

Autobiography

by David Antin



1967
A Great Bear Pamphlet

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Autobiography

it's a tradition in my family to write an autobiography because everytime my mother left her husband — six times — she wrote her autobiography and showed it to my uncle. My uncle was an appropriate man to be a judge because he always considered himself judicious.

Coming thru Kansas at two in the morning on a warm night in a Holland cleaning truck with a kid who thought he looked like Roddy Macdowell and an ex-divinity student. The fields were up on raised embankments and the winding road was flooded with light. Roddy Macdowell was driving. He went to Michigan State and he told us they had the world's third best philosopher there. A small car shot out from behind us at about 80 and disappeared around a turn. We caught up with it about 10 minutes later. The driver must have cut across the road on a turn because he'd slammed into an oncoming truck. He hit it so hard he knocked the front axle out from under it and the little car went spinning across the road. The divinity student stayed in the truck being sick and Roddy Macdowell and I pulled everybody out . . . the truck driver with broken legs, 6 passengers from the car in a state of shock and a baby bleeding from the scalp.

I learned to read at an early age and had a firm grasp of the color words before entering public school. Red Blue even Orange. When I got there one of the first things i had to do was draw a picture of my house. I lived in a two story red brick house with green coach lanterns on the porch so i drew a firm outline with a pencil and colored everything in with a red crayon but though the crayon was red and the bricks were red the color of the drawing was nothing like the house. I became suspicious and gave up art.

looking into the dark oblong mirror into which a triangle of light had fallen through partially open doors as into a pool of water I somehow became convinced of my identity with that luminous figure. We were both completely empty, devoid of properties and totally lucid. In this state I began to believe I was unreal, and this conviction was confirmed by the fact that I was unable to feel anything at all. It occurred to me that I might get dressed go down to the bar at the corner and get into a quarrel in which I might get hurt and thus feel pain. But the bar was closed - it was past three. So I went up to the viaduct overlooking Tiemann Place and looked down over the street below. I thought I might lean over the parapet and place myself in some danger of falling in order to feel fear. This was unsuccessful. I couldn't succeed in feeling anything except the damp cold of the stone I held in my hands. Gradually I eased out further and further till I hung over the street without succeeding in feeling anything when I heard the distant sound of laughing voices further down the Drive. I started to laugh myself choking and coughing and scrambled back over the parapet.

This girl he'd been living with kept calling him. She even came down to his mother's place and waited for him outside the apartment house. She kept pestering him on the phone till he asked her what she wanted and all she said was she wanted to be happy. He was afraid she'd do something desperate and went to see her. They talked very late. As he explained it, he had to teach the next morning. He took off his clothes and lay down on the couch. She disappeared into the bathroom. What did she

mean coming out with nothing on but a diaphragm?

that was the tree where i decided to think — i took my glove off and tried.

“You know what’s the most dangerous animal alive? — Wolverines. They fierce. We goin up to Connecticut and hunt em with bows and arruhs.”

in high school I used to visit the offices of the Cannonite wing of the Trotskyite party, where we were greeted by a lecturer who began each session with the words ‘what are the contradictions in the world pattern today, comrades?’ I lost interest in the affairs of the party when I entered college and fell out of touch with most of my friends but one spring I decided to pay them a visit for old times’ sake. I went down to the University Place office and found them mobilized for a high school students’ strike. It was also a few days before May Day and everything was very festive. I stood with a blonde girl beside the punch bowl and she explained that the strike had started out to get higher pay for athletic coaches but the party was trying to redirect the strikers’ energies into more revolutionary channels. It was a great step forward. The girl was plainly excited and very pretty. I drank punch and listened. It turned out that my friend was the evening’s speaker. Not being much on speeches I retreated to a distant corner behind a large sign, where I could watch her dreamily and play with the sign. The sign was unbalanced and I kept seeing how far I could tip it with my foot and still have it right itself. My friend was a fire-eater. Two pink spots below her high cheekbones — severely dressed in a man’s shirt from which her fragile boned wrists extended — she gave no quarter. ‘This is no time for retrenchment.’ I tipped the sign. ‘. . . no time for compromise . . .’ I tipped it again. ‘We must weed out those among us who are faint of heart.’ Once more. ‘Let the sign fall on those of little faith.’ It fell on me.

— the tree was smaller, the dogs were older and Getzler didn't have the grocery anymore —

He used to own a Himalayan bear named Suzy who opened coke bottles with her teeth. He got her from a bankrupt circus while cutting scrap iron over the mountain. All the town kids used to come by to see her drink her coke and dance with him. But she gave them all a scare by prying her cage bars open and quietly sitting down outside, so he had to give her away. He made a careful study of all the zoos in the east — to see how much room they gave their animals and how they treated them - put her in the back of an open truck and donated her to Philadelphia.

Some kids in baseball uniforms with red socks carrying bats and gloves came up the street. My uncle asked me what team it was and when he saw I didn't know he said the Red Sox.

“why'd she say that? — ‘you must belong to the selfish club.’?”

He kept eating carrots and jumping off chairs. They ended by accepting him. He flew 24 missions and married a girl who looked like she'd been coated with colorless nail polish.

She lost her lipstick and we were late to the exhibition. It snowed and we should have turned back. We skidded nearly hitting a tree. On the way home we took

the long road to avoid the hill by the chicken farm. Her mother talked about an art gallery in the mountains and we yelled at her as the car kept unaccountably gaining speed. I was afraid to stop on the dark road and alternately kicked the brake in spurts and fed gas to hold the road on turns. She was nervous and talked too much. I swore at her and she cried. They kept her quiet till we got back home and found her lipstick wedging up the back of the accelerator.

he said he always wanted to be the head of a family and took one over when his older brother died. he came up to my apartment unexpectedly and sat around boring me with questions — did I like weddings better than funerals? But he liked lumber.

Around and around the bed we ran - she with a knife me with a broom. I clipped her with the broom and she sat on the floor crying with one breast hanging out. “What can I do? — he won’t stop reading.”

He explained to her that he was unhappy with teaching because he had to go in and leave at a fixed time and always had to account to his department chairman for whatever he was doing. He’d been looking for an editing job and had a few offers. One man running a photo agency wanted him to write captions and develop stories to sell to the newspapers but the arrangement sounded too fluid. He’d also thought about going back to school and studying engineering but wasn’t sure he was interested in all that studying. He asked her what she thought and she said the trouble with him was he couldn’t make up his mind. He was surprised and asked how she could say that.

I kept thinking I was in Idaho even though I knew I was walking down 6th Ave. talking to a friend. We were passing the 20's and the smell of fir trees piled on the sidewalk for Christmas

He had the body of a National Football League tackle and the face of an infant that turned dangerously red whenever he had a tantrum, which he occasionally did. For about 10 or 12 bars he was one of the best pianists alive, but he never finished anything. He'd been bounced out of the architectural school at M.I.T. and had dropped out of Julliard. Mostly he read science fiction and felt sorry for his childhood. As an infant he recalled that his mother had been a strict Watsonian and felt obligated never to pick him up when he cried. His childhood had been plagued by expensive schools with progressive ideas about sex. But mainly he blamed his Central Park West adolescence. He'd been dating a girl who lived across the street from him, whose parents were friends of his family. In the summer when her parents went away for a weekend he tried to make her. Picking her up in his arms he carried her into the master bedroom, where she had a trauma on the bed. He got so upset he left his condoms on the night table. When her parents returned they found them but merely called him in and said "Haven't you forgotten something?" and handed the package back to him. His blue eyes filled with tears and his voice shook with outrage as he told me, "David, I'm Marjorie Morningstar."

The man with the blue marks on his chest told me he had to beware of the sun since his cobalt treatment and climbed out of the swimming pool.

Lying naked on the bed with drawn blinds and only a corner lamp for light, as we moved slowly back and forth together we thought we saw the light begin to waver. Remote and self absorbed we watched it fade, return, once, twice, and finally, in proper time, go absolutely dark. When we got up and looked outside we saw the city had been entirely blacked out.

“You’re pretty smart, how many truck farms in N.Y. city. What was General Patton’s name for dice.” — “Thirty-two” — Galloping dominoes.”

There was a party at Bob Rosenfeld’s house. It had spilled out onto all the other floors of the building, engulfing the adjoining apartments. There was a band and dancing on one floor, a guitarist and songs on another, conversation on a third. I was tired and went home early. About 2 I was awakened by pounding on the door. It was a friend who’d just left the party. He was gloomy and querulous. It was noisy - meaningless - who needed it? He’d had a lousy time. The last time I’d seen him he’d had two girls on his lap, a bottle of scotch in his hand and was singing union songs. I reminded him of this, but he just shook his head morosely. I pointed out that he liked scotch he liked girls and liked singing. — That’s what they call a good time.

It was the one who fell off a cliff in California, but they kept it from his mother who continued writing him for years.

Mr. Tofranelli used to come to visit her on Sundays. He taught organ and choral singing at the Manhattanville school for girls and made about twenty dollars a week at it. He paid ten for his room so that it was about the same as being unem-

ployed. He would come over in the early afternoon. Emilie would feed him. Then they would sit in the parlor overlooking the Drive and he would play Chopin-like accompaniments to her songs. She supported herself by renting rooms but she used to write songs and children's stories in the hope of making extra money. She wrote the songs in French and translated them into English, and they all went something like

“Did you ever see Washington in the spring?”

Did you ever see Washington in the spring?

When the cherry trees are blooming?

It is so sad in Washington in the spring

When the cherry trees are blooming.”

As far as I know she never sold any and she stopped writing children's stories after getting a letter from a publisher mysteriously advising her never to send them anything of that sort again or they would notify the police.

The butcher came to the car in the parking lot where they were necking. He started to cry but wiped the tears away and asked “Do you love each other?”

when he was a kid his father took him to the zoo and forgot him there. he said he spent the whole night locked in the lion house.

He courted her with boxes of chocolate covered cherries and by playing the ukelele. He sang Danny Boy and When Irish Eyes Are Smiling and wound up on one knee doing Mammy. I agreed he had a beautiful voice.

Beside the railroad bridge the gulls were turning counter clockwise in a slow

circle outward as they rose. Below them the water was turning in a slow circle clockwise and downward. She said it was a whirlpool.

I said I'd bring the salt. She said I'd take the salt. I said okay I'd take the salt and bring it with me.

every time I went somewhere with her we had to sit in the back away from the window and a couple of times we had to leave suddenly. her husband was in jail and she thought every hoody type was a potential accomplice. When she came to my place I had to pick her up on a deserted street corner and leave her in the subway going home. she was very young and I felt sorry for her, it was all very exciting till I happened to ask a friend of hers about her husband and found she didn't have one.

they were close friends and got progressively more and more annoyed at each other over the years till they finally had it out. Dick said 'I'd like to hit you right in the mouth.' Gene answered 'Yeah? Well, if you did that I'd smack you with a left, right over your right.' Dick said he'd back off but then charge him with a vicious uppercut. Gene said he'd sidestep the uppercut and jab Dick behind the ear. Dick said he'd whirl around and smash a straight right to the gut. Gene said he'd grab him by the neck and throw him on the ground. Dick said he'd bring him down with him and come out on top. Gene said he'd flip him off with his right leg. Dick said he could never do it. They wound up exhausted.

I had to stop seeing her because my face hurt from smiling.

We drove up to your mother's hotel in the fall. They hadn't drained the swimming pool or put any chlorine in the water, so we swam most of the day and lay around in the sun. At night we stayed in the big house in town. It was a sprawling, shapeless structure built by a local doctor, who'd chopped up the last chestnut trees in the neighborhood to panel his walls. We drank Johnny Ebert's cider mixed with vodka and blackberry brandy, and I beat your mother at gin rummy. When they were all asleep you stole down the hall to my bedroom and we got the bed so soaked and stained with lipstick we had to steal the sheets and take them with us. In the morning we drove back on the speedway at ninety. We got two flats within ten minutes of each other and after the second we pulled off the road, lay down in the grass and laughed.

he didn't play the piano because he was a professional.

Her mother went to New York to see if she could get a principal to start a school on her property, but the people at Teachers' College discouraged her. She came back and demanded we write a letter for her to Wyneric who was always interested in progressive ideas. They would start an old age home together. When we refused she wrote it herself. It read:

Dear Sir,

I have a wonderful property here in Sullivan County and an idea that could prove profitable to both of us.

And she wouldn't sign her name.

He was making out with a young Reichian and I lent him my apartment and stayed with another friend with whom I was working on a translation of *Wozzeck*. I wasn't there more than a couple of hours when the phone rang. It was my friend calling up everyone to tell them — "This is Faust. I'm staying at Dave Antin's place. Don't call me!"

She used to feed him peanuts so he'd let her crack him on his leather jacket to make a man of him.

The runner was floating down the sideline in a pocket behind three blockers and I drifted over to cut him off. The first blocker made his move too early and I stepped around him. I caught the second by the arm and spun him into the third, getting a clear shot at the runner. He went right over me.

"Your mother's fainted," my uncle said. They'd been arguing about their partnership and she was lying flat on the living room floor with upturned feet. I got a glass of water and went to pour it on her when a hand came up, said "Thank you, dear," and drank it off.

The water was warm and calm as glass. The jellyfish were out and you could see them glitter when you'd dive. Everytime we splashed the surface there was a shower of sparks. We must have swum for hours before we realized we couldn't see the land. We decided to be methodical. I would swim about half a mile in one direction while he was treading water. If I didn't see anything he would try another direction and I would tread water. I went out and came back. He went out and came back. I went out again. It was like swimming in a bathtub. He found it on the fourth try.

She was a harpist in Sigmund Romberg's orchestra.

They're shooting away. They all look like their backing up the wrong end of a telescope.

He trusted me because I knew what the word limen meant and told me he'd been locked in a room for years. His sister and brother-in-law had kept him there and beaten him up regularly. And in fact he did look pretty beaten up with scar tissue around his eyes and ears. Said he wanted only one thing - to find his sister and brother-in-law and kill them. I rolled my oxygen tanks to the wall and warned him not to do it. But the people at the V.A. had also warned him. I quit working at the hospital and forgot about him. But I went back to collect a paycheck. I stopped at the luncheonette for a cup of coffee and saw him sitting at the counter grinning. He told me he found them.

I was sitting on the stoop with my aunt when an older boy came by carrying a bottle of Clorox in his hand. She looked at him scornfully - "why is he carrying it without a bag, for all the world to see?"

April, 1967

Biographical Information

Was born in New York in 1932 and learned to speak at an astonishingly early age. Said “suppositories” before he was two. When he was two and a half his father died and he learned to fly kites on the boardwalk at Rockaway. At four he visited his uncle’s business in the garment center where he went out on the fire escape and looked down at the people below. He also made two cardboard boxes. His first prose works were published at age 9 (Kensington Magazine). Wrote his first poem at Brooklyn Technical High School during a lull in an English class and was promptly expelled for showing it to the boy in back of him. At City College he met the creator of *The Trojan Women*, *The Corresponding Secretary of the Old Catholic Church*, and other celebrated authors. Also his wife. In after years he had his apartment painted and is now considering moving.

Bibliographical

Definitions a book of poems published by Caterpillar Press, 1967. (distributed by Phoenix Bookstore, 18 Cornelia St., N. Y. 14, N. Y.) and Asphodel Bookstore, 306 Superior Avenue. W., Cleveland, Ohio) Poetry has appeared in *Some/Thing* magazine (of which he is co-editor), *Antipiugiu*, *C-Magazine*, *Chelsea*, *El Corno Emplumado*, *Folio* (Indiana), *Grist*, *Hardware Poets’ Newsletter*, *Helicon*, *Kayak*, *The New Yorker*, *Poems from the Floating World*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Pogamoggon*, *Tampa Review*, *Trobar*, *WIN* (Workshop in Non-Violence). Prose in *Art News*, *Artforum*, *Art and Literature*, *Billedkunst*, *Chelsea*, *Jewish Digest*, *Kenyon Review*, *Kulchur*, *Das Kunstwerk*, *Art News Annual* 1966.

