

THIS IS A TOWN WORTH DIGGING IN AND FIGHTING FOR

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I WAS THIRTEEN WHEN I NOTICED BRISK ACTIVITY in the East End of Provincetown, where my family had a home. People scurried from house to house, their arms clutching folders of manuscripts that seemed to contain secrets, and which I saw explode, during the summer, in the pages of a talked-about publication called the *Provincetown Review*. The editors lived next door. Norman Mailer seemed to be some sort of advisor, and had contributed a piece about Picasso to one issue, declaring the artist's "exploration of reality" as one of "travel not from object to object but from relation to relation." I watched their inscrutable mission take shape in the issue published in 1960, which contained a volatile chapter from Hubert Selby's novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. The editor, Bill Ward, was arrested for selling obscenity to a minor. Later, I discovered my father's back issues of the *Review*, a total of seven running more or less annually from 1958 to 1968. It was an ambitious publication—possessing local excitement plus literary significance.

The Selby story was inflammatory in its cruel punishment of a predatory prostitute who is finally defiled in a violently sexual gang rape by sailors along the Brooklyn docks. The Provincetown police chief was alerted to the contents of the story when a mother complained that her son had purchased the magazine at a local restaurant, which had a stack of copies for sale. The editor was put on trial. Rueben Goodman, an ACLU attorney, admirably defended the *Review's* right to publish. Norman Podhoretz, Seymour Krim, Jason Epstein, Allen Tate, and Stanley Kunitz were called to testify, providing historically important statements. Kunitz, in particular, spoke of the role of little magazines in fostering groundbreaking modernist writers. He cited the censorship battles of D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce,

resolved in the U. S. Supreme Court. The entire transcript of the trial was published in the issue that appeared the following summer: "EDITOR JAILED" the cover screamed. When I read it, I struggled to understand the judge's reasoning. First of all, the young man who purchased the journal was not underage. In a decision bizarre for its oblivious irrationality, Judge Welsh pronounced Ward guilty. On appeal, the case was quickly dismissed. The *Provincetown Review* went on publishing for a few more summers, while our family moved to Minneapolis, where my father taught in the studio arts department of the University of Minnesota, eventually serving as chairman.

Mailer came to the university in the mid-sixties to give a speech in Coffman Union. Afterward, my father hosted a reception at his loft above the Cedar Bar, on the more bohemian, West Bank campus. I was the bartender. My father had alerted Norman of my interest in writing, and he said "Your son is too handsome to become a writer," which made me laugh. Mailer arrived at the party alone, wearing a cinched-up trench coat and bearing a bottle of Jim Beam in a crumpled paper bag. He had roused the audience at a large public assembly; now, he aimed to relax and have fun. I poured his shots and produced a book I wanted him to sign: *Advertisements for Myself*. It remains my favorite book, even today. It revealed to me that a book could take the form of a magazine, and the author could function as its editor.

Returning for summers in Provincetown, I often saw Mailer bustling about. When I was a busboy at Ciro's I cleared his plate and asked him why he ordered a New York sirloin in an Italian restaurant. He said Italians knew how to make the sauce sing. Mailer was a very visible figure in the Provincetown community. He made the local news when he was arrested for shouting "Taxi" at a police patrol car. Staggering up Miller Hill Road after a night on the town, Mailer claimed he was confused by "that thing on top of the cab." Perhaps the police were less polite in the manner in which they took the author into custody, jamming him into the cruiser and whisking him away to a dismal cell in the basement of Town Hall. During the trial, Mailer was his own lawyer. He wore a three-piece suit much like the one worn by the detective he played in his film *Beyond the Law*. Again, he was a ham, mocking his own dignity by addressing the adversarial cop as "Cobra"—his familiar, local nickname. But when he did so, he was admonished by the judge, who repeatedly noted for the record the officer's given name. Yet Mailer did it again, blurting out the nickname of the snake who had snared him at surprising opportunities, so that it became like the punch line of a vaudeville

routine or something of a contemporary performance—an amusing and spontaneous in-your-face “happening.” The jury chuckled, newspapers reported on the comedy, and weeks of laughter echoed in the bars.

Mailer was already an icon when he ambled down the block, generally mid-morning, on his way to write in my father’s former studio, located behind our house. He passed by like a housepainter on his way to paint a house. Here he wrote *Cannibals and Christians*, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, and portions of other books. He worked in a Spartan alcove reached by a vertical ladder, a loft area my father had used to store his large paintings. Still, if one was obliged to stoop, the space was yet ample enough to sit in a chair at a desk in a windowed corner, looking out on a private garden. There were a few bookshelves. Opposite the desk was a low, flat bed, which Norman used as a surface to stack papers. When I was a teenager, I helped my father build the structure. My initials are carved into the beam that supports the south end of the roof. Following my parent’s divorce, my father re-located to East Hampton, and my mother rented the studio to Norman for a string of summers in the sixties.

Mailer ends his meditation on the astronauts and the rocketry that took them to the moon with a chapter called “Burial by the Sea,” in which a bulldozer partially buries a broken car in a spontaneous neighborhood ritual. In a big yard behind the Banko’s house, a bulldozer, unable to inter the automobile in a horizontal manner, instead half-buried it, with its nose facing skyward. Mailer’s book was about men, their machinery, and the invidious imagination of collective will, manifesting itself in a technical and bureaucratic web where the veins and arteries are bloodless. The Banko’s car, purchased to last the full summer, died before Labor Day, and a crowd gathered. Norman wandered out from his studio next door and was surprised to find himself deeply moved by the reverent atmosphere expressed in the readings, which he quoted in his book. Mourning the demise of the vehicle, Eddie Bonetti read from a poem about a car that had been poorly conceived: “Duarte Motors giveth, and terminal craftsmanship taketh away.” A child was playing in the structure during more readings. The sculptor John Kearney had welded skinny iron rods onto the front fender of the car, so it looked like a giant bug emerging from the ground. Mailer observed that he had seen five marriages breaking up, over the months of the summer, including his own to Beverly Bentley. He connected our lunar assault to our inability to sustain love. Mailer said he came to feel that we had sullied the moon by the

lack of ceremony showed by NASA, “where they could have apologized for landing on the moon. Primitives used to do that. If they cut down a giant tree, they were all too aware that the tree had a spirit, which I suspect is true. I think all great, noble trees have spirits too, but it’s the old story of divine economy. You can’t have a ceremony for every tree you cut down, but a tribe can have a religious ceremony when a giant tree is cut down.” It was the first time I saw the depth of feeling in Mailer for the fundamental importance of communal bonding. The part I loved the most, in his description, is when the child, playing in the actual structure of the symbolic form that the car had become, twisted a knob on the dashboard and the windshield wipers sprung to life (perhaps sweeping back and forth to make sure the glass was clear for the voyage.)

Norman’s life was greatly altered by his marriage to Norris Church, strikingly beautiful, down-to-earth, witty, and sharp-tongued enough to parry Norman’s often impish way of animating a given existential moment. Perhaps, for Norman, her charm resided in her relatively equal talents as an actress, a painter, and as a novelist, whose words were not to be touched by Norman until she had written what she wanted. Norman had done some drawings before he met Norris, and Norris said that he did some drawings of her when they first met: “I think that started him on a run of drawings. The ones he did of me are really good likenesses. I told him he could have been an artist, which he liked.”

“Form is the physical equivalent of memory,” Norman had said, describing the attributes of a piece of driftwood he found on the beach in Provincetown. I was astonished at the lessons he learned from little things. The fact had become an artifact. The knots and missing limbs, the burns, scars, and patinas, encoded how it became what it is. This seemed to me to be Norman’s philosophy of artistic form, and it could only be accessed by the memory of a person. Thus the role of the narrator, whether fictional or a self-conscious alter-ego, becomes crucial to understanding Mailer’s narrative strategies, the way he goes about telling a story.

Norris and Norman purchased a large brick edifice that had been owned previously by the art collector Joseph Hirshhorn and the novelist and biographer B. H. Friedman. I thought it was a positive transference of tenants, especially after I saw Norman taking a sledgehammer to a squat pillar of bricks that served to block the space he wanted to utilize for another purpose. “Looks like hard work!” I called out in passing. Mailer wiped his

forehead, nodded, and muttered something about “destroying these symbols.”

Using his house at 627 Commercial Street as location central, he wrote *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, and he directed the movie that was shot here. Mailer had begun to spend winters in Provincetown, learning again how the mood of summer frolic yields to a damp and chilly isolation and a disorienting awareness of inner dread. He reflected, “Provincetown is naturally so spooky in mid-winter and provides such a sense of omens waiting to be magnetized into lines of force that the novel in my mind seemed more a magical object than a fiction.” In presenting Norman on the cover of *Provincetown Art's* inaugural issue as a glossy magazine in 1987, our aim was to celebrate the spectacle of his directing a movie based on a novel he had written about the town in which he lived. His character, Tim Madden, played by Ryan O'Neal in the movie, is a floundering writer and a thwarted lover whose wife has abandoned him. He wakes up at sunrise, drunk on the flats before his house, the seagulls eating at his exposed liver, like Prometheus being gnawed at for stealing fire from the gods.

Eddie Bonetti, a short story writer and a friend of Norman's, appeared in the movie in a jail scene with O'Neal. To get the inmates sweating, the crew squirted water in their faces. Bonetti had to utter a few short lines, but he kept rushing them, and O'Neal said, “Jesus, Eddie, you're talking too fast. Most actors want to stay on the screen forever.” The moods of Provincetown's off-season weather became the main character of movie. When the tide withdrew and exposed the sandy bottom, there shone virgin territory, where no man had tramped before. I, too, had my first time in a movie, as an extra (wearing a *Provincetown Arts* T-shirt) dancing in the opening party scene, where a partygoer stops the music to answer the door about a noise complaint. Completely nude, she opens the front door with a flourish, revealing the smiling police chief, looking handsome in his uniform. (I watched them re-take the shot six times.)

The striking cover portrait of Mailer on the flats in a blue parka, with his arms crossed in a “tough guy” posture, was taken by Joel Meyerowitz, who employed his celebrated, large-format antique Deardorff camera, built in the same year he had been born, and it was this camera that he used to take the photographs in his stunning book of color photography, *Cape Light*. The long vistas, offered by the vast distances along the seashore, make people look tiny. Fog, brightening without any clear boundary, can offer an aura.

The photograph situates Mailer, looking confident and vital, in the velvet envelope of his environment. Mailer loved the photograph. I loved his remark that we quoted on the cover: "This is a town worth digging in and fighting for." It became the unofficial mission of the magazine.

While I was a graduate student in New Jersey, I taught tennis for fourteen summers at the Provincetown Tennis Club. I also was an avid chess player, and participated in a fifty-game exhibition competition with a noted chess master, Nat Halper, who was also a James Joyce scholar. The match was held in a big open room on the second floor of the Tennis Club. Nat and Norman were good friends. When Nat organized the international James Joyce Conference on Bloomsday a few years earlier, Mailer and Robert Motherwell appeared on a panel at the Art Association. I sat at a table to Norman's left, concentrating on solid play and staying even until about halfway through the game. I noticed Norman had acquired an early pawn advantage, and I was rather surprised. Periodically I looked over and saw how he kept using that small advantage to great leverage, tenaciously, and Nat went around the room and checkmated board after board. I got outplayed by Nat, and he checkmated me. Norman was the only board to win a game from Nat Halper. I knew his victory had something to do with his personal will over his friend. Nat did not let Norman win; Norman just refused to lose.

Norman gave many readings in town. Increasingly, in collaboration with members of his family and the Provincetown Theater Company, he involved himself with plays and performances. I was intrigued by his forays into visual art, via his real-life experience of marriage to a painter, his biography of Picasso that so depended on his translation of the memoirs of one of Picasso's mistresses, and his curiously meaningful drawings that were published in *Modest Gifts*. I began my review of *Picasso: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Stocky, powerful, and libidinous, he was also short, cowardly, and fearful." Norman told me that when he first read that sentence, he was afraid I was talking about him. Our contact customarily consisted of the kind of athletic banter Norman knew from boxing and I knew from the world of tennis. He challenged me when I asked him to again appear on the cover of *Provincetown Arts*. I said that Americans like second acts. This time, in the 1999 issue, the cover photograph by Renate Ponsold, the wife of Robert Motherwell, showed Mailer walking on a tightrope.

Before the interview, we had taken a walk down Commercial Street, discussing the wind, and a howl that he had never heard before until a recent

visitor pointed it out. After that, he began to hear it—"An extraordinary sound. Like a propeller whose blades are sixty feet long is sucking air down a huge tunnel." I pondered the image. We walked by my mother's house, which now was set high on a mound, having been raised after it had been swamped in a hurricane. We were about to climb a short rise in the road. We were outlining some of the topics I hoped to address in what became the published interview, and Mailer said, "Just remember, I don't want to push a Cadillac up a hill." I knew he was thinking he was a fine car and I was an untested chauffeur, whom he hoped would not run out of gas. But I said, "Oh, Norman, don't worry. This interview is going to be about who loves Provincetown more—you or me."

Mailer began to make drawings around the time he married Norris. Her paintings began to fill the house. I have always wondered how much of Mailer's daily practice as a writer, forming his letters with a graphite pencil, contributed to his understanding of what constituted a drawing, or where the rhetorical meaning spun off into pure visual comprehension. In one drawing, "Lucky 7," Mailer turned letters into the numbers one through seven. The five was a face wearing a beret. Six and seven were ears. His mouth was number four. The eyes were formed from the eyebrow and iris of the numbers two and three. The handsome nose, propped on the serif-like nostrils, rises tall and thin, stretching into the first numeral of our numbering system. Here Mailer translates the letter I into the numeral 1. He shows where a curve of a line echoes a turn of phrase, a twist in the road when the ego turns into the id.

Mailer's biography of Picasso as a young man was conceived when Mailer himself was a young man, but he did not produce the book until thirty years later. How could it be otherwise? Mailer had contracted to write a biography of Picasso, only to produce a 200-page dialogue about the violent act of creating artistic forms, published as a conclusion to *Cannibals and Christians* in 1966. The dialogue had stimulated Mailer "in such a way that one had insights into the extremities of one's own thinking, but few biographical perceptions about him."

For many years, Robert Motherwell was a neighbor two doors east of Mailer, and the artist and the writer had many occasions to socialize. But Mailer avoided opportunities to seriously discuss painting with painters. He wondered how far words could carry an artist. He told me in 1999, "To this day, I find most writing about art to be poetic explorations that depart very

quickly from the experience of looking at a painting. The writer goes off on some inner collaboration with her or his own experience. The painting becomes like a distant object from which one is receding at a great rate in one's vehicle of metaphor."

As Norman grew older, I grew older. I watched him change from when I was seven years old, learning slowly as my own consciousness grew. I took comfort in walking by the house and seeing his light burning in the window of the attic, knowing he was working. He was some kind of power in the neighborhood, an engine that seemed to move the leaves as I walked down the street, and saw the wind turn the leaves over for a kind of mass inspection of their underside. The color was much brighter, reflecting the weak light of a streetlamp with strange intensity. In the last years, when I walked by on the beach, I greeted him while he paced back and forth on his waterfront deck. Like Ahab, he did some of his best thinking while thumping on the foredeck.

I heard his copper-capped canes clopping like coconut shells on the sidewalk. It was six-thirty in the morning and Norman was marching down Commercial Street as I was bounding out of my house, eager to catch the bus, stopping behind my house, which would take me to New York. I had fifteen minutes to stroll fifty yards, and I slowed down to talk to Norman about *Windchill Summer*, Norris's first novel, which I had just finished reading. I was charmed by a character named Cherry, which echoed a character by the same name in Norman's early novel, *The Deer Park*. I said to Norman, "You know, Norris writes like a Mailer, but her women are more likeable." Norman said, "You're right—it's very hard to create a likeable female character." That thought filled the hours of my trip into the city.

He was buried on a slope that has become something of a Parnassus in the Provincetown cemetery. Here are scattered the graves of other artists and writers who lived and worked in Provincetown, and wanted to, at last, dig in here when they could no longer fight for the town they loved. Mailer's boulder is close by the big rocks that mark where Robert Motherwell and Stanley Kunitz are interred.

At a reception at Gately-McHoul Funeral Home, family and friends mingled while Norman lay in state. He rested—peaceful as a rock. The reality of his expiration was so profound that the loss seemed to lighten our spirits. The children of his children played hide and seek behind the knees of the adults. Indeed, there were few tears. If the atmosphere was devoid of the

piety Norman so disliked, it was saturated with huge love for a man who did so much with his life. He lay in open view in a casket at one end of the room, and people came alongside and kneeled on the carpet and rested their arms on a low brass bar. Norman was wearing the fleece vest he wore so many days in the last six months of his life. It was a gift from the people who produced *Cinderella Man*, for whom Mailer served as a consultant, advising Russell Crowe that an actor in a boxing movie was obliged to exaggerate what happens in a real fight.

This vest was the kind that kept one cozy with radiant heat. It returned one's own body's warmth. It probably functioned as a low-tech version of an astronaut suit that would protect one on a strut across the lunar surface. The visors of the astronaut helmets were tinted with a layer of gold to protect them from the searing sun of outer space. It was nothing for Norman to wander around his house, outfitted in his fleece vest. If it were windy outside, he navigated in almost weightless comfort, ascending the stairs to his writing desk located in the attic under the apex of the roof. He wore the vest, bantering at cocktail hour. It was roomy enough to allow his arms to jab the air. He wore the vest at the poker table, stored behind a buffet and then unfolded and placed on the dinner table. Four sections opened for eight players, usually consisting of a mixture of locals like myself, guests visiting from out of town, and, invariably, several members of the family. Norman liked to start the game at eight o'clock.

Norman liked to dole out the chips when we bought in with our various wads of presidential faces. Usually there was an initial twenty-dollar buy in. Norman kept a cone of concentration on the chips in the center of the table, as if he were meditating on the meaning of their colors. His retinas had become acutely sensitive to bright light; especially irritating were sudden camera flashes. Mailer leaned over the poker table, slightly adjusting the placement of the lamp, and subtly altering the angle of its shade.

Some of the games I played in felt as if they were structured on the model of theater-in-the round. Players stepped into the action when they tossed in chips. Some players stacked them carefully and pushed them slowly into the arena. The chips were of three colors—red, white, and blue, being the most valuable. The table was covered in green felt, heavily textured and tufted, which somewhat dulled the sharp clicks of the flying chips, landing in the spotlight. One learned clues about the cards of others by being mindful of

the way their hands and fingers worried and manipulated the coinage they coveted.

I remember a game in which Norman's nephew, Peter Alson, played. He was the author of *Take Me to the River* about his tournament experience in the 2005 World Series of Poker. His mother, Norman's sister, Barbara, sat in on the game. John Buffalo, the son of Norris and Norman, kept winning, but was extremely modest about his good luck. He seemed content to sip at a small glass of water. Someone asked if that water was indeed plain. He took a sniff and smelled the juniper of pure gin. John said, "What do you expect? I'm a Mailer!"

Michael Lennon, Mailer's friend, archivist, and authorized biographer often sat in with his wife, Donna. He had been spending a lot of time interviewing Mailer for his last book *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*. He was also working with Mailer on an edition of Mailer's letters, to be published next year. He edited Mailer's weighty anthology of collected utterances about the craft of writing, *The Spooky Art*. Norman said more than once that Lennon knew more about his writing than he did. Lennon also had just edited a booklet collecting Norman's writings about Provincetown, *The Wild West of the East*.

Some of the games I played in were like a séance. If I were in a good mood, I tended to voice my inner thoughts about the way I was reading the hands of the others. Occasionally, I would suggest that someone fold; other times, I might question their courage and urge them to show simple self-confidence by raising the bet. Once Norman stopped action, looking at me and making sure he had my attention. Then, very slowly, he thumped his knuckles four times on the felt cloth, accenting each syllable and saying: "You talk too much."

My hands had warmed the brass bar I held while kneeling before Norman at Gately-McHoul Funeral Home. Norman looked like he was napping peacefully, extremely comfortable with the room temperature. His fingers were folded together and rested on his abdomen. He wore his fleecy boxing vest. Norman had written of the eternal afterlife of Egyptian pharaohs in *Ancient Evenings*. Now he seemed to be dreaming of his next novel.