphis will have a Senator!"

Sincerely,

Kib

LBJ's Signature On Voting Rights To Bring Action

I'm doing community service on behalf of the New Society so I need the password. It's "our_bubble." Why not

write about nature instead? Because it doesn't need it, scribbling an impatient landscape undergoing metaphorsis,

while the doors on the rooms say "clean" and "unclean." As Olson said, an American is a complex carbohydrate,

a literary realist who says, "I still expect a little more than I'm actually supposed to have." Changeling but

a euphemism for mutaant—Be thou me, why dontcha? We all share bathrooms now, until the workers hoist,

in front of all the rest areas, signs saying "BATHROOMS CLOSED." But you can still use a white courtesy phone

to complain about the translation of our nation's motto
as: *Bits & Pieces Put Together to Form a Semblance of
a Whole*

Everybody In The Gutter

**Sociology Seeks Ways To Excuse
Misbehavior—Drug Addicts Are Now
Heroes**

Father: Sat., Apr. 30, 1966

Child: I went to the airport to meet Uncle—

F: No...

C: What? Uncle—

F: No...

C: Senator Gore and Mrs. Gore

Mother: That's right

C: And we—and they went to their home, and we
went and had a hot dog and some milk at the...

F: Snack bar...And where did we go after we left the
airport? Where did we take Sen. Gore and Mrs. Gore?
Do you remember?

C: No.

F: Channel 5.

C: Channel 5!

F: That's where we left Sen. Gore, isn't it?

C: Yes....And mama was at her office, and we were at the same building, she works at the same bildin [Father laughs]

M: Well, let's get back to the exciting part of the day. Tell the tape recorder what Sen. and Mrs. Gore told you about the farm.

C: Well, they had ponies and horses and pigs on it and—what else, Mama? And cows!

M: Black cows.

C: Yes. And they give milk. You put a bucket under them, and they give milk, and you drink the milk, and you put some of it in the ice box.

M: Well, now, how did you know about that?

C: I just knowed it!

M: No, you just knew it, huh?

At the Peabody: I'm with N. [?] having coffee—I see my mom get out of some trolley/bus/carriage & I make some remark like, "My mom drives me nuts—but I love her!" Then she comes in & shows me this little tram—a 2-person electric shuttle in the form of an old car. I tell her I've never seen such a thing, & she says "Never seen it?! Why you used to ride in the *middle!*"

Mother: Goodnight, tape recorder. Goodnight, whoever's listening.

Child: Goodnight, tape recorder. Goodnight whoever's listening, Batman.

“Just Between Us” —

The librarian hands me the book, *Bedtime Stories*, by Thornton Burgess, & I'm surprised to feel warm around the edges & insides assert themselves. This is one of the books my mother read to me. The maroon calligraphy of the title against the olive-green cover, the pattern of brown, green, blue shapes, infinitely reproducible reminders of everything not left; I imprinted upon it. Buster Bear, Peter Cottontail, Chatterer the Red Squirrel, Sammy Jay: they form a circle around the big cover as they hang out on the margin, in the forest. Through a break in the foliage, their attention centers upon a boy with a beagle dog, trotting across a grassy knoll (it is, of course, me and my beagle that are depicted). The animals, smiling friendly totems, protect the boy and his dog, and no one is exploited or depressed. “Mr. Mocker Makes New Friends.” “Bobby Coon Meets a Kind Boy.” Oh, sure, the animals get in scrapes. They even do human things to each other. But no one is eaten alive. The original of the book exists in heaven, safely out of touch.

*

Your child wants to disapprove of wrong groups, to share your point of view and think it noble. You don't want him to wonder who our sort of people are, want him to know that while there are attractive Catholics, even some who are the right people, there are attractive Jews who are never the right people, and none of these are our sort of folks, who are attractive *and* the right group, who know the meaning of “Catholic,” “Jewish,” “Canadian,” “squirrel,” “bear,” and “colored.” As always, in a free society, for ourselves and for our children, we must strive to be *adjustable* persons, who are always attractive and always already right.

Queen of Cotton Will Entertain Subjects

Grandmother: ...the forsythia so pretty, and the maple trees all out in bloom, and ah...Wait, now: let Lib say something.

Mother: I really—I really haven't got anything to say.

G: Well, that's—that's terrible. Well, Joe—Jack, tell her about...

Father: Well, tell her about the Vice President's visit.

G: Why, certainly!

[pause]

M: I went to a luncheon for Mrs. Hubert Humphrey...

[microphone moves closer]

M: OK.

F: Go on.

M: Do I get to the other part?

F: Everything's going fine.

M: [noticeably lower in volume than the other speakers] Hubert was in town to speak to ten thousand members of the Tennessee Education Association. So Mrs. George Grider, the wife of the Congressman from Memphis, entertained Mrs. Humphrey at lunch in the Skyway.

F: That's the real reason he was down here: to try to get this lame-duck liberal Congressman re-elected.

M: Well, anyway, this was a dutch-treat luncheon, except you had to be invited apparently, because you had to have security clearance to go to Mrs. Humphrey's luncheon. And, ah...it was very nice, and had a big crowd, and Mrs. Humphrey made a nice, little homey speech about "What It's Like to Be the Wife of the Vice President." And she is really very charming. Everybody seemed quite impressed with her. I didn't see Hubert: he was off having lunch with the men.

F: And with Marguerite...

M: Well, no not Marg...he spoke to Marguerite in the morning (amongst ten thousand)...But, ah, apparently it was a very successful occasion for all concerned. It was kind of an experience getting to go to one of the "functions."

F: But—



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United States Senate
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

1129 Federal Building
Memphis, Tennessee
October 6, 1966

*Full
Marty
Jim*

Bill:

Notes on temporary closing of Memphis Office:

Jenny LaFon is keeping two potted plants and the silver bowl until such time as office is re-opened. Also, I have some of the plants at home which I will bring up when office is opened.

Have signed a form with the P. O. Dept so that all first class mail will be forwarded to Washington Office. Whoever opens up here should either call the PO or see the postman to have mail delivered here again.

Am leaving keys to the doors, files and supply cabinet with Mrs. Wiley in Judge Brown's office. Also, am offering Judge the use of Senator's parking space for his staff, until Senator needs it again.

Have kept one key myself in the event my coming in occasionally may be helpful.

I'm gonna miss y'all! ! !

Lib

Queen Chi-Chi—

“a sense, already dulling...that we could be New Women...
[‘I want to be ambitious, go with ambitious people’]
before the feminine mystique,” w/its interrogation:

“Shall I prepare myself for a lifelong celibate career?
Or a temporary vocation, which I shall give up when I marry,
assume the responsibilities of homemaking &
motherhood?”:

“real life was when you married and lived in a suburban
house
with your husband and children.” Real life began at forty
for her, mother at forty-one (cf. “the free years after forty”),

with its threat of a “terrifying monotony,” a see-through
womb with eyes to see back, the isolato mother-child.
Only magazines & baby books. She liked government work,

so why did she give it up? The South, “where the ‘femininity’
which the mystique enshrines remains most intact”? Or the
Church’s making it “more difficult...to stay emancipated?”

Or just “under enormous pressure from everyone”?
“amid crushing anxieties about abandoning their children”?
Spock explained that being wuman is irrational, that

“if a mother realizes clearly how vital care is to a small child,
it may make it easier for her to decide the satisfaction of
an outside job is really not important after all” QED.

Mother: I'm just so sorry I didn't take Mother up—you know we walked around; well, we sat down there for a nice leisurely lunch and we couldn't see out.

Grandmother: I was seeing out all the time. Course, you were sitting at the wrong seat.

M: You just saw one little section of a great panorama [said breathlessly, like a movie star]

G: I saw half of the horizon!

M: [To Child] Now, don't—do not do that (?) any more...put it like this, baby, it'll sit up better. Joe, do you want to say something to Matthew? Tell Matthew what you're doing. Say it loud: what are you busy doing? Say—say—say it to Papa. Say you're busy playing with the toys that grandmother sent. Tell the microphone.

C: [Whiny voice] I—I—I can't tell it.

Father: Why?

C: Because I'm too busy.

M: OK, Well, as long as he's busy, I don't think we should disturb him.

F: Heavens, no! Are you kidding?

M: [Exasperated, to Child] Well, put it back on...

C: You put it back on. I'm not.

M: I can't, 'cause it has to be on the floor. Well, put it on the floor.

Awards Fail To Hide Blight

Watts Newark
seemed Detroit difficult, fearsome
unpredictable "dread engulfed
Bluff City" whites "reacted (life) even
treacherous, viscerally...watched in disbelief "
engendered caution "very like a revolution"
Memphis 27 July 1967 Molotov "order-
and-security coveting" Henry Loeb seized
"When I was mayor other cities Memphis
White and Negro worked to keep
the peace law and order" City Charter "State
of Tennessee" police powers Discouraged
individuals prone to overestimate hostility of
the surrounding world they are doubly
anxious
about their offspring
(And did she stop
working downtown — was it I mean
conceived as a safety thing?)

Congress makes Beale
historic landmark fathers rest of
neighborhood demolished favored by
the black establishment
Jewish merchants who'd "been there
forever" not.

**...The persons who would laugh at Memphis' quest
for a cleanest city trophy live in the slums of our
city.**

[from pro-"urban renewal" editorial]

CAGED ELEGANCE—

The “arts” seem suitably feminine and offer endless personal identity w/o the need for pay, but “an original sculpture by a fashionable artist is a more prestigious purchase than a Kewpie doll”: without the money, they cease to dabble or babble. You could give a dog a pill for creativity You could stroke its throat until it had to swallow, but “candid, revealing self-exposure in public? anathema to genteel lady hood”—which is perhaps why we have so little of her work or words.

Your macrame, your holiday decorations, plant holders, birthday cards, little felt estonian birds, eyeless wise men, self-express. If the children show an interest, devote your life to it, and your steely chakras would open like a warmer with a bun. A little television couldn't hurt, but manifest a gluepot instead, it is better for the tikes.

A little relevation is acceptable in Milltown:

remember, after the dating game and the newlywed game, you are queen for a day, that girl bewitched. Southern Ladyland featured displays of generic gender genre dramas. Remember TV dinners? Remember whiter than white? We expected the “mature” actresses to show a little madness now and then, while the “quintessential ding-a-lings” popped fabulously from the chinks in the wall.

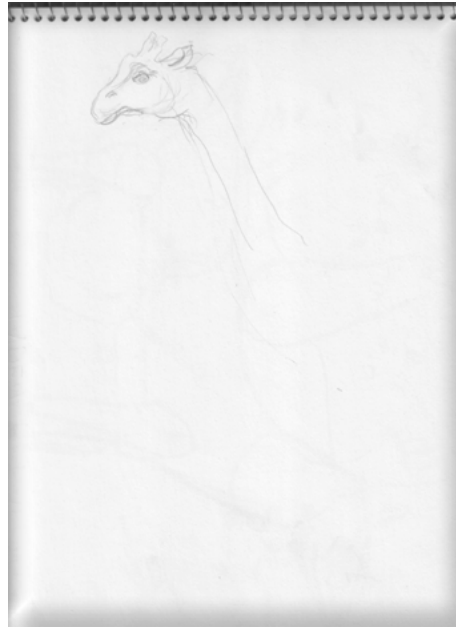
1. Sometimes I look at a sketch and fancy I can't tell which one of us drew it.
2. She always carries a snap-up purse w/short strap and holds her horn-rimmed sunglasses, in the photos. Undyed pouffed gray hair. And often cigarettes. One could read too much into this.
3. What a melancholy thing is a list. The first form of writing.
4. What care she put into my drawings. The first writing.
5. The fawns in the petting zoo in Biloxi look thin. Maybe they kept them hungry, so they'd have to eat out of your hand, no matter how much you disgusted them.
6. The yellow flower earrings with orange centers and matching brooch—she wore these with her "psychedelic dress." Present objects and missing Object. They know who but not what.

7. When they posed you in those school pictures and adjusted the position of your head—just so—what were you supposed to be looking at? Vaguely future, vaguely heaven. Your wry neck.

8. She sketched the ghost animals. Ostrich by her; fire truck by me. Evoking a day: Overton Park, c. 1968? A gar. The statue of liberty, random menagerie. Only one sketch of me—at least that's who I think it is.

9. "My mom has one just like that," we say. Nostalgia for self-identity over time, not just another alike. How we shall tell each other apart, when we shall meet to part no more. "My mom had one just like that when I was a kid," we say.

Notes



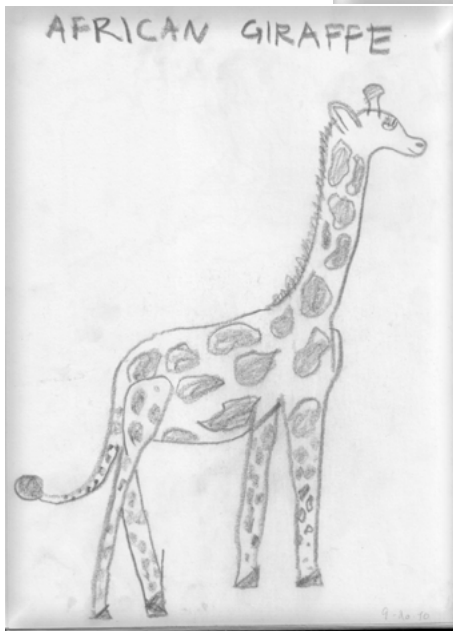
Ten distinct Squares: From frontispiece ("confection") of *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

The Swiss Cutter: Present author, c. age 5.

the only difference; the most rural-minded; a small town with; decaying Mississippi River town; Sunbelt's dark spot: All from G. Wayne Dowdy, *Hidden History of Memphis* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2010).

unhealthiest city; Buckle of the Bible: Both from Wanda Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2009).

northernmost city: "Often labeled the 'most northern city in Mississippi,' Memphis has historically attempted to distinguish itself from the rest of the Deep South." Kimberly K. Little, *You Must Be from the North: Southern White Women in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson, MS: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2009), 11.



leader of evil: "Memphis has always been the leader of evil things in the world." Attributed to bluesman "Sleepy" John Estes, as quoted in Howard Wuelfing, Jr., "Memphis: A Voodoo Baedeker," *Spin*, Feb. 1988, 40.

inculcation of racist: Little, 55.

'put sugar on their meat': James Conaway, *Memphis Afternoons: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 20.

...an open detestation: Conaway, 125.

give meaning & narrative: Rushing, 6. "Memories and identities from the past and self-consciousness, pride, shame, and ambivalence about those identities give meaning and narrative coherence to Memphis as a distinctive Southern place and shape place identity."

Race-Mixing, etc.: David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Divic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville, TN: The Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1980), 133.

In the '30s: From Rushing, 171.

the calvinist cracker version: Cf. Rushing, 156.

"the right attitude" etc.: From Tucker, 140.

Memphis is beautiful: Conaway, 44.

"*Memphis, Athens, Sulfur Springs,*" etc.: Indented sections adapted from William Witherspoon, "As Wm. Witherspoon Remembered It," Ch. 3 of *As They Saw Forrest: Some Recollections and Comments of Contemporaries*, Robert Selph Henry, ed. (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1987).

The Bomb will kill; I hear parents ask: Based on Dr. Benjamin Spock, *Problems of Parents* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 267 & 274.

hexachlorophene and *Karo*: advertisements in Spock, *Baby and Child Care*. New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1962.

There is no evidence: Spock, *Baby and Child Care* (BCC), 68.

Sat. Eve. Post's: 22 Dec. 1962. From Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*. New York: Basic Books, 2011, 1.

reasonable, friendly being: From quote by Benjamin Spock, in Julia Grant, *Raising Baby by the Book: The Education of American Mothers* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), 223. Grant's and Coontz' books inform the entire poem.

don't want to get up: From Spock, BBC, 365: "Realize ahead of time that questions about death are apt to come up at this age. Try to make the first explanation casual, not too scary. You might say, 'Everybody has to die someday. Most people die when they get very old and tired and weak and they don't want to stay alive any more. They don't want to have to get up in the morning and work. They just stop being alive.'"

mother's responsibility: Stanza based on Ann Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a century of Advice About Children* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 269.

how he ripped up and I taken them: From Witherspoon.

By the early 1960s: Elaine Tyler May, "Anger and Security: How the cold war ended the notion of public good," *The Chronicle Review (Chronicle of Higher Education)*, July 16, 2010, B11.

penis and scrotum big: Judith Arcana, *Every Mother's Son* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983), 72.

See, I was an only: Arcana, 116.

For high marital adjustment: From Friedan, 330.

the suit you bought: From Spock, *Dr. Spock Talks with Mothers: Growth and Guidance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 204.

newly democratic home-front: From Hulbert, 12.

spatial commotion: Poem based on Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007).

The social highway: Kenneth Fox, *Metropolitan America: Urban Life and Urban Policy in the United States 1940-1980* (Jackson, MS: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1986), 70: "The social highway to middle-class status in Tennessee, or Kansas, ran through construction and growth of suburban communities in the existing metropolitan centres, and promotion of growth of smaller cities to metropolitan size."

I would like to be, etc.: This line spoken by a 1960s housewife quoted from Lopata, 193.

For example, I remember: Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2002), 89.

I still expect a little: Arcana, 233–4.

Bits & Pieces: banner seen on side of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, March 2012.

Your child wants to disapprove: Poem based on Spock, *Problems of Parents* (POP), 265 and Conaway, 79.

a sense, already dulling: Poem based on Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*; *under enormous pressure:* Coontz, 119; *amid crushing anxieties:* Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2003), 4.

if a mother realizes: Quote by Spock; quoted in Grant, 224.

Watts, etc.: Poem based on Dowdy, Rushing, Fox, Stearns, and Richard M. Abrams, *America Transformed: Sixty Years of Revolutionary Change, 1941-2001* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006).

The “arts” seem suitably: Friedan, 348.

an original sculpture: Lopata, 174.


candid, revealing self-exposure: Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, *Composing Selves: Southern Women and Autobiography* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2011), 129.

quintessential ding-a-lings: Blanche Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green, *American Women in the 1960s: Changing the Future* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 203. Last stanza based on this source.

AUTHOR BIO



Joseph Harrington is the author of *Things Come On (an amneoir)*, a mixed-genre work relating the twinned narratives of the Watergate scandal and his mother's cancer. It was a *Rumpus* Poetry Book Club selection. He is the author of the chapbooks *Earth Day Suite* (Beard of Bees, 2010) and *Of Some Sky* (Bedouin, forthcoming), as well as the critical work *Poetry and the Public*. Harrington is the recipient of a Millay Colony residency and a Fulbright Chair.

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