

## DIARY OF A SATYR

When I was a child, I moved my pillow to a different part of the bed each night because I liked the feeling of not knowing where I was when I woke up. From the beginning I yearned for the nomadic life. I wandered, grazed like a goat on a hill—the move from grazing to exploring was just a leap over a fence. In my seventh year, I had a revelation. A teacher asked me a question. I knew the answer. Miss Green, a horse-faced redhead, asked the 3A class of P.S. 99, Kew Gardens, Queens, a long way from Byzantium: “What are you going to do in life?” Most of the answers remain a blur, but someone said she was going to be a novelist and someone said he’d write a play, or for the movies. I remember waiting; I was last to answer: “I am certain I am a poet.” Then Miss Green said, “I knew it. You, Stanley, are a bronze satyr,” and she whacked my erect penis with a twelve-inch Board of Education wooden ruler.

I ran home in a fury at my parents. They had never told me I was a satyr. My mother’s explanation: “You know what a hard time I had giving birth to you. Why do you think every time I hit you it hurts my hand? You had whooping cough the first six months of your life. The doctor said no human being could survive that. Even so, when you were three months old in your crib, you knocked your five-year-old sister unconscious. Nothing ever fits you, not your shoes, not your pants, not your shirts, nothing. Your feet always hang off the bed.” How many times did I hear my mother say, “That kid doesn’t know his own strength. You’ll injure somebody for life. Don’t hit. Don’t hit. The other kids, gentile and Jew, lie. You are mythological.”

After the revelation, at dinner, I saw my father—a public high school principal—as an angry centaur. Most evenings he was out herding his mares and women together for song, smell, and conversation. At our dinner table, I knew if I didn’t speak, no one would. My fifth summer, my father went to Europe “alone,” mostly, I think, to Venice and Vienna. By watching others, I taught myself to swim. When he returned I couldn’t look him in the eye. He brought back presents: a wooden bowl that, when lifted, played a Viennese waltz, a bronze ashtray of a boy peeing, after the fountain in Brussels, a silver top on a plunger I could never figure out, a blue necklace for my mother, some etchings of Venetian views and one of Beethoven. We lived in an apartment as desolate as Beethoven’s jaw. Still, on February 7, 1935, with my father on sabbatical leave, we set out as a family aboard the S.S. Statendam, heading for the stormy waters of the Atlantic, then southeast to the sunny Mediterranean. It was the first of many voyages I would take under different circumstances from the moral north to the warm south. For the first time, I heard the Roman languages of satyrs and satires, then Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Turkish. I heard rolling r’s, strange j’s and h’s, sometimes silent, throated on olives, anchovies and garlic. Until that February, I had entered a house

of worship only on special occasions—a Protestant Adirondack church in summer, to attend films—a synagogue, only once, to tell my grandmother on Yom Kippur that my mother was waiting outside in a car—I was thrown out for not wearing a hat, or perhaps because I was a satyr. My mother offered me hers, a brown, broad-brimmed hat with a veil that I refused to wear. Within a month, this satyr stood before the “Nightwatch” in Amsterdam. I read “Franco Franco Franco” on a wall in Malaga, I rode a camel beside the Sphinx, toured the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, watched men praying at The Wailing Wall; I entered the Church of the Nativity and the Holy Sepulcher, heard the “good news” for the first time. I took off my shoes, heard my hooves echo on the green rugs and tiles in the mosque of Santa Sophia and the Blue Mosque. I was photographed with the caryatids on the Acropolis, ran through the Parthenon on a windy February or March day, the Greek sun so bright against the white marble it hurt my eyes.

A few days later, on the Island of Rhodes, I was proud to be nicked in the leg by a ricocheted bullet in a post-revolutionary celebration. When I told the story throughout my childhood, I was shot in the leg in a Greek Revolution; I said I had a scar to prove it—and I do. That spring, I wandered off alone into the red light district of Algiers. An auburn-haired, tattooed lady smelling of flowers and sweat kissed me for nothing behind a beaded curtain. She touched a naked breast to my lips—I was in paradise. My mother thought I was lost. Soon, in Cairo, late at night, I roused most of the hotel attendants, claiming I had leprosy. I was covered with volcanoes of blood, my only comfort a black dragoman, tribal scars on his face, until my parents returned from a performance of belly dancers and made the discovery that I had been bitten by an army of fire ants. I would not forget the poverty and disease in the slums of Cairo, the crack of whips over the donkeys and horses. I was nine years old, eight years younger than the Soviet Union, changed forever.

Aboard the Statendam, I played chess with a thirteen-year-old kid named Matthew. He wore white knickers and traveled with his grandmother. I last saw him crying, kicking and spitting at my father, who was beating the dickens out of him. I never, in the two-month voyage, saw Matthew or his grandmother again. I asked my mother if Dad threw them overboard; she said, “You’re exaggerating again.” My father said, “To ask questions is a sign of intelligence, but you ask too many questions. Your mother is the Tower of Babel. You and she are two of a kind.” Now that I could accept and was proud of being a bronze satyr, I remembered when I was a baby in my Aunt Bessie’s arms, I took her breasts out of her blouse, thinking, “I am pretending to be just a baby, but I am really out for a feel.” I wish I had been photographed, then with my little victorious, evil satyr smile, instead of the family photo of me in a baby carriage reaching for a cloud. In our family, the beginning of civilization was understood to be the moment Abraham sacrificed the ram

instead of his firstborn son. I started one dinner's conversation with "I think it would have been better to kill Isaac than the ram. I think the ram stands for me. Daddy, you know there's a very thin line between the good shepherd and the butcher."

"Who are you to think!" Whack went my father's Board of Education ruler, a thirty-six-inch weapon. My mother threatened to stab herself in the heart with a kitchen knife like a bronze Lucretia. We were a family of atheists; still, we celebrated an occasional seder with uncles, aunts, and their children, most of whom kept away from me, lest I molest them. What could I do to liven up the evening? I planted a snail and a skeleton of an eel under the parsley and horseradish on my father's seder plate. The moment he passed out the horseradish, everyone saw the snail and eel's skeleton. I said, "Horseradish rhymes with Kaddish." Lightning, my father reached out for me, but he missed. I was ordered out of the house, into the world of wild things.

I had planned one last, beautiful gesture. My mother and Aunt Mabel had a friendly contest, who could make the lightest matzo balls. My mother always lost. I had found my aunt's matzo balls laid out on a platter in the kitchen. I took our little collection of stones and jewels from Jerusalem, and one by one I thrust them into the center of each matzo ball: diorite, opal, quartz, limestone, sandstone, onyx. I watched through the window as the matzo balls were served with a spoon, one by one, into the chicken soup. My aunt had a big and loyal constituency that typically gulped their food. Hypocrites, they swallowed the matzo balls with such comments as, "Light as air!" "Like perfume," until my cousin Audrey cried, "I broke a tooth on a rock!" I danced my little goat dance outside for joy. For the first and only time in her life, my dear mother was declared a winner.

Whatever the weather, the smoke of battle never cleared. In November, on the anniversary of my grandfather's death, my mother lit a Yartzheit memorial candle in a glass. I believe she prayed. "What would happen," I asked, "if I blew out the flame?" My mother's face saddened that I should ask such an unspeakable question, but she knew my ways. "That would be a sin." She almost never used that word. Now I knew there was a second sin—the first, the greater sin, wasting food. A proper satyr, sin was my pie in the sky. I knew that in one evening Alcibiades had cut the penises off half the herms in Athens. I scouted the neighborhood, and in one evening, with our nineteenth-century American candlesnuffer, I put out the flames of seven Yahrzeit candles. I came across a magazine called *Twice a Year* that introduced me to Rimbaud, Lorca, Wallace Stevens; they taught me how to survive. Out of a bar of Ivory soap I carved a Virgin Mother with a baby satyr in her lap, then another virgin with a unicorn in her lap. My thought was the unicorn represented, not Christ, but my savior—poetry. I cut school and went two or three days a week to the main reading room of the Forty-second Street Library (a satyr among

lions), or the Museum of Modern Art, or to the Apollo Theater to see foreign films. I smoked five-cent Headline cigars. One romantic evening I called my father a sadist (the first shot of the fourth Punic War). It was then I was banished from Jackson Heights forever.

Hard years. I learned to disguise myself to earn a living. Wherever I went I carried my desperately thin production of poems and Wallace Stevens. I was sure Hitler was anti-satyr. I joined the Navy at seventeen. A sword wound and the G.I. Bill got me through college in style. I had a recurring nightmare that, like the satyr Marsyas, I was flayed—just for being a satyr, for no reason at all, not for challenging Apollo at music. I leapt around graduate women's dorms, broke windows and doors. Police were called. I was expelled for "subversive activity." Now history: I was hired by a detective agency to spy on organizing workers. I became a counterspy for Local 65. I sang in a band, played the bass, waited on tables; I was a sailor on a Greek merchant ship (I got the job through Rae Dalven, the translator of Cavafy); I grazed a while at New Directions; for mysterious reasons, Dylan Thomas and I became passionate friends—I loved his poetry and his deep-throated Christianity. I remember his saying "the truth doesn't hurt." He could and would talk intimately to anyone, regardless of class or education, not a habit of American or English intellectuals. He drank, he told me, because he wasn't useful, which I understood to mean he could not relieve human suffering. Anyone who really cared about him knew how profoundly and simply Christian he was. Dickens was a favorite teacher. He gave away the shirt off his back. The turtleneck sweater Dylan wore in that picture was mine, knitted for me by my Aunt Tilly. We discovered an Italian funeral home on Bleecker Street where, after the bars closed at 4 a.m., we drank whiskey on a gold and onyx coffin. He introduced me to Theodore Roethke, his second-favorite living American poet. His favorite was e.e. cummings—"he can write about anything." Dylan, Ted and I spent an evening with townspeople from Laugharne, trolls who whitewashed the town. What a concert of Welsh accents and laughter. Dylan had his boathouse, Roethke his greenhouse, I had my apartment house in Queens.

I met a blond, green-eyed Catalan beauty named Ana Maria. Full of Spanish poetry and Catalan republican-heretical-anarchistic tragedy, she was a great bad-weather friend. After Barnard College she sailed off to Spain; I followed, after writing a poem called "Sailing from the United States." (I earned the money to follow by wild luck—an old 8th Street satyr who knew I loved painting gave me an El Greco to sell, a crucifixion with a view of Toledo.) We married at the American Consulate in Tangiers. Our witnesses—her mother and two virgin sisters. There was blood on the floor. It turned out that one of her sisters had been given a metal garter with nails by a nun at the Colegio del Sagrado Corazón because the nun thought Ana Maria was marrying an American Protestant. A miracle: the sister who wore the garter and shed her blood at my wedding

found her way to Philadelphia, married an orthodox Jew, a painter. They both died too soon and are buried on a hillside overlooking Haifa. I knew in Rome there was a tradition of centaur teachers—why not satyrs? I made my way to pagan Rome. I taught English and tutored. We lived facing the temple of the Vestal Virgins across the Tiber. I decided, one August evening, to have a mythological picnic, a cookout for my mythological friends. Of course, it had to be beside the river, on the embankment of the Tiber, because the hippocamps were half-horse, halffish; the tritons were half-man, half fish. There were nymphs and maenads. The great god Pan himself came—and the Artemis of Ephesus on a sacred barge. (You understand I could not serve my famous fish soup.) A giraffe crashed the party. He said he was a tree, a sycamore among men, lonely since his nesting birds flew south. He said he envied trees that can lean over a river and see their reflection. Madness, I thought, to have a private mythology, but I knew to speak to him I had to accept his metaphor. The symposium began. How did it feel to a man to make love to a fish, how did it feel to a horse to make love to a fish? What was love? Someone complimented Artemis on the beauty of her many breasts. A harpy screeched, “She has no nipples; they are the testicles of sacrificed bulls.” We all came out of darkness, hatched from a single egg that was love the enchanting, the brilliant. When we departed, we kissed goodbye in our several heartfelt ways. Some wept because the sirens, as usual, sang their song of how we would be remembered.

I spent years in Rome, happy to eat the leftovers of the gods, reading and writing, trying to make a living holding four jobs simultaneously. More than once, drunk on Frascati, I bathed in the Bernini fountain of the four rivers. On summer evenings, I drank from the Nile with a marble tiger. I corresponded with my mother. I received one letter from my father I carried around a while. Finally I destroyed it, lest God should see it. Out of the blue, I received a postcard from my father, “We will be in Pisa on August 18, 1956, at the Hotel Cavellieri, if you care to see us.” Signed, “Pop.” Never, not once in my life, did I call my father “Pop.” I arrived on the appointed day, shocked to see how much they had aged. They were fifty-eight. We had lunch in the piazza, the pages of the Bible flapping in the wind. A little peeved that I had learned Italian and Spanish in the passing years, my father taught himself passing Italian and Spanish to go with his Greek, Latin, and French. He had more than enough Italian to order, as usual, exactly what he wanted. He insisted on having his spaghetti with cinnamon and sugar, no doubt a Litvak recipe out of his mother’s kitchen. My mother said my hair was getting straight; did that have anything to do with the Leaning Tower of Pisa? Oh, how I miss my mother’s questions. My father spent a cordial week in Italy, my mother another month at our apartment in Trastevere. She slept in a room I usually rented out, in a bed just vacated by Christopher Isherwood and friend. If she had known, would she have slept a wink? My father said,

in wishing me goodbye, “If you had only been a bronze horse rearing up once in a while, I could have handled you.” What was our mettle, a word I misspelled in my head as m-e-t-a-l? What we were really made of, the years would prove.

Coming out of his thoughts, my father said abruptly, “What I know of poetry I owe to you.”

“How so?” I asked suspiciously.

“When I was studying for my principal’s exam when you were two or three, I had to memorize passages from Shakespeare. On walks, I would recite the great speeches over your head, and repeat them out loud until I had them: Hamlet, King Lear, The Tempest.”

I said, “Perhaps what I know of poetry I owe to you.”

He started reciting “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I” with his large, tin ear. I finished it. I kissed him and said, “Thanks a lot.” (A wellknown actress from a famous acting family once put me down with “I saw my father play King Lear when I was ten. You couldn’t possibly understand the difference between that and studying Shakespeare at Yale.” I informed her that I began my Shakespeare studies when I was two.)

I met Ted Roethke again in Rome when I was munching on the review *Botteghe Oscure*. We both had passed dangers. We hit it off. We met again two years later by chance at a Pinter play in London when I was heading back to the States after Rome fell. We joined up to see Hamlet and Gielgud in *The Tempest* (we did not drown our books). Eight seasons passed. Ted and Beatrice came to stay with me at 57th Street at a barn I was living in. I gave Ted big breakfasts and my homburg, he gave me his famous raccoon skin coat. He liked the fish and turtle tank in my small dining room. He told me he was once in love with a snake. Ted brought me to dinner at Stanley Kunitz’s. I remember that first long, long, long evening. Thinking back, I didn’t quite know how lucky I was. They were in their fifties, Stanley had almost fifty years to go, Ted had six. Dylan had crossed the Styx a handful of years before. On still another evening, not after death, Roethke came with his not-quite-finished manuscript of *The Far Field*. He went off one evening to show it to Stanley Kunitz. He put on a blue serge suit and my homburg for the occasion. Just before dawn, he rolled back in. “What did Stanley say?” I asked.

“He liked it a lot.” Then a look of pain crossed his face and I knew that Ted, who had been in the mood to be crowned heavyweight champion and nothing less, was disheartened. I thought Kunitz had found something not quite right, that he had been demanding and not just celebratory.

Suddenly, Ted said, talking half to me and half to the world,

“Stanley Kunitz is the most honest man in America.” I told this story in an introduction to a book of Kunitz conversations. More years. Roethke long dead, after a formal Roethke celebration at which Kunitz, an aged ex-Roethke sweetheart and I were the only three people in the room who knew him, Kunitz asked me to repeat the story at dinner to a young poet.

I was pleased my story had touched Stanley.

When my father was soon to die, he spent his last hours in a fury that he hadn't died a year before when he'd wanted to. His doctor kept saying to me, "He's made of stainless steel. He's made of stainless steel." I understood my bronze self was just a chip off the old block, a mere alloy of tin and copper. What is a satyr, a Turkish brass sieve without moral outrage, a chamber pot that lets the urine through beside my father's moral steel.

My mother divorced my father six months before her death. On her birthday, a month to the day before she died, she saw her second great-granddaughter, who, to her joy, was named after her. She never knew she had a grandson. My sister sent our mother's ashes through the U.S. mail. My parents are buried in a garden I made in Water Mill, the graves two unmarked stones, surrounded by Montauk daisies and pink mallow. I didn't think my mother would want the stones too close. Last spring, a swan nested right on the graves. When the eggs hatched, the mother swan paraded with her six grey cygnets in the bay in front of our house. When I approached, they all jumped on their mother's back, and she swam away with them to safety. My mother would have liked that.