

When you're both alive and dead, Thoroughly dead to yourself, How sweet The smallest pleasure!

—Bunan

Some men a forward motion love, But I by backward steps would move; And when this dust falls to the urn, In that state I came, return.

-Henry Vaughn

WHEN I WAS A CHILD I entertained the fantasy of travelling somehow into the future so as to be able to view my life as a whole, from the other end, as it were, so placing the exigencies of day-to-day living safely behind me. But now that I have reached the dispiriting age at which one's hopes for the future begin to fade, looking forward offers little attraction. So I hereby throw in the existential towel and take refuge in time past—finally parting company with Magritte who claimed to despise everybody's past, his own included. On the contrary: as my horizons shrink and what remains of my life slowly congeals around me, I embrace the idea of alleviating my *tedium vitae* by squeezing the desiccated lemon of memory. Here, for better or worse, is the result.

My mother, Helen Lane (1920–1960), originally trained as a pianist, was English, my father, John Wright Bell (1918–2003), formerly a civil engineer, American. They met during World War II while my father was stationed in England as an officer in the U.S. Army, and after a whirlwind courtship they were married in 1943. On 25 March 1945 I was born in Cheltenham, a genteel town in Gloucestershire (my mother's family's county of origin) noted both for its posh Ladies' College and for its numerous retired colonels in Bath chairs. At war's end my father returned to the United States along with the bulk of the American army, and a year later my mother and I travelled to join him in California, crossing the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary*, which had been requisitioned, it seems, for the express purpose of reuniting the many European war brides with their American husbands. This was to be the first journey of a childhood spent in a state of perpetual motion.

PERPETUAL MOTION

A mnemonic fog quickly gathers when I try to recall details of my family life in California before I reached the age of seven¹, a life which seems to have been spent on the move. But a few isolated memories stand out from the mist: of a childhood friend, Richard Gilliland, whose mother, I was later informed, committed suicide by throwing herself off the Golden Gate Bridge; of my father's running children's story, "Stripy the Skunk," written in his flowing hand on ruled sheets of yellow paper; of my father describing to me the various sorts of cloudscumulus, stratus, cirrus, nimbus, etc.--and of his pointing out the various constellations such as the Pleiades; of a book of dinosaurs, in which both the name and the squat form of the Eryops I found amusing; of "Tootle", the cautionary tale of a locomotive that straved off the tracks; of a Halloween skeleton suit and a T-shirt from the period of World War II bearing the repeated message "Keep 'em flying"; of my fascination with the curious names of the colors in my crayon setmagenta, gamboge, burnt umber, ochre, and sienna; of a plain grey teddy-bear.

My chronicle begins in earnest with our move to New York in 1951.

¹ Years later I was to learn a little about my five-year-old self from a letter my father sent me just after I received my doctorate. I quote from it:

The fruition of your plans in Fresno in 1950 is finally a reality—however a little late. You probably don't remember do you?... we were discussing atoms and molecules, or at least that's when you found out about them from me. I can remember verbatim the conversation. You asked what the coffee table...was made of. I said glass & wood bright eh? Anyway, you said "I know, but what are they made of?" so I said "Little particles" "What are they made of?" "Molecules", etc. to atoms. At that you asked if everything was made of atoms. Oh yes. You looked at the fire and asked about the flame—yes—gas, etc.... Then, you asked about light, as the lamp was burning—No but out of the blue, you asked how fast light travelled. Yore ole Dad gave you that answer. Anyway, following that you said that you wanted to be a scientist and get a Ph.D. Where you heard of that I couldn't figure but you knew what it was in general terms. Then you wanted to know when you could get one and I told you probably under the age of 30. Then you told me that you'd like to have it by the time you were 21. I guess you figured that when you had reached manhood you should have a Ph.D.