

Millerton

The rock, as big as my head, was rolling towards me. My father had told me to lie underneath the hay wagon, while I watched him create a drainage ditch with dynamite. So I did that, lay in the lush green alfalfa hay field, in the shadow of the wagon, looking out over the hilly farm country to the blue sky and puffy white clouds when I heard a “phump”, a disappointing “phump”, because he had promised me an explosion, and I saw nothing, at least not what I expected, an artillery like explosion, with smoke, and debris flying in the air, but here, in front of me, rolling towards me, was a rock as big as my head.

I was about three years old, I have been told, and remember thinking, “So, this is how rocks are made, dirt is compressed and becomes rock.” I was already a scientist.

I am lying on the green moss, looking up at the bright blue sky, my mother sitting next to me. I must have fallen asleep, taken a little nap. The air was perfumed with cinnamon, or so it seemed, actually, sweet fern is the name of the plant, and every time I smell it, as an adult, I am reminded of that childhood memory. It was a different day, but nonetheless, the sky was bright blue, with puffy clouds. We had walked up the old wagon trail which ran through the woods of our farm at the top of Silver Mountain, in Dutchess County, NY.

Other memories from those first five years:

Falling down the stairs, of tumbling down the stairs, not being hurt, but crying, frightened. I was probably just learning how to walk.

A fourth of July, when my father set off fireworks, He told us this was the last time he could do this, for fireworks had been made illegal in New York State. As a teenager, and an adult, I was always surprised that this small matter of the law did not deter other parents from fireworks, even supplying them to my friends.

From the [home movies](#) [go to the YouTube link, if you want to watch them] which my mother took, rolling pumpkins, chasing the geese, playing Indian with a bow an arrow at the small creek behind the barn, the birthday party on the front lawn, the arrival of my grandmother on the train, the snow piled high on the dirt road in front of our house, my father driving the team of horses as he plowed the driveway to the barns.

On a more personal, almost fantasy level, I remember, soon after my son was born, looking at him and seeing a translucent image float over him, an image that I understood to be that of my brother, just born, when I was two years old, or another image, appearing as if a mirage, of what must have been my mother's breast, as she was nursing me, or another image, or really a feeling, while practicing a kind of therapy called re-framing, feeling pushed through a fleshy canal, what must have been, as I understand it, the feeling of being born, or, another image, this both visual and emotional, of me lying in my crib, on my back, crying, with my mother looking down at me, distant, unsure of what to do, remote.

When I was older, our mother told us a story from when I was four or five years old. My sister was two years older than me, and already going to school. It was Halloween, and Jane took me along, to the Halloween party at the school. The school bus dropped us off at home, and we went into the house. There, sitting in the living room, was our mother, dressed as a witch. Without missing a beat, my sister looked at her, took my hand and said, "Don't worry, Walter, we will wait until Mom comes back and she will take care of the witch."

In many ways, that was the story of my mother. There was something within her, possessing her, a witch, perhaps, over which she really had no control. I am sure it came from trauma's in her childhood, and from living with our father, no easy task, but, as I have gotten older, I have learned to forgive her, to accept her for her failings, rather than to blame her for not being a different, more emotionally available person. I certainly know that I too have inherited, from both my mother and my father, those similar wounds, and hope that I have done a better job, or at least given my own children tools, to deal with the emotional dis-junctions of the fractured family in which they grew up. Of course, it might have been in her genes. She was, after all, named Alice, after her grandmother, Alice Cooper. No, not that one, but some times I think he named himself after my mother.

Driving near the farm, and I saw a building, half-hidden down below a field, next to the road. It was an old mill, probably some kind of fabric mill, and my mother said it had closed, that it was sad, because so many people had lost their jobs. Fifty years later, I was driving, between the hamlet of Housatonic, and Great Barrington, and there was that same mill, now converted into artists' lofts.

My sister, in her bed, sick, with the flu. We were allowed in, to say hello to her, but we

had to stay away, because she was very sick, and I believe that my parents, who had lived through the flu epidemic of 1918, were well aware of that death was always close. My father's brother had died before he was ten, of sepsis, which would have been cured by penicillin, if it had been invented. Or, perhaps, it might be polio. This was before Salk or Sabin.

The slaughter of a cow. I was not, for good reason, allowed to watch, but I remember that my father had a system where he would raised the cow up in the air, by running a rope from his tractor over the branch of a tree, and then to the calf's hind legs, and then, probably, stunned it and bled it. It was then butchered at a meat packing plant near Millerton. I am pretty sure this was 1945 or 1946, I would have been 3 or four, just after World War II was ended, and there were still coupons needed for the purchase of certain kinds of food.

These are my earliest memories, the earliest complete memories of my childhood, my first five years, on the dairy farm my father and mother owned and operated.



Before and after, a dilapidated farmhouse, and then, about ten years later, in much better condition. In my recollection of it, and from the [home movies](#), it became a quite attractive location, looking out both East and South over the



rolling hills of the Harlem River valley. I learned many years later how beautiful it was, while spending three months there at its incarnation as Apeiron, a photography school. Looking to the South, down the Harlem River valley one winter morning, with the trees my parents had planted coated in ice crystals. It is a picture that I stays in my mind, and with these words compose, snap, and print.

For those not familiar with barnyards, the picture to the right, yes, that is a manure spreader parked in front of a door, and behind it, looking toward the hill in the background, is the storage shed where the milk was kept cool, then hauled out to the road in front of the house to



be picked up by the dairy. The cows would enter and exit through the large open door behind the manure spreader. They all had their own stanchions, but occasionally, one cow would choose another cow's stanchion, which would cause a complete ruckus that my father would have to settle. And yes, they all had names.

The farm was halfway between two small towns, Millerton and Amenia, in upstate New York. From the front porch of our farmhouse, we could see the Taconic mountains, of which Silver Mountain was one, of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Up over the hill, behind the farmhouse and barns, through the woods, on the other side of the mountain, still part of the farm, we could look out over the valley of Pine Plains, over the Hudson River into the Catskill Mountains looming above Saugerties.



Children don't really understand extended vistas. Adults do. One of my mothers favorite stories was driving the pick up truck on the road on the west side of the mountain, and seeing another group of picnickers sitting in the meadow where my parents kept cows which were “freshening”, not yet calving.

Of course, it was important the cows not wander off, so a bar was put across the entrance to the field, a very simple bar, a sapling that laid across the gap in the barbed wire. My mother yelled out to the picnickers, most likely people from New York City ninety miles south, to “not forget to close the bar.” She did not want the cows to wander off.

My parents accepted this trespassing on their property as one of the small inconveniences of living in the country, and owning a farm with a spectacular view, but were unprepared for the letter which arrived the following week. Its return address was The White House, Washington, DC, and inside was short note, from Franklin Roosevelt, thanking my parents for the use of their land for a picnic, and promising to always “close the bar.” Hyde Park, his ancestral home, was on the Hudson River, 15 miles west of our farm, and apparently, he liked to come up to the land, and enjoy the view, enjoy a picnic.

It was one of my parents' several brushes with the masters of the universe in the thirties. While they were dairy farmers, neither had grown up in rural America. My father had grown up in New York City, moving, apparently, every year or two, for reasons I am not sure, but whose home was the Ethical Society of New York, and its

school which is now known as Fieldston. His grandfather was a founder of the Ethical Society, a humanist religion that grew largely out of the reform Judaism of the German immigrants of 1850.

Walter, my grandfather and namesake, was a lace merchant, importing fine sundries from Europe, and selling them to the thriving garment industry of New York City. At least, that is what he did until DuPont invented nylon, and synthetics replaced organic fibers. My grandfather then reinvented himself as an insurance agent, and pioneered a kind of policy which allowed the families of the insured to take money out of the policy. This business lasted until the stock market crash of 1929, my father's sophomore year at Cornell.

My sense is that the depression destroyed my grandfather's finances. It undoubtedly had a severe impact on his business, but it did not prevent him from giving my father a substantial loan, the down payment to buy the farm, in the mid thirties, shortly before died. The picture I have of him, my namesake, in my mind, is of him leaning against a locust rail fence, with a pipe in his mouth.

My father's parents lived in a ratified cultural atmosphere. Walter, for example, created a conductor-less orchestra, a rarity even today. What is even more surprising about this accomplishment is that, as far as I know, my grandfather did not play a musical instrument.

He had an extensive collection of Wagner operas, on 78 RPM records, Records, you know, before MP3's, I mean, before CD's, I mean, before cassette tapes, I mean vinyl records, before long playing records, before 33 RPM records, but 78 RPM records, three minutes to a side. Unfortunately, most of these were broken during one of our family moves, or perhaps fortunately. Heresy, I know, but I never liked Wagner's music.

Apparently, my grandfather was **not** an outlier, unschooled, interested in classical music in opposition to his social status. His generation, and his people, were leaders in liberal New York. When I was twelve, I visited my grandmother, Walter's widow, during Christmas vacation. She invited some old family friends over, to meet me, I suppose, and then have an adult conversation. Two couples came, Osmond and Helen Fraenkel, and Milton Bergerman, and his wife. [Osmond](#) was the General Counsel of the ACLU, that much I knew, until I looked him up on Wikipedia and was astounded at all he had done. Milton Bergerman was director of the New York Civic Union, the good government lobby group in New York City, who took on Robert Moses. Looking back, I

would think it quite the coup for my grandmother to get both of them to come over to a simple dinner party in her small apartment.

After dinner, I was given money to see the movie at the theater across East 23rd street from her apartment building. It was an art house. Showing there was Bergman's The Seventh Seal, just released. The year was 1955. I was twelve, a very young twelve, and I was not admitted into the theater, because I was too young. I knew that I should not return to my grandmother's house for a little while, and noticed the public library across the street. I went in, sat down in the reference area, and started reading a book. I have no idea what the book was about, just that I should kill some time. The librarian was concerned, here was a waif, who wandered into her library, and she wondered what she should do. She talked with me a little while, saw that I was purposeful about being there, and when the library was closing, as I recall, at 9 PM, asked after me again, and followed me with her worried eyes as I went out the door, into the night.

I returned to my grandmother's, early I feared, and was welcomed in. The adults asked me about the movie, what was the title, what was it about. I told them the title, and told them I was not allowed to see it. Worried, they asked me what I did. I told them I had gone to the library, and read until the library closed. My grandmother looked at me with eyes wide open.

It was as if her beloved lost son Paul, dead at six of septic poisoning from an infection which grew from a cut on his hand, was standing before her, alive. Paul had died just before World War I, far before antibiotics had been developed, when any infection could result in death. And he was the sensitive child, the poet, the artist, the soul whom his mother so dearly loved, who would be the kind of man she wished her husband was, the man she thought she married.

But Walter was not the financial success her sister's husband was, he was not a lawyer, making oodles of money in high profile divorce cases, with a summer house on the Connecticut coast in Westport and a large apartment on the Upper East Side. Walter and Irma, my grandmother, never had enough, had to live in small apartments, moving all the time, I suppose, to someplace better.

And now, stuck with this brute of a boy, that is, my father, who would rather play sports than read a book, born left handed even, who they forced to be ambidextrous, who failed at everything important, languages, the arts, music, and excelled only at sport. Not even science, like his classmate in the Ethical Culture school system, Frank

Oppenheimer, or Frank's older brother Robert.

She should know what was important. She was one of the first Jewish women to graduate from Barnard, not just graduate, but earn a Master's degree, work as a social worker, help knit families together in Westchester county, and now, there she was, at home, with this rough and tumble street kid. As she said, within ear shot of my father, her surviving son, "The wrong one died."

I knew my grandmother, not my grandfather. Irma lived a long life, into her eighties. She would visit us on the farm, and in Warsaw, and then in Mendon Center, after we moved from the farm, and we would visit her in New York City. We have [home movies](#) of her arrival in Amenia, getting off the train from New York, in her fur coat, and large bag and large hat, smiling like the grand dame, the Auntie Mame, that she was. My father's normal mood, that of a slow boil, would occasionally erupt when she was around. She wanted to "discuss" issues. These "discussions" were always arguments, mostly about money, recapitulating childhood trauma. Only later in my life did I understand how my father had in many ways married his mother, so he could replicate the slow boil, and the screaming arguments.

But life on the farm was peaceful, in my infant innocence. My father was working, all the time. He became a farmer not only to escape the hyper intellectualism of his New York life, but to exercise his muscles, to labor mightily in the manure, driving the team of horses which predated the tractor, corralling the bull, slaughtering the hog, rooting out the brush that had grown up on the abandoned farm's fields, wondering if my mother was really up to the task of being a farmer's wife, on a farm which had not electricity, which meant it had no indoor plumbing, when she first followed him to the top of Silver Mountain from her apartment in the West Village of New York.

It had been a whirlwind romance, less than three months, and there she was, probably wondering why on earth she had followed this man to this cold, drafty, smelly farm, isolated up on top of the hill. It sure was romantic at the time, but she had a life, a career, in cosmopolitan New York, living in the West Village in the thirties, working as a librarian for the Works Project Administration artists project, staying in touch with her friends from Mt. Holyoke and Columbia, and the several years she worked in Paris.

Sure, she was recovering from a brutal marriage, to an aristocratic Austrian, with whom she would converse in German, from having grown up speaking the language. But he had expected a European wife, used to mistresses, affairs, or, if not European, at least

wealthy American, with a substantial dowry.

In fact, he got nothing, and the marriage lasted less than six months, It was a mistake on both parts. My mother, for hers, had married her father, in a sense, a dominating, I presume, angry man. I have no idea who her first husband really was, save for hints I gleaned from his brother's son's autobiography, shared with us after my father died, remembering my mother as speaking this odd, American inflected German, but profoundly thankful for the affidavit which they had received, in 1938, from my father, guaranteeing them support when they came from Europe, saved from Hitler, and the odd American folk songs my father sang at the camp fire on the back pasture, and the surprising and continual anger expressed by my father.

My mother had married her father. Her father, Louis, I had never met. Like my other grandfather, he had died in the thirties, broken, I imagine, by the depression. He was a profoundly successful man, the son of German immigrants. At an early age, before he married my grandmother, he had been Vice President of the Pennsylvania Railroad Louis was then hired by the Vanderbilts for special projects, spent several years in Java fixing their rubber plantations there, and then was assigned to monitor the Vanderbilt's interests in Europe, especially Germany.

He married well. My mother was born, as were her two brothers and sister, in Mt. Vernon, Ohio, the home of the family foundry, as it was called, or, more formally, Cooper Bessemer, a mainstay of the town. After her younger sister and brother were born, she spent the next six or so years of her life in Europe, returning each summer on a steamer, to ride Vanderbilt's private rail car to Mt. Vernon for the summer. My mother grew up in a household which had a cook, and a maid, a tutor, and probably a butler. While he traveled the world, he parked his family in Michelstadt, Germany, near Frankfort. To the right is a picture of the four kids, my mother being the tallest, then Phillip, then Dorthea and the shortest one is Louis.



Basically, my mother spent her first ten years in Germany, and then, as war approached, the family moved to Paris, and then, as the First World War engulfed half of France, the family moved to the suburbs of London, England. One of the stories I heard was that

Louis would proudly read the German papers, holding them high, noisily shaking them on the commuter train he rode to work, giving the political finger to his fellow passengers on the British train.

By the end of the war, the family had returned to the states, and settled in a large house on the Scarsdale/White Plains border. She attended high school in Scarsdale. Her father commuted to New York, to the Vanderbilt offices off Battery Park at the tip of Manhattan. I remember hearing of the exclamation, "*Auf Deutsch!*" bellowed by her father if they slipped into English at the dinner table. I remember hearing of her mother's death, with the hint of emotional neglect hastening the death of the sixteen year old's mother, and the marriage, too soon, within six months, to who was for my mother the evil step-mother, Jesse, presumably the father's mistress.

Both she and her younger sister escaped to Mt Holyoke College. Neither of them married a suitable mate, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, wherever in the Ivy League. I remember a picture taken of her then, with a haunted look in her eyes, a group picture where she has placed herself just a little distance from her classmates.

Her father agreed to fund a Masters in Library Science at Columbia, as he most likely funded the Ph.D. in chemistry that her sister earned at Illinois. My mother went off to Paris with a friend from Mount Holyoke. Her sister Dorteia suffered an emotional collapse, and lived her remaining years in a New York State mental hospital. I was barely aware of her existence.

Of my mother's two brothers, they both went to Antioch College, in Ohio. I imagine their father thought the cooperative education model, three months in the class room, and three months in the real world, was a far better system of education. They both flunked out.

My mother's older brother, Philip, spent his career at Dun and Bradstreet, with extremely conservative economic ideas. I remember his visits, with his wife Edna Louise, they had no children, and his pipe, and his ability to blow smoke rings. The younger brother, namesake Louis, veered to the left politically, worked in an electric motor factory, as active in the United Electrical Workers Union, which was red-baited out by the IBEW. In the early thirties, he even ran for mayor of Yonkers, NY on the Communist Party ticket, using his father's distinctly capitalist car for transportation.

Fascists in the family? Some people have Klansman in the family, but I have fascists.

When Louis, my grandfather died, I heard that there were two kinds of socialists at his funeral, one, his son Louis, the communist, and the others, his friends who were German national socialists.

Louis was the only relative I had who served in World War II. He was in the Air Force, some kind of ground duty in New Guinea, the Pacific theater. He married a woman with similar political convictions, and raised three children in an apartment building he and his wife owned in the Bronx. We rarely saw them, for this was the fifties, and he was a communist, and my mother was afraid of what trouble this might bring to my father's job with the federal government, or what that might have done to us socially, in the small and rural towns where we lived. The Army/McCarthy hearings were on TV, the first time I remember seeing a TV show, and the soon to be lesson of Oppenheimer was clear to her.

Just after my fifth birthday, in 1949, my father sold the farm, auctioned off everything, and we moved to Warsaw, NY. He had been given a full time job with the US Department of Agriculture, as a Work Unit Conservationist. His job was to advise farmers, primarily dairy farmers, in Wyoming County, of which Warsaw was the county seat, toward more efficient ways of farming.

For the previous two years, in Dutchess county, NY, where the farm was located, he had worked part time for the same agency. Much of what he did he had learned at Cornell. Farming, especially back then, when farming was being transformed from subsistence agriculture to cash crops, was a traditional family business. Everyone worked, all the time, and the work was bull labor. It really took a special kind of person to communicate with the people whose families had worked the land for hundreds of years, very traditional folk, who were loathe to trust the advice of an outsider.

The expression, "I am from the government, and I am here to help you." had especial poignancy to people who had seen their friends, their neighbors, who were often also their relatives, driven off the land their ancestors had hewn from the primeval forest of the colonial era, driven off the land by forces which they did not really understand, forces called the Great Depression.

My father chose to become a farmer, at the depths of the depression, because this is truly what he wanted to do. As a child, into his teens, he and his cousins, with their mothers, Irma Jonas and Edna Lewis, would summer at a dairy farm in Lee, Massachusetts, in the Berkshires. It was there that my father discovered the joys of

farming, the hard work, and the outdoors.

So Cornell was a logical choice for college. It was an excellent school, and would give him the technical training that he, a child of the city, not the country, might have gotten had he grown up on a farm, and, because the Ag school was part of the land grant system, it was cheap. This was particularly important by his second year there, after the stock market crash of 1929. Growing up I heard a few stories about some of the classes he took, such as small engine repair, animal husbandry, and scientific farming techniques. He would share them, anecdotally, when describing to us the work he was doing, as we drove around Wyoming county, when we were younger, and Monroe County, in our teens, after we moved there.

Looking back, I see now that my father had a chip on his shoulder, never quite good enough. I see some of the same narrative in myself, as I write this, but his narrative was quite different from mine. He was good enough at one thing, sports, and made some money “to pay for college” playing in a semi-pro basketball league. He was good enough to earn a letter in Lacrosse. I still have that letter, and the sweater upon which it is sewn, in a box of woolens, hopefully protected by moth balls.

He also earned his room and board at his fraternity, Zeta Beta Tau, which I later learned was a Jewish fraternity, by waiting on tables, and he earned extra money through his enrollment in ROTC. It is odd that he never mentioned his summer jobs, because summer jobs were expected of us. Perhaps he spent the summers working on a farm, for room and board. I simply don't know. I do know, when he graduated, in the depths of the depression, 1932, that he was able to get a job related to his college education, grading fruit and vegetables shipped to New York on the railroads. The picture comes from this time, because he still had hair, long gone by the time I was born.



Of course, we never heard of his girlfriends, or any romantic entanglements, until much later. Later, I learned from my brother, there was at least one, a Russian exchange student, who wanted him to return to Russia with her, to help the glorious people's revolution, and the transformation of Russian, perhaps Ukrainian agriculture, from peasant serfdom to collectivism. Of course, we all know how that turned out, with the starvation of millions, and the dispatch of equal numbers to the Gulag, and the horrors of World War II, first the German armies scorching the earth on their march to the East, and then the Soviet armies returning the favor on their march to the West. Luckily, for him, he

chose not to follow her. My brother said it was his father Walter who pointed out that they were only offering him a one way ticket.

After several years, and apparently a variety of jobs near New York City, he rented a farm in Dutchess County, an abandoned farm, or perhaps he took over a failing farm, complete with cows, barns, other livestock, and equipment, in a rental deal. I am not sure. A friend of his, visiting, painted a watercolor of the farm, from the perspective of a facing hillside, which I still have. Anyway, he wanted his own farm, his own land, found the farm where I spent my first five years, and bought it. It had been abandoned, the rural family who owned it was not able to make a living there.

He worked it, improved it, for about fifteen years, when he sold it, and we moved to Warsaw. In those fifteen years, he and my mother had established themselves in the community as hardworking, honest people, had established a sense of trust with the local business people, and had established his authority, as someone who knew what he was talking about, with the people who had grown up on the mountain, the McGhees and the Lyles, whose son bought the farm from my father.



The farm was always my father's, not my parents. I don't know why. Perhaps just the chauvinism of traditional societies, where the land belonged to the man, and the woman was his helpmate. The farm was bought by my father, so in that sense it was his, Nonetheless, it was operated by both of them, and especially my mother, who arrived there for a grand adventure, and lots of hard work.

Moving to Warsaw, for my mother, must have been in many ways a relief. While Warsaw was a small town, in remote upstate New York, at least it was a town, and we lived in a house with central heat, and plumbing, the farmhouse in Millerton had neither when she first moved there, and she could walk to the Main Street shopping

district four blocks away, or drive to the relatively well stocked library. She was even able, once my younger brother was in school, to get a job, at a stationary store, as a clerk, gaining some independence, and a life other than the drudgery of child care and housework. Small rewards for a woman who had grown up in Europe with servants, had a degree from Mt. Holyoke, and a library degree from Columbia, but no doubt immensely freeing from the boring drudgery of house work.

She missed the possibility of intelligent conversation with some of the neighbors of the farm. Not five miles away, just outside of Amenia, lived Lewis Mumford, whom my parents had come to know through political activity. She must have been aware, also, of who [Joel Spingarn](#)'s visitors were. Spingarn had inherited his estate, Troutbeck, and it was not until I fact checked this section that I discovered that his father was a distinguished scholar, botanist, and one of the founders of the NAACP.

I remember visiting the estate, an old Victorian House, rotting into the ground, facing a lake, where we went swimming. I was probably four or five years old. I believe we were invited there to play with Spingarn's guest's son. In the home movies we had, there is a segment, since lost, of us on the dock, with an African American child. I remember wanting to go back, but being told, no, we had to wait for an invitation, and I remember wanting to go inside the house, during that visit, but being told no, we were not invited. My mother was most clear on social proprieties.