

Robert Wexelblatt

Kolwitzer's Father

I.

The day they announced the Prize I downloaded a photograph of Nathan Mullhorn. In this picture Mullhorn appears every inch the shrewd captain of industry he was, sleek and predatory, hardly at all the philanthropist he likewise was. The old plutocrat is seated behind a mammoth desk looking up imperiously, as if at a secretary he'd just summoned. With a green felt-tip I drew a heap of cash on the desk, dollars tumbling to the floor like rose petals. "Ceilia, send in Kolwitzer," I wrote underneath and pasted the picture over the label of a bottle of Veuve Clicquot. Before heading downtown the following morning I phoned work and announced I'd be late.

It was around nine when I buzzed Kolwitzer. I figured he would probably have been up late celebrating, might even have stood drinks for his bohemian pals in one of the funkier East Side bars. It took a while before he let me in. Robert had always been a late riser. Back in our sophomore year he'd given me a key to his dorm room so that I could wake him up for final examinations. He didn't mind sleeping through classes or midterms.

Kolwitzer regarded nothing about the body as trivial and at the age of eighteen was already spinning off theories to justify his habits. "The body has its proper rhythms," he'd lecture in the apodictic tone he affected even then. "It's always a capital error to violate them, invariably a form of self-betrayal, particularly for the artistic temperament. The Industrial Revolution made people perform by clock and calendar instead of sun and season. The systematic damage is incalculable. Why else should population have increased geometrically, and good art barely arithmetically? Sleep's a great general and should issue orders, not obey them." Robert would deliver these lecturettes mock-professorially; perhaps he was lampooning his father. Anyway, what was notable wasn't that he liked doing as he wished but his insistence on giving reasons. I suppose this was part of what fascinated me about him, along with his unpredictability. Robert was apt to launch an analysis of anything, from a classmate's gait to the national debt. As we walked around the city he would do things like break into a Gershwin tune (complete

with tap dance), declaim Aristophanes, or criticize the hexameters of Arthur Hugh Clough. At eighteen Robert was a young man with a narrow, intense face, and hair that like what was under it seemed to be flying off in all directions. Yet he could also be stiller than still, a ruminative spider pondering profundities in the middle of an infinite web. I've never known anyone as purely alert as Robert Kolwitzer. He made me feel like Dr. Watson, two steps behind and anxious about his sanity, but neither jealous of his talents nor displeased to be commonplace.



Robert was wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt. He wasn't sleepy but rather exhilarated, maybe even a little manic. He grabbed my bottle of champagne and laughed and laughed at the label.

"Wonderful! Fucking brilliant!" He gave me a hug, something he'd never done before, not even when I'd loaned him money.

"Well, you're obviously pleased with yourself," I said.

Robert threw himself down on the open sofa-bed. "Pleased with myself, eh? So you think I'm delighted because I'm a success?"

"Well, aren't you? I mean officially?"

"An official success? Not at all. I'm like the French Revolution. Remember what Chou En-Lai said when he was asked whether it had been a success? He said, 'Too soon to tell.'"

"Well, there's some proof. There's the cash."

"Ah, yes." He rubbed his hands together greedily.

The Mullhorn Prize is given annually to "a young artist of promise," as the great benefactor's will puts it. The selection is organized by the Mullhorn Foundation and transpires completely in the passive voice. Nominations are solicited, deliberations carried out, a decision reached. The panel never meets. No member knows the identity or even the number of his or her colleagues. The final decision is proclaimed at the end of March and received by a more or less interested world. The prestige of the Mullhorn Prize is owing to the quality of its past recipients—which is to say its predictions—but just as much to its mysteriousness which is perceived as proof against politicking and gives each year's announcement the character of a papal election. Certainly, the choice of Robert Kolwitzer was a bolt from the heavens. Even I, a humble laborer in the venal vineyards of Wall Street, could come up with a dozen more accomplished candidates. But Robert had done a lot of different things, done them

well and, what's more, had provided cheeky interviews about them. Journalists liked him not because he was cooperative or forthcoming but because people wanted to read his interviews.

When asked to describe the intention behind his theater-piece *Oedipus at Coney Island*, he called it "a defensive action so retrograde that it looks avant-garde. It's conceived as an entertainment aimed at the next stage of evolution. The idea came from a box of Cheerios. *Oedipus* simply states yet again that the original sin is the conviction that the original sin was committed against us. *Non aequus est* is a gripe that rolls down all the ages, renewed by every generation of three-year-olds. Why put the Cyclone on stage? Formalism. Roller coasters and dramas are both structured in accord with the male sexual response. Every decent thrill-ride requires a build-up just as a revelation demands a prior concealment. A climax is just a climax, but a falling action isn't always an ending." And so forth. Mystifying, allusive, disconnected but always amusing.

Robert once confessed to me what he desired from his audience. "I want people to say out loud, 'Look how easy it is for him to knock that outhouse together' but I want them to say to themselves that it must be pretty hard to knock together an outhouse like that."

Robert Kolwitzer's maiden gallery show was a gallimaufry, a declaration of scope. There was a startling sculpture of a thoughtful, emaciated corpse which he called *Professor Golovin, Carcinomatotic*, a wittily fantastic installation he titled *Miniature-Golf Hole Devised by an Inebriated Pythagorean*. There were four small paintings in distinct genres and styles: a photo-realistic portrait of an exceedingly old woman, a neo-classical landscape with a punk band in the foreground, a post-Impressionist still-life with rotting fruit, and a vaporous abstract that recalled the way Turner painted weather but, somehow, without the moisture. In fact, Robert called these collectively *Four Pictures from a World without Atmosphere*. The chief work was a mural daubed right on the gallery's largest wall. This piece, *Susannah and the Elders* attracted the most comment owing not only to its size but because it was thought to be political, which, as they say, "excited considerable comment." I don't doubt the effect was shrewdly calculated by Robert; he always calculated shrewdly, though without being petty or self-seeking in the ordinary sense. ("I'm far too ambitious to settle for money and fame," he once told me.) The mural showed about a dozen "elders" leering at the viewer but no Susannah at all—an unsettling conceit but hardly an obscure

one. The political angle derived from the repellent aspect of the elders, their dress, and what apart from unpleasantly ogling into the viewers' space, they were doing with their hands. Scientists, men in business suits, generals, computer geeks—all were assembling what looked like fanciful weapons, passing money, and stepping on severed limbs. ("People ask you how you think the world's going," Robert explained. "It's generally smart to tell them—bad!")

Robert may not have been quizzed about the world, but he *was* asked what he was trying to say in this mural, and, disgusted by the phrase, replied with a brick wall of language. "Trying? To say? The most profoundly political, authentically apocalyptic art is invariably the most a-political. Like Camus, I'm way too patriotic to be a nationalist; like Dostoyevsky, I think civilizations' only achievement is to increase the range of sensation. My ambition isn't to make social comments but to be a pane of glass. The meaning of any artistic act floats about, declaring its independence from the intention behind it, especially the intent of the studio, so to speak. Intent is indispensable, intention superfluous. The former is a motivation, like hunger, the latter like a menu or, better, a restaurant review. In my opinion, intent is no proof of intention. The ideal work of art would be one sustained on style alone yet no such ideal can or will ever exist. Ideals, like rock crystals, are boring, inanimate, and dead. Just think—what if you worked for a newspaper in Heaven? What would there be to write about? Don't you agree?"

Robert was fond of ending interviews with challenging rhetorical questions. Unnerving interviewers delighted him. He recognized no distinction between creation and destruction, so long as neither claimed to be "pure." He thought the phrase "constructive criticism" oxymoronic and saw critics as parasites. On the other hand, among a gaggle of whining artist friends I once heard him quote with approval a Mexican writer who complained his nation suffered from having millions of superb poets but not a single decent critic.

“So,” I said, “last night? A crowd of sycophants parade you on their shoulders through the East Village?”
Robert rolled over on his bed and put his hands behind his head.

“As a matter of fact, there was something of a mob,” he admitted. “After an hour I sent them away. I thanked them, but said giving

prizes to artists was like giving awards to mothers. Virtuosity in childbirth? Besides, what if the Assembly had given a prize to Socrates? What if Pilate had crowned Jesus with laurel rather than thorns?”

"Not very gracious of you. Or humble. Want me to go?"

"Not yet."

I checked my watch. "Too bad. I'm late for work."

He smiled. "Fair's fair. So am I."

"You know, no matter what you say you do sound happy."

He looked sideways at me with that wry suspicious smile of his. His hair was mussed and he hadn't shaved. The studio was a mess, too small for everything that went on in it. "*Le chambre fait l'homme*," he'd said the first time he showed it to me.

"Your father?" I asked carefully.

"Hasn't phoned."

Kolwitzer's father taught European history at Columbia University which is where his son and I met. "Tuition remission," Robert instructed me during our first dinner together as freshmen, "is a variety of nepotism." In my third year, much against Robert's wishes, I took a course with his father. It was titled simply "1848." Professor Kolwitzer was an erudite and intelligent man, in his teaching more thinker than scholar, not the sort to be reduced to crawling between lines of old texts. His lectures brought the revolutionary year to life. They were full of "for instances" and peopled with big boys like Mill, Marx, Metternich, and Manzoni. He spoke ardently of the students and workers at their barricades, of hopes dammed up since Waterloo bursting out in a kind of continent-wide lyricism of action. He made us listen to Verdi. His lectures could also be operatic. The professor was patient even with foolish questions but sharp with the lazy who didn't do the reading and downright sarcastic with those given to glib generalization. Robert had warned me that his father was a strict grader both in class and at home. "I believe it comes from living with ideas whose time is past," he said derisively. In fact, his father was a comparatively easy grader. I got an A-

Robert took out a couple of wine glasses while I popped the *Veuve Clicquot*. Happy New Year. "Champagne at nine-thirty in the a.m. Must be a first for you," he teased. It pleased Robert to pretend that I was strait-laced. Once, when I'd dared to reproach him for something he'd done that I considered nasty, he retorted that the greatest force for virtue in the universe was cowardice.

"The first time on a working day," I replied as I filled up our glasses.

"*Quasi-touché*."

I handed a glass to Robert and raised mine. "To this year's most promising young artist," I declared pompously. "So, what exactly are you promising?"

Once again, he laughed. "You'll see," he chortled. The prize seemed to have made him almost giddy. "No, no! Wrong toast." He cleared his throat. "To Nathan Reardon Mullhorn's millions and the philosopher's stone that transmutes commerce into art!"

We clinked. We drank.

"That stone works both ways," I cautioned. "Watch out that your art doesn't turn into commerce."

"My, my. You're quite on today, pal. Mm."

He gave me a rundown of who'd phoned, emailed, stopped by, and which of his friends had maintained a dignified silence. There was no further mention of his father the professor.

"It really is disconcerting," Robert philosophized, "to be congratulated over and over for this Mullhorn thing. What are people so delighted about, anyway? Why do they beam down on me like fluffy clouds on the fair-haired lad? After all—"

I knew him of old and begged. "No dialectics, Robert."

"No, really. I mean is it for my past achievements or the greater accomplishments sure to come? I don't think so. Oswald Balisser nudged and winked away as if I'd pulled a fast one, diddled some brass out of the squire. Fred acted as if I'd just got laid. And speaking of the women, they looked at me the way traders do at an IPO. But, you know, what touched me most was what old Marcini said to me. You remember old Marcini, don't you?"

"Sure. Buzz cut, big sweater. Crusty old cuss."

"Very crusty. Survived both the Marine Corps and Citigroup. *Soi-disant* mentor to the young, self-appointed conscience to the middle-aged, darling of the rich, and neo-classicist to all."

"When did old Marcini show up?"

"He swelled the early throng. 'Robert,' he said, big arm over these ectomorphic shoulders, 'you've got to do something with this. It's time to stop playing the smart-ass teenager full of dreams and yearning to spite everybody. Dump the adolescent negative self-definition. Not that all that isn't a fine pose in its way. The alienated pubescent bourgeoisie is the backbone of high culture. But don't think for a minute you've proved anything to anybody you'd care to prove things to. It's put up or shut up now, kid.' After that the old lech got stinking drunk and felt up all the girls."

II.

Robert and I were mulling over an old classmate's engagement. "To become a husband and a father the one sure way," he said. "Sure way?"

"To stop being a son."

Robert's death was senseless and seemed to confirm his view of things. I can picture him with a bitter smile pointing at my chest. "See? See? In a car, like Camus." Neither Camus nor Robert was driving. But there was a difference. Camus bought it in a flashy sports car, Robert in a grimy New York cab, crushed by a fire truck in a hurry.

The idea of calling on my friend's father, on my old professor, actually scared me. But it was one of those ideas you know you'll have to carry out. As soon as the notion took me I could already see myself sitting in his office, in the center of all those books, as if I were again a junior perplexed by Kierkegaard's feelings toward Bishop Mynster. When my own father died a couple of years after we graduated, Robert sent me some verses inside a particularly mawkish Hallmark card.

To turn ache into consciousness,
Find health inside the malady,
Transmute defeat into success,
Change death to immortality—
This is a culture's cruelest task.
Prometheus' gift to help us cope
Was to fashion an eyeless mask
And blot out sorrow with blind hope.

Mere alchemy can't refine lead;
Magic's a meretricious fake.
We must look to ourselves instead
And in shared grief some solace take.

Well, I wanted some of that brand of solace and could think of no one else from whom to get it but Professor Kolwitzer. And yet what Robert had done in that last month, the climax of two decades of twisted relations, made a condolence call feel impertinent. Knowing how close I was to his son, would the old man even see me? I couldn't just show up on his doorstep, could I?

Of course I had seen Professor Kolwitzer at the funeral, which had been generic and perfunctory. This was apparently the way the professor wanted it, since he'd made the arrangements. He himself didn't speak. The affair was held at a suburban funeral home. Such as it was, the eulogy was delivered by a childish man who identified himself as the family's Unitarian minister. ("Their one is so very, very close to zero," Robert had once quipped about his religious education.) I couldn't recognize my friend in the speech: nice boy, good student, loving son, terrible loss. Wham, bam. Not a word about his work. I mean the deceased could have been anybody, even me.

After this inanity I joined the line filing by Professor Kolwitzer. He looked old and unwell but stoical, an unapproachable figure who'd prepared himself to be approached. I kept thinking of this morbid Chinese proverb, "Happiness is when the grandfather dies, then the father dies, then the son dies."

When I phoned Professor Kolwitzer's office I half-hoped he wouldn't be there, that Columbia had sent him off on compassionate leave or something, that he was on a cruise to the tropics. When we were juniors and I was taking "1848," Robert had told me his father wasn't any good at vacations. "He's a complete homebody who'd rather read about a place than see it. The only form of social life my father can tolerate is teaching, where it's clear who's got the power. Once that's settled, my father can be as charming as you keep assuring me he is." When I asked why he didn't take a course with his father, Robert guffawed. "Oh, I couldn't ever take a course with him. That would be too cruel, even for me. Hell, it'd knock the old man for too much of a loop."

"Yes, of course I'll see you." The familiar voice sounded almost eager. "Actually, I think I ought to. I'm truly grateful to you for calling.

I've been wandering around the house, you see, picking up his old things . . ." He trailed off as if he had disclosed too much. I made a note of this because the point of our meeting, at least to me, was precisely revelation. There was a lot I wanted to know. What really happened with Robert's mother? Why had my friend tried so earnestly to hurt his father? Had his father been hurt? It never occurred to me that my old teacher might wish to learn something from me.

He didn't want to meet either at school or at his home. "Some place neutral," he said.

"A bar?"



The place wasn't crowded. We took a booth. With a nervous grin, the professor said it reminded him of Ivan Karamazov having it out with Alyosha.

I decided not to beat about the bush, certainly not Russian literary ones. "Tell me about Robert's mother."

"What did he tell you?"

I answered frankly. "He told me you drove her away."

He smiled faintly, nodded once, took a deep breath.

"When Robert was six my wife ran off with a man quite unlike me. You might say an anti-me." He paused to squirm. "Look, maybe my wife lacked a maternal instinct. I suppose it's just as possible that she changed her mind, her heart. In any case, our relationship began to go wrong the moment she found out she was pregnant. It shocked Leda, terrified and disgusted her. She bawled her eyes out that first night while I—well, I was completely over the moon and couldn't hide it. She saw this and got angry. I guess she offered silent prayers to Saint Spontaneous. She probably thought of an abortion but didn't have the nerve for it. I don't know. Perhaps at first she thought what I did, that her misery was just hormones or because of the surprise. Robert was what they call unplanned. I've had almost three decades to think about it but I still don't really know. In any case, Robert and I were both rejected. Inevitably, he mythologized her and her leaving, also her return. Leda had her own kind of nobility, though; once the papers were signed she never attempted to contact him or me again."

"Not even . . ."

"No, not even when he was killed. Not since either, if you're wondering. As for Robert, you could say he had his mother's pride. I

mean that he was too proud to search her out. Yes, he was always terribly, terribly proud, just like her. Haughty. But it's also possible he was afraid to confront her and risk his precious mythology. Robert wasn't averse to taking risks, as I'm sure you know, but he needed to be in control of the risks he took. As a child he'd do dangerous things but only if they were his doing, climbing trees, biking in the rain, getting into the whiskey. In my opinion—I don't know about yours, of course—that's also the way he operated as an artist."

I had to admit that there was truth in this, that controlled risk-taking was part of what Robert thought an artist was supposed to do—to risk and to mythologize. He wanted his fate in his own hands. Well, everybody's concerned about their own fate, but how many consider that of their cab driver?

"What did Robert think about his mother?"

"He never talked to you about her? I'm surprised. And you his closest friend."

"It was usually you he talked about, Professor."

He nodded, again that wan little smile. "Robert was never what you would call whole-hearted. I expect that even as he was composing the romance about his mother he also knew it was—what?—a bubble? He preferred bubbles—his art—to life. Perhaps I was just a burster of bubbles. In history, as in physics, one ugly fact can explode the most beautiful theory. Robert wasn't a liar but he loved theories and despised facts. That's one reason why he was stuck in aesthetics, forging things and ideas but never really committing himself to either. In my opinion, that was his weakness as an artist. In the long run, either he'd have grown out of it or he'd have despaired. Perhaps that last month of his, his *mensis mirabilis*, might have been the turning-point. Robert was the most purely intentional person, wasn't he? Maybe that's what he had in mind, getting all sorts of things out of his system—above all me."

I noticed that almost everything he said about Robert was qualified, probably or perhaps or maybe. Robert himself spoke in this way only at his most whimsical. He'd make these little speculative essays into the nature of things. But more often he spoke in the opposite fashion, broadcasting *obiter dicta*, loving his theories, just as his father said, but believing them for about five minutes.

"You loomed large for him," I said tentatively.

The professor corrected me. "You understate matters," he said. "I had to make a tremendous effort not to argue with my son. This

wasn't because we saw the world so differently—perhaps we even saw things much the same way. It was because from puberty, or even earlier, Robert batted on polemics as the most dignified way to speak to me, the one that bolstered his amour-propre. What I mean is that Robert argued with me on principle. He believed a son with anything in him ought to battle with his father. I know he didn't despise me, though at times I'm sure he hated me. Hatred is so close to love that you might almost think that the capacity for love is the prerequisite for hatred. Our war was a religious one, furious battles over little points of doctrine. No quarter for the infidel."

This reminded me of Robert's contempt for his father's Unitarianism. "Last Church of the Vanishing Lukewarm Christ," he called it. "It makes ethics the earth and religion a tiny moon."

"You say I loomed large for him. It was more than that. I know. I was indispensable to him. I was all at once his subject, muse, and audience, the door against which he devoted his life to pushing. That he preferred this door to be shut saddened me because I wanted it open so much. I'd have gladly thrown it open the second he stopped pushing. Look, Robert knew perfectly well I was only his father, an ordinary man, but he insisted on casting me as the one and only gigantic Father. He abstracted and inflated me to suit his conception of himself. Who better to subvert a father? He needed to be a victim, and who's more oppressive than a father? Above all, he needed to be heroic. From Zeus to Prince Hal, Freud to Luther, Scarlatti to Alexander the Great—all his heroes had despotic fathers to overcome."

"He could be cruel," I admitted.

"Oh, I don't complain; I don't even claim that he did me an injustice. If I can use a fancy metaphor I'd say that he willfully bent my love out of all recognition on the anvil of his ambition. He's dead and I'm not. That's all I want to complain about."

I could see the man was becoming carried away by his own words, by the feelings that overflowed them. I let him go on.

"You know, when the police came to tell me he was dead I didn't say anything. I was shocked but the terrible thing is that I wasn't surprised. I'd had these, these presentiments. I'd imagined his death even more often than I suppose he had mine. What's more, what I imagined was a real death whereas what he imagined was only imaginary, part of the story in which I'd driven away his mother and tyrannized over him."

Here he paused, waiting for me to say something. I had an odd recollection. "I was once on a streetcar with Robert. There was this woman tearing at her knitting. He pointed to her and said that his life was like that, that art is knitting and life just unravels it."

"Yes, that's just like him." He paused for a sip of tepid beer. "We did love each other but in a way the mathematicians call incommensurable. No common denominator. My love made me think about him; his made him think of himself. That's how it was, maybe how it always is with sons. I never thought of my own father's troubles, but he thought of mine. All I wanted was to be Robert's father, to rejoice in being his father. All he wanted was to be an artist. And to him to be an artist was to be in rebellion, and whatever he rebelled against had to be me."

He straightened up. "Now I have a few questions for you. First, I want to know about Robert's personal life. Were there women? Men? Nobody?"

"Nobody, as far as I know."

He nodded. "He had distaste for the body. That's why he was obsessed with digestion. He didn't like bodies. Back in high school he wrote this term paper about digital technology and how it was going to make bodies obsolete, how it would translate personality into image. He thought that was wonderful. It was a kind of hygiene gone mad but he was prophetic. My students call a face-to-face conversation 'meat-mail.'"

"Robert told me that abstract painting was the artistic equivalent of genocide because for both the human body is an embarrassment, a sort of infestation of life. He said for the Greeks the body was not yet too corrupt to bear the weight of the ideal. He blamed Hegel."

"That's because I wrote my dissertation on Hegel."

"It's possible, I suppose."

"So no lovers? None?"

I shrugged. I shook my head.

I was being discreet. Robert took seriously that anecdote about Balzac crying "There goes another novel!" each time he ejaculated into a mistress. His libido, like everything else, was tossed into the hopper of his art, sacrificed on its altar. Neither passion nor seed was to be wasted. "Nothing," he once told me, "makes me more furious than a wet dream." When I objected to so much self-denial Robert replied sharply that while my task might be to experience the human condition his was to illuminate it. "And they don't put the lights in the

middle of Yankee Stadium," he said. "Anyway, sex leads to fatherhood. It's what it was designed for. The Big O's just life's cunning little way of tricking us into getting what it wants by making us think we're getting what we want. It's a mug's game."

The professor sighed.

"What else?"

"I guess I'd like to know what he meant to achieve, apart from slandering and destroying me. And I want to know if he was a good friend, whether he ever did anything at all unselfish."

"On the first one, I never really had a clue. As to the second, yes."

III.

What his father called Robert's *mensis mirabilis* began of the very day of the *Veuve Clicquot* when he was interviewed by one of the savvy, patronizing blondes of morning television. Apparently someone had thought the Mullhorn Prizewinner would make good filler on a slow news day. They came to him; they wanted a location shoot in the prodigy's studio.

Blonde: So this is your studio, Robert? Excuse me, but it seems so small.

Robert: Infinite riches in a little room.

B: What?

R: In these matters, size doesn't count.

B (giggling uncomfortably): You're teasing me.

R (looking her over): Au contraire.

B (shaking her shoulders, jovial yet getting down to business): Well, congratulations.

R: For what?

B: (uncertain) Winning the prestigious Mullhorn Prize, of course.

R: I see. Have you considered it might be a clerical error?

B (with an edge now): Oh, come now, Robert. From what I hear, false modesty isn't in your line.

R: Dear Lady, I assure you false modesty is a thing to which I can only aspire. How about you? Are you modest?

B (aside and angrily): Cut! (to Robert) Look, you can have fun if you like but bear in mind that I can make you famous. I can also make you look like a total asshole.

R: That hardly seems a modest thing to say. Incidentally, I don't

believe I caught your name?

B: I can leave right now.

R: Madam, suit yourself. I didn't invite you over in the first place. However, I wouldn't mind making a short statement to your loyal audience.

B (nonplused): A statement?

R: Challenge, actually. You should ask me what I'm going to do with the prize money. I thought that's why you were here. Following the money. By the way, would you like me to paint you? In costume it's two grand but nude would be gratis.

B (pissed off, yet resigned): Turn the camera back on. So, Robert, what do you plan to do with the prize money? Get a bigger studio? Some decent clothes? A haircut?

R (to the blonde): Thank you for asking. (to the camera): I plan to use the money to produce four major works, all in different media, in one month—this month. That works out to one per week.

B: And the money?

R: Oh, most'll go for coffee, gambling, and bleached blondes, I figure. But I'll probably blow the rest on art supplies and renting out space. For what I have in mind, size does count.

I called Robert after seeing an edited version of this on TV the next morning. He told me what had been cut out.

"You're a slow worker," I warned him.

"Am not. In fact, I work so fast you can hardly see me doing it. I just take long breaks. If I skip the breaks I can do it easily, one hand tied behind my back, on my head."

"But why? Why try?"

"Why not? I'd like to make the Mullhorn panelists look good. I want to push myself. It's like having only fourteen lines to say something new about unrequited love. Look, just hang up on me, will you. I've got to get to work."



Robert rented a large third-floor space on Warren Street in a building that was about to be rehabbed. A big shot who'd bought a couple of his pictures put Robert in touch with the developers, a special deal. He could do whatever he wanted there for a month, but then he'd have to clear out.

Robert worked all the time, determined to transcend himself or flame out. He willed himself into a state of hyper-inspiration. He simply couldn't not produce. Never before had I gotten so many e-mails from him and most were not the usual updates or gossip but poems in prose or verse, most sent between three and five A.M. Here's for instance:

Took an imaginary trip tonight. Went to a hotel in the Midwest, Cleveland or Chicago or someplace, and sat in the bar nursing my whiskey. Here's what it was like:

The piano in the bar unfolds note by
note its melancholic missive of
American regret, insouciance
of deep sofas, Old Spice and Shalimar.

Somewhere inside hunched shadows cower
joy of the joyless and the hopeless' hope.
Upstairs, businessmen phone sleepy wives
or expensive girls, but most are teased

by their computers' protestant lap dance.
It's a byproduct, happiness, no *ding-an-sich*:
closing bigger deals, grabbing more power,
imagining defunct love was *dans le vrai*.

Money goes round like blood or single malt.
Decorated with old decisions, in
the bar everybody moves to a bouncy
profit motif, staff and customers alike

in this febrile economic foxtrot
from which good whiskey renders a flitting
forgetfulness rather than respite—as if
an eight ball could escape solitude or shock.

The backdrop of tranquil jazz, clinks and whispers,
foreground of orders and gags, confessions
and come-ons, might nearly persuade you that
everyone's unique story is the same.

Another:

Walked down to the river at dawn and came on that plaque, the one that quotes the end of *Gatsby*, a novel that begins with one father's wisdom and ends with another's bewilderment. America, Amerika. Kafka has the Statue holding up a sword, not a lamp.

In the mood to scribble these crypto-patriotic lines. Another game of singles, with a net; perverse national anthem.

Goethe praised with envy
but didn't emigrate;
Donne conceived a body
nude, ripe to copulate.

Millions in the lottery
and millions insecure;
Marx's diagnosis
was better than his cure.

Virtue's road is rocky
and hand-grenades get hurled;
intractable is the
nastiness of this world.

No doubt those rough Dutch sailors,
many centuries dead,
were awed by what they glimpsed
just like Fitzgerald said.

Week One: *My Father's Breakdown*

For his first piece, the simplest, Robert rented a large-screen TV and bought fifteen full-length mirrors which he broke into shards. The TV he programmed to change stations according to what he solemnly called an "aleatoric algorithm." Behind the TV he arranged the mirrors in an arc that looked crazier than any funhouse. He insisted that the angles had been carefully calculated, his way of saying he knew what he was doing. The space had a fifteen-foot ceiling. On the wall above the mirrors, using more rented electronic

equipment, he projected a scrolling "explanatory text," a pronunciamento consisting entirely of declarative sentences.

Television constructs reality. It doesn't mean to. For the writers each TV show is unitary. For a viewer with a remote control it's the purest form of juxtaposition. For one there's the reinforcing of expectations. There is beginning-middle-end, smooth technique and progression. The program is life. Life is programmed. For the others there's disintegration, collage. *My Father's Breakdown* is an invitation to watch the watching and the watchers watching as you watch the watching, watching you watch. TV alone realizes all the aims of Surrealism. Professional wrestling next to vaginal deodorants. The Infomercial patiently awaits your return from the precincts of Elsinore, Tombstone, suburbia, the ghetto. Hamburgers elbow famine. Here we extol television. Here we anathematize television. Repose is disturbed. My father breaks down. He is breaking down into his constituent elements. This is what you look like when you look at what you're looking at. By the age of fifteen an American has witnessed 15,000 violent deaths.

Mr. Rogers introduces a chainsaw massacre. TV magnifies what is divided. The unity of TV is not political. TV is soporific. TV dissolves integrity. TV uses people up. TV gets us through our worst nights and dullest days. TV is friend, pastor, teacher and mortician. Whatever you are looking at already belongs to the past.

Television constructs reality

It took him only three days. By the fourth, he was already hard at work on his second project.

Week Two: *My Fathers' Unconscious Hands*

This time the paternal was pluralized; this time Robert mounted a play. He hired two actors, set up a raised platform ("thirty-five planks and a passion") and covered it with a heap of junk. The "fathers" were, in the immediate sense, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Matthew Arnold, and Franz Kafka; in a second sense, Creon, Kings Hamlet and Claudius (with Gertrude as ambiguous mother?), Rustum, and Hermann Kafka. In a third sense, I suppose all of them are Professor Kolwitzer. Robert fashioned from the jumble of lifted passages and collected debris a drama of non-sequiturs unified by

one undefined emotion. The critic who wrote that his aim was "absurdist mystification" had it wrong. His father had it right; Robert was never whole-hearted, never single-minded. He wanted to dramatize cultural collapse but also continuity, to set out precious fragments as one might diamonds against a foil. The play, like its sources, is both impersonal and intimate, contingent and eternal, picking at while also drawing together the sides of a wound, a spasm of implosion and a spurt of release. When asked about the play Robert was able to reply honestly that he had not created a play. "Try as I might, I can't help making contemporary art. That means my task is to juxtapose ruins and rifle the past. *My Father's Unconscious Hands* is really just an anthology."

In addition to the dialogue there was stage business. After declaiming each speech the actors would throw a random object from the stage, jettisoning comforting illusions, dumping baggage. And there was a soundtrack, too. I was able to pick out bits of Mahler, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, but at the end there was some unfamiliar music I found arresting. Robert told me later it was the finale of Alban Berg's *Violin Concerto*, which, he said, describes a soul spiraling up into heaven over the Bach chorale, *It Is Enough*. The end of the piece now seems prophetic, the title could serve as that of some future biography. Here's the finale, flat on the page but on stage, ferociously cathartic:

A. Dearest Father, you asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you.

B. I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night.

A. I am your son, sir; by your wise decisions
My life is ruled, and them I shall always obey.

B. Art thou so fierce? Thou wilt not fright me so!
I am no girl, to be made pale by words.

A. I'll tear you apart like a fish!

B. You put special trust in bringing up children by means of irony,
and this was most in keeping with your superiority over me.

A. Your extremely effective rhetorical methods in bringing me up,
which never failed to work with me, were: abuse, threats,
irony, spiteful laughter, and—oddly enough—self-pity.

B. You'd be an excellent king—on a desert island.

A. Surely, to think your own the only wisdom,
And yours the only word, the only will,
Betrays a shallow spirit, an empty heart.

B. Not even your mistrust of others is as great as my self-
distrust, which you have bred in me.

B. Father, forbear! For I but meet today
The doom which at my birth was written down
In Heaven, and thou art Heaven's unconscious hand.

The play ran for only twenty minutes ("I left time for commercials," cracked Robert) and proceeded by a sort of accretion of pathos which owed a good deal to the actors' skill—their diction, physical grace, the ability to project heavy objects and weightier feelings while hitting the audience only with the latter. I believe that Robert arranged these tragic shards so as to approximate the trajectory of a doomed relationship, the history of a distended adolescence. His goat song is likewise a love song, an incommensurable one.

Week Three: *My Father's Sex Life*

This large piece is a bastard work—some would say the work of a bastard—mixing photography and painting. Its dimensions exceed discretion, fairness, decency. The focus of critics was exclusively on what one of them, handling the piece with tongs, called "the unusually vile subject matter." The consensus was that Robert had simply aimed to shock, that the picture had no further aesthetic aim and was, in the most exact sense, a-moral.

I believe Robert wanted to hurdle every inhibition. The images, as few bothered to note, are not his own, but plucked from the air of our times. They are ogled—by whom? His father? All fathers? Hadn't he said that sex leads to fatherhood? To me, what the critics said was

silly, though I grant that the terrible, fascinating images might lead an observer who didn't know Robert to call the work shameful and the artist shameless. In fact, Robert was anything but a-moral. A hurdler must believe in the hurdles. His job is to jump them without loss of momentum. Did Robert want to insult his father? I can't deny it. He had given the entire month over to this task of calculated affront. In this case, though, I think what he wanted was to show off his color sense. The pornography was perhaps just a particularly provocative *donnée* and, I have to admit, grudgingly, an aesthetically alluring one. Here, beauty is degraded, but it is nonetheless beautiful. To see beauty in degradation makes the viewer ashamed.

Robert's work was never without an idea; in fact, he admitted the idea was what propelled him. But a profitable idea, for him, had to run on more than a single track, and it could never remain abstract. "A good idea's like a drowned gangster," he once joked. "It's got to have a pair of concrete shoes."

My Father's Sex Life. Sex was a problem for Robert. He talked about it a lot when we were undergraduates. Talked only, so far as I know. Artistically and intellectually, he preserved the highest standards—why not emotionally as well? He was a Romantic, a Platonist who demanded love and was disgusted by sex without it. It appalled him that his peers collected conquests, that so many men and women were two-bit Don Juans, regarded intercourse simply as a bodily function, spoke of regular coitus as a kind of salutary workout. *O Tempora! O Mores!* Robert had a Ciceronian side and was, to put it plainly, a prude—albeit a prude with a singularly filthy mind. He was the opposite of shameless.

He had taken a piece of hardwood six-foot square and divided it into a grid. "It's very satisfying. William Penn probably felt the same way when he was laying out Philadelphia," Robert joked in an e-mail. He searched through pornographic Internet sites, printed out sixteen pictures, blew them up, painted over them in interesting ways and fixed them to the grid. What first snagged the eye were the startling lines and colors. From a distance it seemed a kind of action painting. The colors sometimes swirled into vapor and at others were concentrated to a dazzling density. Here they were lurid and iridescent, there pale and diaphanous. The piece evoked a minor sensation in the press. Critics debated, moralists fulminated, and tabloid reporters stalked Professor Kolwitzer who said (between clenched teeth?) "No comment."

"I'm rather pleased with the brushwork," said Robert to me at

what he mockingly called the *vernissage*. I was becoming more concerned about him. He looked awful, eyes too bright with raccoon-like circles all around them, arms too thin, posture like a depressive's. He greeted everyone who showed up, then slumped in a corner.

The next night brought another emailed poem, the last. "No time to explain this bagatelle," he wrote, "not that it requires exegesis. It should be called *My Father's Field*," he wrote, though the field was clearly his. "Finally had an idea for the last piece. Not much time. If only one could always live this way!" But what the poem says is that he couldn't maintain this exaltation, that, even before he had finished, he had begun to crash.

Down by those boulders
the fence peters out
like a vein of lead.
The boards still left are
gray as the rocks. You
can see just where he
stopped, though not why.

Week Four: *My Father's Death*

Robert's final work was a sculpture. He fashioned a life-sized plaster convict and stretched him out on a metal table, arm extended for the lethal injection. In a nice touch of circularity, a soupcon of Eternal Recurrence, he had recycled the full-length mirrors. Now the viewers were all witnesses to an execution, victims' families there to relish the *lex talionis*, voyeurs of the legal system, but still art-lovers, trend-setters. Despite the title, there was no mistaking the features of the prisoner's face. This was Robert's version of Michelangelo inserting himself into *The Last Judgment*. It is his only self-portrait.

IV.

As we were making ready to leave the bar Kolwitzer's father, my old professor, suddenly asked if I knew where Robert had been going that morning, why he had gotten into that cab.

I admitted I'd never thought about it.

"He was coming to see me. Where else?"