STANLEY ELKIN
essays
PIECES OF SOAP
To Joan
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INTRODUCTION
By Sam Lipsyte

If you didn’t know any better, the guy on stage looked pretty jolly, a kindly, balding, white-bearded fellow in a wheelchair (“MS,” an audience member here in this packed hall at Brown University near the end of the 1980s whispered), an avuncular gent ready to embrace the crowd with warm wit. I knew a little bit better, but when he opened his mouth what rumbled out still shocked and mesmerized, and if you took a second gander you saw now in this moonish middle-aged man a sly ferocity, a devilish need to provoke, to push, like his notorious creation Push the Bully. He sure as shit wasn’t Santa Claus, and he was going to let you know it with astonishing lyricism and perversity.

“My name is Stanley,” Stanley Elkin began, reading from an essay (“What’s in a Name?”) collected in this book. A simple enough declaration, but what followed (go read the opening, I’ll wait) was a long paragraph about what somebody named Stanley might do to your child, a riff more funny, disturbing, and poetic than any three steps of the tongue down the palate, any humdrum life lights or loin fires. The piece soon veered away from first-person molester
hypotheticals, but not before words like “fork” and “grimes” and “bespittled” had lodged new resonances in my noggin.

I’d read him, in fevers of bliss, already, a few of his novels and short stories, always dazzled by his language and humor, but it was another thing to see him in person. He was all sprezzatura on the page, his circus utterances unfurling with seeming ease. Up in the lights you could sense struggle, agon, some inner grimace, probably more to do with physical discomfort than anything. Certainly he knew how to read his prose—he was maestro and orchestra at once—and it was the music I’d come to hear.

I had just recently been privy to this idea that some artists give aspiring ones “permission,” and I had adopted that feeling about Elkin. Reading his books, you realized how lazy most writing is, how instead of just skating in circles on the rinky-dink ice of dull utterance, you could try to put life into every line, to see every clause as an opportunity for some kind of close-up magic, a pigeon of felt actuality bursting from your fist. (“Try” was—alas, is, for everyone but Elkin—the operative word.) But the fireworks weren’t just for the sake of the spectacle, or the trick. It all needed, in some marvelous way, to connect to that larger entity, the show. Elkin once laid down what he called “the rules” in a radio interview: “Form perfect sentences and flesh these sentences out in high structures of imagination.”

Elkin did so, again and again, in novels like The Living End, George Mills, The Magic Kingdom, and The Dick Gibson Show, as well as in short stories like “A Poetics for Bullies.”

That night in Providence he was part of a largish gathering of writers, all friends of a sort, invited by the great Robert Coover. These were the so-called postmodernists, those in step with John Barth’s famous essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” purveyors of an exciting anti-realism, though such appellations would grow more
and more meaningless. Still, in those days, the particular camps in contemporary American literature seemed fairly well demarcated. Later they’d dissolve into the mist, but that’s another story.

Also on hand were William Gaddis, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass, a colleague of Elkin’s at Washington University in St. Louis. Gaddis was dapper and anxious, Gass was a shaggy wizard, Barthelme charming, and if they constituted some kind of pantheon (and they did to me), Elkin was a gruff but fair-minded war god, assuming the war was one waged against the forces out to stifle daring prose, deep comedy, and an honest (complex, contradictory, horrified, celebratory) sense of the world.

*Pieces of Soap* is pure Elkin, and something different as well. While there’s no real separation on the sentence level between Elkin the fiction writer and Elkin the essayist, he does employ, like a wrestler (see his memorable grappler Boswell), a variety of new grips. Elkin explores many themes, including literature, movies, sex, small-town comforts, big-time diseases, and many other topics quotidian, epic, or, mostly, both. He understands the Shakespearean stakes and poetry in a breakfast spread, or, as in the title essay, a collection of “wrapped motel, hotel, airline, railway, and steamer soaps.” Elkin does not keep his pieces of soap for Proustian remembrance, and, he says, he “writes more from the grave robber’s viewpoint than the collector’s.” He traces his soap-collecting compulsion to the past (which Faulkner, one of Elkin’s permission-givers, and subject of his Ph.D. thesis, reminded us is not even past), to his traveling salesman father. Once Elkin starts using his soaps, they become talismans against mortality, or at least a way to measure the life left to him.

Elkin also makes incisive forays into theories of craft. He reveals the true nature of plot (it’s “isometric”) and novels (“For conveying ideas, novels are among the least functional and most
decorative of the blunt instruments’). Elkin’s thoughts on fiction are as brazen and astute and often as entertaining as his fictions. His adventures in Hollywood, described in two brilliant pieces here, are as much about himself, and America, as they are about the celebrity-industrial complex circa 1989. By now a “cripple,” he falls out of a hotel shower, “my pale Missouri body falling from grace—only no one falls from grace so much as from its absence . . .”

“Schmuck,” his connection, his old Yale acquaintance, TV honcho David Milch (NYPD Blue, Deadwood) calls Stanley, for resigning himself to a shower without grab bars. Sometimes Elkin is a schmuck. He makes great art from the fact. Often he leads with his wounds. He lures you, traps you with them. Not that you mind, of course. It’s part of the magic, the show. (“Never the winner of my anecdotes . . . but the fall guy, the whiner take all.”) The schmuck also confesses to trying to be an asshole, and losing the game, as when he attempts to humiliate a former Democratic Party nominee for president for what Elkin perceives as phony courtesy at a cocktail party. But the old pol handles him perfectly. Awful for Elkin, but all the better for us, for the story.

Yes, Elkin is funny, one of the funniest ever (radio interviewer: “Is there any pain or humiliation that is too great for humor?” Elkin: “No. No, there isn’t”). He was also one of the most serious ever. He was often amused, but his books were never merely amusing. Too much was on the line. His vision of society, culture, absurdity, the stations of the self, the sufferings and charms of the body, were all too acute for light humor. The title of a recent TV show and website, Funny or Die, almost has it right. Yet what it misses is everything. Funny and die is more like it. But also funny and live, in bigness and in smallness, in sickness and in health, and in the case of Stanley Elkin, not just live but perdure, beyond life, in some of the most original and thrilling prose in the language.
PART ONE
PERFORMANCE AND REALITY

There is in literature an element of what I shall call “crossover.” In primitive form it is often little more than echo, or allusion, and is borrowed from one thing and imposed on another for what might almost be homeopathic reasons, growing a sort of interest, as money grows interest—lump-sum momentum like a chain letter no one has broken.

We frequently see the crossover in story titles. E. M. Forster writes *A Room with a View, A Passage to India*; Bob Coover “The Cat in the Hat for President.” Joan Didion calls her novel *A Book of Common Prayer*, Thornton Wilder his play *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Indeed, it isn’t only authors who consciously mine the allusive, magical properties inherent in prior names—inherent after the fact—history itself does it. “World War Two” is a crossover, catchy as a tune. Not sequential convenience, mind you, though that’s certainly part of it, but actual art. So artful and catchy, in fact, that the one on the drawing boards, if it ever happens, will be called “World War Three.”

Writers of advertising copy and the editors of popular magazines are perhaps the most expert, certainly the most
self-conscious, practitioners of this form—and it is a form—with its values of pun and slogan. It would be an interesting exercise to examine the titles of the news articles in just one issue of *Time* magazine. I’m too lazy to take the trouble, and too troubled to take the pains, but if I were a better person and had the character for it, I’m certain that what I would find would be a kind of cornucopia of recombinant and essentially *literary* elements—
in-jokes for outsiders.

But whether the source is literary or idiomatic—usually it’s idiomatic—the intended effect, when it is not merely cute, is always the same—new wine in old bottles, some recycled but incremental and compounded sense of the world, the lifting of one occasion to enhance another.

Some years ago, to no one’s particular notice, I thought to call a collection of bits and pieces from my previous books *Stanley Elkin’s Greatest Hits*. I thought it an inspired title. The model was from the recording industry, an allusion to what, in America, has become almost a genre—*Wayne Newton’s Greatest Hits, Elvis’s . . .*: the habit of reissuing in a new package the popular but out-of-print blockbuster golds and platinums of established stars. Often these anthology recordings are promoted in TV commercials with the note, like a surgeon general’s disclaimer on a package of cigarettes, that it’s not available in stores.

My intentions had been honorable. That is, like all honorable intentions, they were born out of frustration and despair. All I’ve ever wanted, as I tell my friends, is to be rich and famous and to live forever without pain. My title, I felt, was pure crossover ironic, not in the least cute, pure art. I have no greatest hits of course, no golds, no platinums, none of the fabulous and rare ores, elements, and alchemicals of the Las Vegans; in me metallurgy reduced to mere spin-off, simple dross. Anticipating, I even tried
to make the case with my publisher that we should use the other crossover phrase as well and display prominently on the jacket the fact that the book was “Not Available in Stores.” An in-joke for an outsider. For me, I mean.

To this point, at least, I’ve been talking only along the fringes of art and fiction, my notion of crossover simplistic—allusions, slogans, and puns, statutory miles from my argument. But even allusions, slogans, and puns with their pentimento, almost geological, layers and palimpsest arrangements, do in primary colors what good fiction with its infinite palette must always try to do.

Let me tell you about the flamenco dancer.

The flamenco dancer sits in the café against the whitewashed walls, slouched in his wooden chair. While the women dance, a guitar player, his feet oddly stolid and flatfoot on the small platform, leans his ear against the back of his instrument as if he is tuning it. Another gazes impassively across the fretted fingerboard of his guitar as though he were blind. The family—it is impossible to know relationships here, to distinguish husbands from brothers, sisters from wives—a mysterious consanguinity undefined as the complicated connections in circus; only the standing, hand-clapping man in the suit, shouting encouragement like commands, seems in authority here, or the woman, her broad, exposed back and shoulders spilling her gown like the slipped, toneless flesh of powerful card players. Even the slouching brother? husband? nephew? son? is attentive but demure, the women’s hair pulled so tightly into their comb tiaras you can see the deep, straight furrows of their scalps. Their arrhythmic clapping is not so much on cue as beside it, beneath it, random as traffic, signaled by some private,
internal urging like spontaneous pronouncement at a prayer meeting. Yes. Like testimony, like witness. Except for this—the finger snapping, the hand claps never synchronous as applause, the occasional gutturals of the men and the abrupt chatter of the women like a musical gossip—they do not seem absorbed, or even very interested, their attention deflected, thrown as the voice of a ventriloquist, loss of affect like a dominant mood. Inside the passionate music and performance they are rigid, distracted as jugglers. The men and women, patient in their half circle of chairs as timid Johns, polite whores in a brothel, seem even less aware of each other than they are of the performers, kinship and relationship in abeyance, whatever of love that connects them dissolved, intimacy stoicized, the curious family in the cavelike room suddenly widowed, suddenly widowered, orphaned, returned to some griefless condition of independence.

And now the bailora completes her turn. Like some human beast, she seems to rise from the broad, tiered flounces of her costume as from a package of waves at a shoreline, the great, fabric petals of her long train swirled, heaped as seawater at her feet, her immaculate ass, hips, thighs, and tits a lesson in the meaty rounds of some mythic geometry, her upper arms spreading from her shoulders like wings, angled to her forearms, her forearms angled to her wrists, her wrists and hands and fingers and long Latin nails a squared circle of odd, successive dependencies, the stiff, queer displacement of the askew fingers like some hoodoo signal to charm the bright arrogance of the dance.

The man in the suit—when did the cigarette, burned out now, only a dead ash longer than the intact paper that supports it, go into his lips?—beats an asyndeton, paratactic, ungrammatical applause. It is that same deliberate offbeat accompaniment that earlier had almost but not quite violated the heel clicks and toe taps
of the bailora. No matter how studiously the audience in the café tries to keep up with it, they cannot fall in with this artful dodger.

Now the flamenco dancer rises from his chair. Slim and grave as a bullfighter he moves in his gypsy silks and gabardines, his trapezist’s pasodoble entrances and heroics. Alone, it is as if he marches in a procession, deadpan as a saint, solemn as Jesus. He looks like a condemned man leading an invisible party of executioners and priests to his gallows, the host at his own murder feast. There is nothing epicene or hermaphroditic in his bearing, yet he could almost be the embodiment of some third sex, or no, some sexual specialist, a fucker of virgins, say, of nymphets and schoolgirls and all the newly menstrual. In his tight, strange clothing, the trousers that rise above the waist and close about his spine, the small of his back, the narrow jacket and vest that just meet them, leaving off exactly where the trousers begin, not a fraction of an inch of excess material, sausaged into his clothes as the girls’ hair had been into their comb tiaras, the bulge of his genitals customized, everything, all, all bespoke, fitting his form, seamless as apple peel, the crack in his ass, the scar on his hip, he seems dressed, buttocks to shoulders, in a sort of tights, some magic show-biz gypsy latex.

And now he is in position on the platform, conducted there by the asyncopatic hand claps of the man in the suit.

At first he appears the perfect flamenco analogue of a bullfighter. If the women, with their elaborate hand and arm movements, had seemed to flourish banderillas and brandish lances, the flamenco dancer with his minimal upper-body gestures and pile-driver footwork, seems to wield capes, do long, stationary passes, slow-motion veronicas, outrageous down-on-one-knee rodillas. Indeed, with his furious heel-toe, heel-toe momentum, he seems at times to be the actual bull itself, pawing the ring of platform
in flamenco rage. Bullfighter and bull, as the dancing woman had seemed an extension of the actual sea.

This is what the flamenco dancer looks like.

He has the face of a cruel, handsome Indian and looks insolent as a man in a tango. There are layers of indifference on his face like skin, like feature itself, some fierce inappetency and a listlessness so profound that that itself might almost be his ruling passion, some smoky nonchalance of the out-of-love. Not cold, not even cool, for these words at least suggest an idea of temperature, and the flamenco dancer seems to have been born adiabatic, aseptic. What, on someone else’s face, might look like sneer, snarl, contempt, may, on his, signify no more than the neutral scorn and toughness on the face of a bulldog.

Now the flamenco dancer is possessed by his duende, his musical dybbuk. His is jondo, profound—death, anguish, tragedy. The larger issues. (Music is hard. In prose, music is very hard to do, unconvincing as lyrics, a cappella on a page. Avoid trying to render music. Avoid the sensations of orgasm. Steer clear of madmen as protagonists, and likewise eschew a writer as a hero of the fiction. And it’s swimming at your own risk in the stream of consciousness. “Knowing believes before believing remembers,” says Faulkner in a Joe Christmas section in Light in August. What the hell does that mean?) And the guitarist is singing his serious soleares, calling his cante like a ragman, whining his tune like a cantor. Davvening despair.

_I am no longer what I was_ [he sings, calls, whines, davvens]

_now will I be aga-ain_

_I am a tree of sadness_

_in the shadow of a waa-aall . . ."
A woman was the cause
of my first downfall;
there is no perdition in the world
that is not caused by women . . .

In the neighborhood of Triana
there is neither pen nor ink
with which to write my mother,
whom I haven’t seen for . . . ye-ars.

“¡Ole!”’s pour in from the satellite performers half an orbit behind the flamenco dancer. “¡Ole!”’s like an agreement, a deal, an oral handshake, a struck bargain. The done/done arrangements of serious negotiation.

And now it happens. Just now. The flamenco dancer is doing a particularly difficult riff. This murderous tango of a man whose body is one taut line of mood, who, touched at one end of that body should, by the laws of physics if not the conventions of his trade, like the strings on the musician’s guitar, vibrate at the other, but whose art it is to defy physics, to drive his feet like pistons without ruffling a ruffle of his shirt, who does that, whose ruling second skin of costume, revealing still that inch and a half of scar, the material caught in it, in the scar, the magic show-biz gypsy latex, stuck there like the long, dark vertical of a behind snagged in the pants of a fat man rising from a chair on a hot day, does not, does not, display a single qualm of muscle, not one quiver, tremor, shiver, flutter, not one shake, not even his trousers which, snug as they are from mid-thigh to the small of the back, are cut like normal men’s beneath that and actually hang like a gaucho’s in a sort of a flare below the knee, not even his damn trousers jump! It is as if he is the ventriloquist (you must come back; you must return and use everything; you must use
up your material; you must move the furniture around); it is as if he is the ventriloquist, only what he throws is not his voice but his feet, his shoe leather; it is as if he is the ventriloquist, has exactly on the physical plane the ventriloquist’s schizophrenic detachment, straight man and comic all together all at once, only it ain’t only his lips that don’t move, it’s everything! His hands are stilled, his calves are quiet, his knees, the ruffles on his shirt, all his torso, and it’s as if he really is detached, actually separated from the interests of his body, only his feet going on about their business like steps drawn on a dance chart.

Except, as I say, now it happens. The dark fandango of a fellow is grinning. He is grinning; not smiling, grinning; not pleased as punch; probably not even happy; but grinning, grinning. And not just grinning, not simple human cheer or the Cheshire risibles of pleased teeth, but the original, paradigmatic, caught-out, pants down, caught-in-the-act, shit-eating smirk of grin itself!

Because that is how the flamenco dancer must be rendered, I think. A man who never grins, whose profession it is to keep a straight face, who earns his bread by artful scorn, whose squared back, poseur, gypsy bearing is by ordinary the stately four-four time of toreros and graduating seniors, must be shown with his face naked, his bared teeth and grinning lips like private parts. There must be crossover, what joke writers call the “switch.” There must, that is, be a grafting of one condition upon another, the episodic or eventful equivalencies of pun and slogan, the schizophrenic tensions and torsions—though unless he’s a minor character the flamenco dancer may not be mad, recall—of all discrepant allegiance.

It’s like this. A flamenco dancer, a tinker, a tailor, a candlestick maker, any human being, cannot be shown in fiction without
quirk, wrinkle, slippage—the fall, I mean, from the photographic, all, I mean, the strictly realistic and correct dictionary parameters and ideals of grace. Which explains whiskey priests, golden-heart whores, hung-over surgeons, cowardly soldiers, misers who tithe, mercenaries who develop some long-haul loyalty they cannot understand or even very definitively or coherently explain. “A man,” Hemingway’s dying Harry Morgan says in To Have and Have Not, “one man alone ain’t got. No man alone now. No matter how a man alone ain’t got no bloody fucking chance.” Which explains, that is, all driven stereotype and fictional cliché. But the instincts of the cliché are correct; only the judgment of the writer is flawed, his critical lapse of recognition, maybe his reading habits. He is like the writer of mystery stories pursuing the idiosyncratic as relentlessly as ever his amateur detective pursued any murderer.

But I’m not talking about the idiosyncratic so much as I am about the strange—the flat-out, let-stand, mysterious. If there can be no flamenco dancer without the shit-eating grin, neither ought there to be any of the tight hospital corners of explanation. In James Agee’s A Death in the Family there occurs perhaps one of the strangest ghost stories I’ve ever read. Jay, the father, has just been buried. The family returns to the house after the funeral. Here Agee discharges point of view into the disparate consciousnesses of a handful of characters. Upstairs the mother senses a presence in the room—that of her dead husband. Simultaneously, in another part of the house, their little boy feels that his father’s spirit has suddenly returned. Still another relative hears an odd noise from the dead to comfort his mourners. Each character is certain that Jay has come back, is with them again, but, not wanting to upset the others who might not understand, decides to say nothing about the visitation. Agee never explains the startling conviction of reunion each has experienced. Indeed, he never even alludes to it.
Or Anthony Powell. In his novel *From a View to a Death*, Powell draws a tight and quite conventional picture of the middle professional class. Mrs. is sixtyish, a bit dowdy, a touch past it but still civilized. Mr. is a professional soldier, a major, retired. They live an uncomplicated home life in a genteel but ordinary house a few miles from town. They drink sherry, they take the *Times*. And one morning his wife goes into town to do some shopping. I don't have the book in front of me, but this, at least approximately, is what happens. “You’ll be all right, dear?” “Oh, yes, I’ll read I should think.” “Is there anything you need?” “Cigarettes. I require cigarettes.” “What, don’t you have cigarettes?” “Well I thought I did, but it appears I’ve run out.” “I’ll bring some from Scrapple.” “Most kind. Most decent.” “It’s on my way. It isn’t as if it wasn’t on my way.” “Most considerate.” “And I did wish to see Scrapple. Ask after his wife.” “Mnn.” “What’s that, dear?” “My book. I can’t seem to find that book I was reading.” “What, the one about the campaigns?” “Yes, the campaign one, that’s it.” She sees the book and brings it to him. “Oh,” she says, “that sunlight! Much too bright on the page.” “Yes. It is rather. Yes.” “Shall I draw the drapes then? You could switch on the lamp.” “Most thoughtful. Yes.” And she draws the drapes and the major thanks her, and they kiss good-bye, and she goes out to start the car. He hears it start up and listens to her drive off and rises from the chair beside which the lamp is now burning. He puts the book about the campaigns on the seat of the wing chair so that he won’t misplace it again and walks into another room. When he returns he is dressed in his wife’s clothes, even her makeup, even her hat. He sits back down in the chair and reads the book about the campaigns by the light of the lamp in the drape-drawn room. That is the end of the chapter. Powell never mentions the major’s transvestism again. Though we see him again. And each time we do, *each time*,
observing him closely now, astonished by him, gradually taken with an apparently decent man, we think: This fellow dresses up in women's clothes; he likes to put on a girdle; he enjoys the brace of a brassiere, the squeeze of a pump. There is that faintly geological feel of crossover, character layered as a cake.

Not the idiosyncratic, not the strange, maybe not even the mysterious, finally, so much as the queer, protuberant salience of the obliquely sighted. What the periscope saw, what goes on in the corner of the eye, talking pictures in the kaleidoscope, an eye staring back at you, weeping, through the keyhole, the application of a close but possibly afflicted vision, as if writers were color-blind, say, or mental. Because the flamenco dancers and the ghosts and the British majors (ret.) are all used up. We endanger a species simply by mentioning it. So not the idiosyncratic, strange, or mysterious, or even that queer protuberant salience of the obliquely sighted; maybe only surprise. Which I take to be some flipped-coin mix—flipped-coin because it can go either way—of the ordinary in league with the exotic, the strange displacements of the ordinary. The flamenco dancers and ghosts and majors retired are all used up, but we can never be quit of them, or they of us. We must wring them dry as a sheet, put usurer's pressures on them, dun them with obligation, hit them when they're down. And, using surprise, surprise always in some un-Hitchcockian way so that surprise is not ever expected, not ever the form itself that is, not ever looked for, some logical, non-Jawsian sense of the thing. Not Boo! from a closet or Happy Birthday! from pals. Surprise inevitable as verdict, ordered as law.

I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was one of those fine, rare spring days in New York when optimism flows like an energy, when, mysteriously, there is a kind of astonishing
democracy in the air, the pollen count zero and the ego and envy in abeyance, not even coveting my neighbor’s wife, not coveting at all, giving everyone the benefit of the doubt, this old Scrooge, better than Christmas; not “You, boy! You know the poulterer on the High Street? Fetch a goose, I’ll write you into the will!” Because you figure he doesn’t need it, convinced everyone is a personage anyway, the pimply fellow in dirty jeans, the bag lady, the Howard Hughes type fishing coins from the gutter—all, all personages, all upperly mobile and down from the three-million-buck co-ops across Fifth Avenue, out for a breath of air, a touch of art. Your eye out for Kissinger, your eye out for Jackie.

On Eighty-first Street, personages were sprawled on the museum steps eating hot dogs, knotted saltbread, sipping soda. Two vendors, their marvelous wagons with their clever compartments like trick drawers in a desk, about twelve feet apart, cry “Hot dogs, hot dogs here,” more to each other than to their customers. They do a brisk business and seem terribly amused, as if all that’s at stake is the side bet they have down on who will turn over the most saltbread today.

I schlepp up the steps, pulling myself along by the railing, this privileged Porgy for whom even the bag ladies get out of the way. I climb half a mile of stairs. (I love art!)

Schoolkids, cross-legged on the floor, civil and serious, snug and curiously private in this public place, copy masterpieces into their sketchbooks. Joan has organized a wheelchair. I wave to the toddlers in strollers. “Hi kids,” I say, amusing myself that I know what each is thinking, struggling to say. Not “Hey look at the cripple,” but “Mommy, Mommy, there goes the biggest toddler in the goddamn world!” I’m having a marvelous time, my heart in high for once. Everywhere people back from the gift shop carry Metropolitan Museum shopping bags like so much artistic grocery,
and I have, in this perfect temperate zone with its ideal temperature
and humidity designed for canvas and pigment, a sense of some
best-foot-forward, good-willed world, as if Philanthropy were
an actual order of actual politics, as much a rule of reign as the
dynasties and kingdoms and tribes whose artifacts and paintings
and sculptures seem somehow the place’s generative treasury, not
a repository of art at all but native wealth, natural resource, like
Saudi oil, Zimbabwe chrome, Argentine beef. So close to the
source of things, I am close to tears. It could be the giant toddler
is simply overtired, on the edge of crankiness, tantrum. But nah,
nah, his heart’s in high, overwhelmed by the good order and best
behavior of the citizens of this good country, the schoolgirls seated
cross-legged on the floor, concentrating, intense, their lower lips
in their teeth to get a line just right, to catch it on the tip of their
drawing pens and hold it there, balancing, balancing, careful,
gentle as people in bomb squads, till they can thrust it safely onto
the drawing pad and be rid of it. (I will tell you something secret
about myself. It’s none of your business, but I don’t much care for
music, the classics I mean, the high symphonies and opera styles,
yet whenever I go to a concert I weep. It’s the cooperation that gets
me every time, that dedicated sense of the civil—not the music but
the musicians, the useless fiction of harmony they perpetuate. It is
this that gets me now.)

Did I tell you that it is Saturday? It is Saturday, and scattered
among the lovers and schoolkids, the Fifth Avenue co-op owners,
the freelance tour guides and museum guards and gift-shop mar-
keters and toddlers—use it; use it up—the retired majors and fla-
menco dancers—are fathers and sons, fathers and daughters. The
children—use it; use it up—have lunched on vendor hot dogs
and have mustard on their chins, the corners of their lips, bits of
saltbread like a light seasoning in the wrinkles of their clothes.
The kids are oddly solicitous and gaze where their dads direct their attentions with a courteous, leashed patience, not bored but the opposite, concentrating—use it; use it up—working hard as those schoolgirls cross-legged on the floor, intense themselves, as nervous about line, but it’s their own expressions they’re perfecting, that they must balance even longer than that memory on the tip of that drawing pen, hold and hold like a smile for an old-time photograph, breathing of course, even talking, giving and taking, exchanging ideas, opinion, but everything controlled as the climate in this place, and suddenly I recognize these kids. They are Saturday’s children, and they are here by court order, by official decree, sentenced by a judge and their own mixed loyalties, serving their time like good cons, and the fathers, too, sneaking a glance at their watches, wondering if it’s time yet to go to the museum restaurant, time to get out altogether, figuring how much time it will take up to get a cab to the Russian Tea Room, how long the wait will be, how fast the service, which movie to take the kid to, when it gets out, timing what’s left of the morning, the long afternoon, doing in their heads all the sums of visitation, rehearsing the customs of custody.

And I get an idea for a story. Perhaps it was my private joke in the wheelchair that set it off, my vision of myself as a giant toddler; perhaps it was all this, well, behaving, this sedate and serious steady-state attention I feel all about me, the suspicion, grown now to conviction, that no one is having a very good time; certainly my sudden awareness of the divorced fathers and their children, doing God knows what sums of custody in their heads, had the most to do with it, but I have an idea for a story.

It’s this.

Julian’s—I even have the name—parents are divorced when Julian is eleven years old, and Julian’s mother gets custody.
The court grants Julian’s father liberal visitation privileges—weekends, of course, certain specified holidays, Julian’s birthday in even-numbered years. And Julian will spend at least one month of his summer vacation with his dad.

Only when the story opens Julian is thirty-two years old, his mother and father in their early fifties, and Julian is dutifully waiting for his father’s Saturday visit. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is wrong with Julian. Though he still lives at home, he has grown up to be an intelligent, healthy young man, decently employed, still single but ordinarily sexed, not particularly fixated on either his mother or his dad. The story will concern itself with their afternoon, Julian’s and his father’s, with the mutual anxieties both have about these visits, anxieties not all that different from the anxieties of the parents and children doing those secret sums of custody in their heads. Perhaps they will visit the Metropolitan, certainly they will go to the Russian Tea Room, where their order will be taken by the man in the suit. I expect they will have the conversation fathers and sons usually have on such occasions, the father discreetly pressing Julian for information about his mother, and Julian politely resisting, reluctant to be either go-between or honest broker, and both, from time to time, glancing at their watches.

The story is not yet written, or even begun, but I am satisfied that it satisfies my criteria, that it has all the elements—the shit-eating grin on the flamenco dancer’s face, the idiosyncratic, the strange, the mysterious, the queer protuberant salience of the obliquely sighted, crossover, and what the periscope saw, surprise, and all the rest of these strange displacements of the ordinary.