Long Life Cool White

Photographs & Essays by Moyra Davey

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with an introduction by
Helen Molesworth

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Fifty Minutes

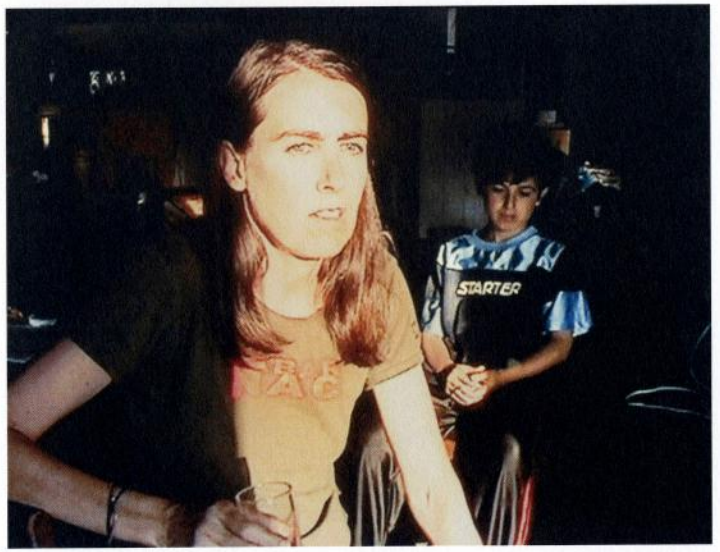
Moyra Davey

(video transcript)

THE FRIDGE

I had a houseguest once who told me that all of his cooking was about managing his fridge. I don't remember the man's name, but I did retain from him that expression, and even though I don't cook per se [*narrator forgets her lines, begins again from the top*], I think of a fridge as something that needs to be managed. A well-stocked fridge always triggers a certain atavistic, metabolic anxiety, like that of the Neanderthal after the kill, faced with the task of needing to either ingest or preserve a massive abundance of food before spoilage sets in.

I get an unmistakable pleasure out of seeing [*long pause; narrator again forgets her lines; off-screen voice tells her to wait five seconds and start over*] the contents of the fridge diminish, out of seeing the spaces between the food items get larger and better defined. This emptying out reminds me of the carcasses being eaten away by maggots in Peter Greenaway's film *A Zed and Two Noughts*. He uses time-lapse photography to show an animal carcass wither



away before our eyes until all that's left is clean white bone. That is my aim with the fridge: to be able to open it and see as much of its clean, white, empty walls as possible.

Once every ten days or so the fridge fills up with food and the Sisyphean cycle of ordering and chewing our way through it all begins anew. This rodentlike behavior is my metaphor for domestic survival: digging our way out, either from the contents of the fridge, or from the dust and grit and hair that clog the place;

or sloughing our way through the never-ending, proliferating piles of paper, clothing, and toys.

Recently I read about a writer getting rid of four thousand books and hundreds of CDs, and emptying three closets full of clothes, and it made me think of how much we pad our lives with this stuff.

BOOKS

I feel a little towards my books as I do towards the fridge, that I have to manage these as well, prioritize, determine which book is likely to give me the thing I need most at a given moment. But unlike with the fridge, I like to be surrounded by an excess of books, and to not even have a clear idea of what I own, to feel as though there's a limitless store waiting to be tapped, and that I can be surprised by what I find.

I spend most of my time trolling through a half a dozen or so books, all the while imagining there's another one out there I should be reading instead, if I could only just put my finger on it. Often I find the spark where I least expect it, in a book I may have been reading casually, lazily, wondering why I am even bothering to read it. Sometimes I persist with a book, even just through inertia, and it can happen that the writing will suddenly open itself up to me.

[*Narrator has been roaming through Pete's Barn, a giant junk store in upstate New York, speaking into the camera mike. She asks: "Do I remind you of Geraldine Chaplin in* Nashville*?"*]

[*Short interlude in which narrator is seen blowing dust from her books*]

ANALYSIS

[*"Shhhhh." Narrator attempts to silence others in the room, who chime in, "Shhhhh."*]

I started my analysis when I lived in Brooklyn. I'd take the L train to Union Square and then the 6 to 86th Street. From there it was a

short walk to my analyst's office on Madison Avenue. As I approached Dr. Y's building I'd scan the sidewalks for his small, compact frame, since he often arrived for my appointment just before I did. Once I spotted him in profile walking down the avenue—he was holding a paper bag just under his chin and putting food in his mouth. Another time, even more unsettling since I wasn't even in his neighborhood, we found ourselves eye to eye, a mere ten feet apart, me standing on the Uptown platform at Grand Central, and him staring out at me from the window of the express train.

But if I happened to catch sight of him anywhere near his building, rather than enter the lobby and risk having to ride up in the elevator together, I'd circle the block. These near encounters were enough to throw into question the entire analysis, and to ratchet up the level of self-consciousness to a nearly unbearable degree. I also felt conspicuous walking past his doorman five days a week at exactly the same hour.

Once I had crossed the threshold into the waiting room I would take a seat on the couch, or if someone already happened to be there I'd sit in the black-and-gold Harvard chair and wait for the moment when Dr. Y would appear to welcome me into his office. It was all very ritualistic and formal.

MONEY-TIME

We negotiated a fee of eight dollars a session, based on my income at the time. The fee is meant to compensate the analyst for his time, but in my case it was purely symbolic. In fact, I was paying for his time with my time by my willingness to come four–five times a week and be a control case in the final stages of his training. I knew almost nothing about my shrink, other than that he was a psychiatrist training to become a psychoanalyst at one of New York's more conservative institutes.

[*Dust motes fly around a corner bookshelf.*]

VIVIAN GORNICK

Late last night, coming home on the subway, I was reading Natalia Ginzburg, but in a quite distracted way, even having trouble keeping the characters straight, when slowly, something about the writing began to dawn on me.

I had picked up Ginzburg's novel *Voices in the Evening*, subsequent to reading a short article by Vivian Gornick titled "Reading in an Age of Uncertainty," published a few months after September 11th in the *LA Times*. Gornick's essay is a brief analysis of the writing of three postwar European writers: Ginzburg, Elizabeth Bowen, and Anna Akhmatova, and why it is she finds solace in reading these authors in the weeks and months after the attacks.

As Gornick explains, all three authors lived through terrible times: war, bombings, murder, ongoing persecution, and censure.

Their writing, she notes, shares certain qualities of detachment, and a lack of sentimentality. It recounts events in a cool, matter-of-fact way. It does not emote. Gornick writes:

"What unites all these works is a severe absence of sentiment—and even of inner motion. A remarkable stillness suffuses the prose in each; a stillness beyond pain, fear or agitation. It is as though, in each case, the writer feels herself standing at the end of history—

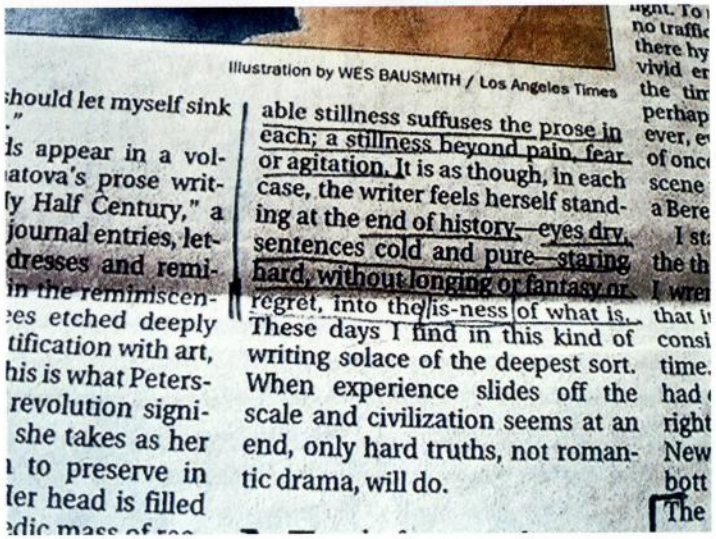


Illustration by WES BAUSMITH / Los Angeles Times

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able stillness suffuses the prose in each; a stillness beyond pain, fear or agitation. It is as though, in each case, the writer feels herself standing at the end of history—eyes dry, sentences cold and pure—staring hard, without longing or fantasy or regret, into the is-ness of what is. These days I find in this kind of writing solace of the deepest sort. When experience slides off the scale and civilization seems at an end, only hard truths, not romantic drama, will do.

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Gornick's essay then shifts from literary analysis into the present moment: the bewilderment and shock of New Yorkers in the weeks following September 11th. She recounts an anecdote, of trying to cross Broadway somewhere in the Seventies. The light changes before she can get all the way across, and from the median she does what she says all New Yorkers do: she peers down the Avenue to see

if there's a break in the traffic that will allow her to run the light. But there is no traffic. The street is virtually empty, and the thought begins to cross her mind that the scene looks like a Berenice Abbott photograph from the 1930s. But Gornick cannot allow herself to complete the thought because it is too painful and disturbing. She realizes that to even entertain that thought presupposes a temporal relationship to the city that is no longer available to her. Gornick continues:

"The light changed, and I remained standing on the island; unable to step off the sidewalk into a thought whose origin was rooted in an equanimity that now seemed lost forever: the one I used to think was my birthright. That night I realized what it is that's been draining away throughout this sad, stunned lovely season: It's nostalgia. And then I realized that it was this that was at the heart of Ginzburg, Bowen and Akhmatova. It wasn't sentiment that was missing from them, it was nostalgia."

DR. Y

After I moved from Brooklyn to Hoboken my travel time to and from Dr. Y's office increased to about an hour and fifteen minutes each way. I'd catch a four o'clock bus to the Port Authority and then either walk across on 42nd to Grand Central, or I'd take the C up the West Side and walk through the park.

Dr. Y had a nice aquiline face that reminded me of Pierre Trudeau's when Trudeau was young—well, when he was about fifty or fifty-five. I registered this visual impression of my analyst in the preliminary consultations that eventually led to the analysis proper, to lying down on the couch, at which point I ceased to look at him. Upon entering his office, I both removed my glasses and averted my gaze, and his face soon faded into an ageless abstraction, a gentle, pleasing blur.

All of his movements and gestures, from the way he stood in the hallway to signal that my time had come, to his walking ahead of me into his office so as to position himself, sentinel-like, by the doorway as I entered, to the careful shutting and locking of the door with a flimsy little hook crudely and inexpertly screwed into the molding, to his calling me Ms. Davey rather than by my first name, were choreographed and ritualized.

This highly mannered behavior suggested to me that he was performing the role of the analyst, and that he was incapable of any spontaneity or originality. What I was supposed to be doing on the couch was figuring out all the reasons his behavior made me so uncomfortable. But in fact I am not a very analytical person and over and over I balked at doing my job on the couch. I couldn't bring myself to talk about him and all the things that annoyed me—his clothes, his shoes, his thinning hair, his shortness, his priggish, by-the-book manner. I found it ridiculous and absurd that I too was expected to participate in this codified, preordained script.

NOSTALGIA

For Vivian Gornick in post-9/11 New York, daydreaming about the city stretching backwards in time is a cause for anxiety, a reminder that historical continuity and the promise of a future are no longer things we can take for granted.

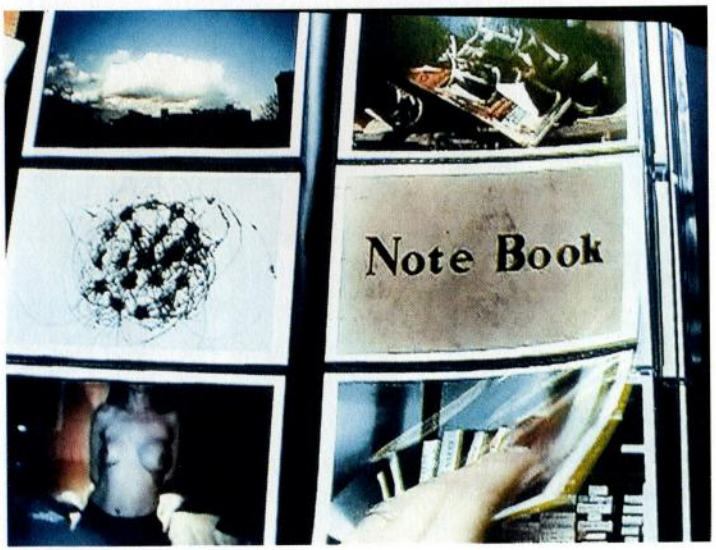
In critical circles, nostalgia has a negative, even decadent connotation. But the etymology of the word uncovers other meanings. It comes from the Greek *nostos*, a return home, and *algos*, pain. According to Jane Gallop, after "homesickness" and "melancholy regret" in the dictionary there is a third definition of nostalgia, which is "unsatisfied desire." And that is what the word has always implied to me: unconsummated desire kept alive by private forays into the cultural spaces of memory.

I am told nostalgia is the intellectual's guilty pleasure. Cynthia Ozick, writing about Sebald's novel *The Emigrants*, would seem to agree: "I admit to being disconcerted by a grieving that has been made beautiful. Grief, absence, loss, longing, wandering, exile, homesickness—these have been made millennially, sadly beautiful since the Odyssey. Nostalgia is itself a lovely and piercing word, and even more so is the German *Heimwey*, 'home-ache.'"

Asked in an interview in 1982 if he felt nostalgia "for the clarity of the classical age," Michel Foucault replied: "I know very well that it is our own invention. But it's quite good to have this kind of nostalgia, just as it's good to have a good relationship with your own childhood if you have children. It's a good thing to have nostalgia toward some periods on the condition that it's a way to have a thoughtful and positive relation to your own present."

[*Narrator reads "pleasure" instead of "present," then corrects herself.*]

In *The Future of Nostalgia* Svetlana Boym identifies two tendencies: restorative and reflective nostalgia. The first is principally linked to place, and, with its emphasis on *nostos*, home, can easily become a breeding ground for oppressive and intolerant nationalisms. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, has a "utopian dimension." It is not about "rebuilding the mythical place called home [but about] perpetually deferring the homecoming itself."



Here is a personal example of reflective nostalgia: As I write and think about this abstraction, nostalgia, a particular landscape always presents itself. It involves a summer day, a park in Montreal, '60s-era architecture, my mother, and a scene from an Antonioni film. But I can't say more than that. To do so would be to kill off the memory and all the generative power it holds in my imagination. I keep it perpetually in reserve, with the fantasy that someday I may land there, in what is by now a fictional mirage of time and place.

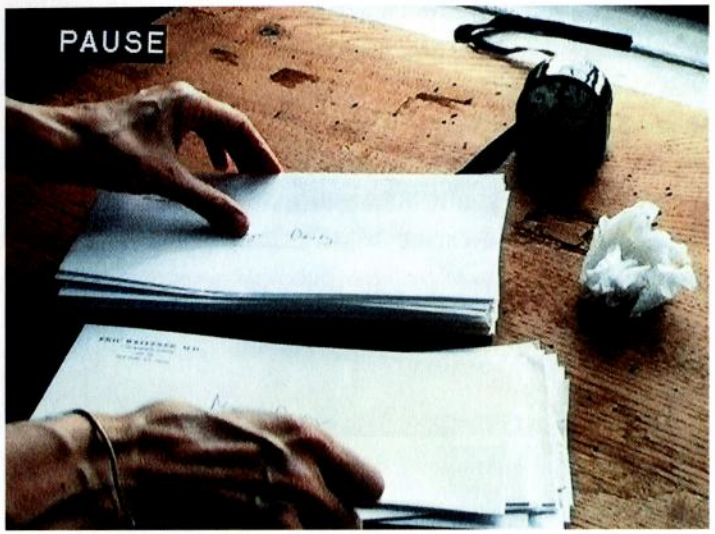
EAVESDROPPING

Dr. Y's office contained one floor-to-ceiling bookshelf on the far wall, and on my very first day I recognized the bright yellow dust jacket of Joel Kovel's *The Age of Desire*, a book I happen to own two copies of. A few years later a second set of custom-made shelves went up on the wall parallel to the couch. These remained empty for some time and then eventually began to fill up with books, the titles of which I was at pains to decipher, but could never quite make out from my nearsighted position on the couch. I read a fair amount on psychoanalysis in those days and sometimes tried to introduce ideas from my reading into the analysis. But these attempts to connect on any sort of theoretical level with my shrink invariably backfired. I would mispronounce names, and then feel embarrassed, or my queries and remarks would simply go unacknowledged. The most Dr. Y would concede was that my reading was my way of trying to get closer to him. What he wanted was the unfiltered version of events, my childhood for instance, something I did not have a good relationship with and did not relish talking about.

LOST & FOUND

I rehearse "lost and found" almost daily. Sometimes it's an actual object but it can be a line or two I've read and only dimly recall. I rack my brain, flipping through books, magazines, newspapers, trying to retrace my steps. Often the thing I'm searching for is of dubious significance, but I persuade myself that the flow of life cannot go on until I have located the object. The search can be for something of very recent vintage, or it can cut across deep time into a twenty-year archive of negatives. The ritual is about creating a lacuna, a pocket of time into which I will disappear. When I find the object, the relief is palpable.

Lost and found is a ritual of redemption. If I find the thing, then I



am a worthy person. I have been granted a reprieve. I have relief when I find something, but it's a shallow, superficial relief. I know this ritual is a rehearsal for all the inevitable, bigger losses. I think, if I can only find X, then I am holding back the floodwaters, I am in control.

This compulsion to "lose" and find things is not so different from the drives and habits of collectors. In thinking about the cyclical nature of collecting, Baudrillard invokes the *fort/da* game that Freud witnessed in his young nephew and interpreted as a way to stave off anxiety over the mother's absence.

Baudrillard: "[T]he object stands for our own death, symbolically transcended. [B]y integrating it within a series based on the repeated cyclical game of making it absent and then recalling it from out of that absence—we reach an accommodation with the anguish-laden fact of lack, of literal death. [W]e will continue to enact this mourning for our own person through the intercession of objects, and this allows us, albeit regressively, to live out our lives."

NATALIA GINZBURG

On the subway, halfway into reading *Voices in the Evening*, I began to recognize the specific quality Vivian Gornick had been describing. There's no psychologizing. We have to infer the complexity of a life from a handful of very selective and superficial details. And mixed in with all of Ginzburg's appealingly idiosyncratic detail and anecdote, you'll come upon something of the utmost seriousness. But it's all treated in exactly the same artless way, with no sentimentality whatsoever about time passing, people growing old and dying, even being murdered by the Fascists. Before, during and after the war, it's all the same, recounted in the same slightly absurd, flat voice. This is the absence of nostalgia that Vivian Gornick is talking about.

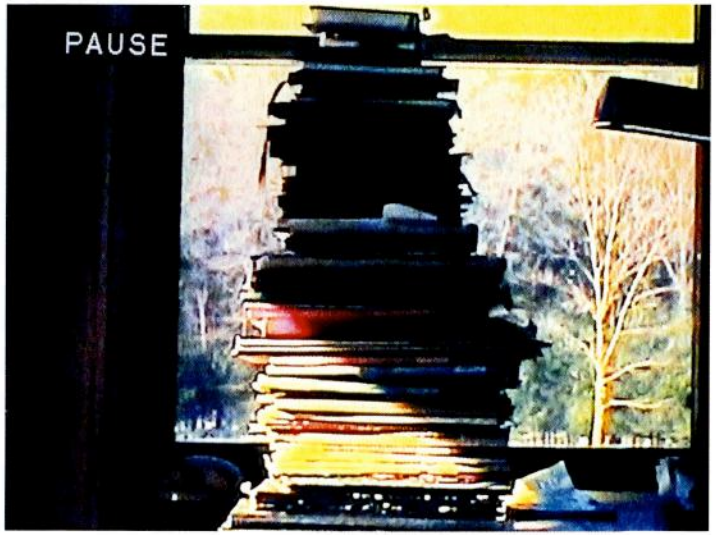
THE COUCH

I was constantly irritated by the look of Dr. Y's couch, a bed really, with a Mexican fabric covering it and a pillow with a small white hanky laid on top. Nailed to the wall directly over the couch was a South American fringed rug. I hated this arrangement of bed and covers and rugs because it struck me as a rather artless mock-up of Freud's couch, and served to reinforce my idea that my shrink was an amateur, someone doing a poor job of imitating an analyst. I was also convinced that I was his only analytic patient, the only person desperate and meek enough to submit to such a draconian schedule as the one he imposed.

I would lie on his couch and spend a good deal of my time thinking of ways to get up, either to sit upright on the couch, or to move to a chair, or simply to walk out. But I felt as though I'd been nailed there, stricken in this supine position a little like in a dream when you're inexplicably paralyzed and can't move your limbs.

FEAR

I found myself thinking often of Natalia Ginzburg in the weeks and months after September 11th. Especially a passage from one of her essays, titled "The Son of Man," in which the image of a shattered house, a home reduced to rubble by bombs, becomes the central metaphor for a loss of wholeness, for the ability to ever trust again in the stability of material things, in the continuity of lives.



Ginzburg writes: "Behind the serene vases of flowers, behind the teapots, the rugs and the waxed floors, is the other, the true face of the house, the horrible face of the crumbled house. Even if we have lamps on the table again, vases of flowers and portraits of our loved ones, we have no more faith in such things, not since we had to abandon them in haste or hunt for them in vain amid the rubble."

I would lie awake at night in my bedroom on the eleventh floor overlooking the city, listening to the roar of jet planes, and think

of Ginzburg's crumbling houses and sleepy children wrenched from their beds and "frantically dressed in the dark of night." Every morning for a long time I would leap from my bed and foolishly scrutinize the skyline to see if the Empire State Building was still standing.

It's summer of 2002 and extremely hot. I am waiting on the subway platform, having glanced at the headlines on the newsstand, all bad, dire warnings about the inevitability of future attacks on the city. I board a suffocatingly hot subway car and make my way through the moving train until I reach a car that is so cold it could be a meat locker. These extremes of temperature are so excessive, so unnatural, they reinforce the sense that things are way out of whack and could crack at any moment.

I dialed my shrink's number, but it was busy and I didn't call back. Almost a year later I still found myself sitting at the kitchen table staring at his number in my address book. And I would just sit there frozen to the spot, working my way into a small fix over whether to call or not to call.

But instead of calling I told myself all the reasons I shouldn't call, and the reasons why I never wanted to see him again. Over the course of some time I talked myself out of it: I did my work, I did yoga, I got on the subway. I walked into a food store and noticed that there were plenty of things I'd like to eat.

PREGNANCY

I carried on with the analysis for five and half years, going from five to four to three, [*narrator forgets her lines, starts again*] and then after I'd had a baby, to two days a week. In the beginning I liked going five days a week. It was a novelty, and I had the time. But more and more, as the years wore on and out of necessity I began to cut back, there was a lot of tense exchange around the issue of frequency of visits.

One such discussion took place in my ninth month of pregnancy, a few weeks before Christmas and my due date. I suggested to my analyst that wasn't it a bit unseemly, me in my state lying here like this, not to mention the treacheries of navigating icy sidewalks and blizzards to make my way to the East Side from Hoboken.

Sidestepping the issue of travel and convenience, as he nearly always did, Dr. Y came up with the idea of "arranging for [me] a

chair." Somehow the image of him hoisting furniture and rearranging his office in order to stage this thronelike commode in the middle of the room was too much, and I simply insisted that we stop and resume again after I'd had the baby. Which we did, and I managed to sustain the analysis for another couple of years, though it became increasingly difficult with a small child.

HOLLIS FRAMPTON

In 1971 Hollis Frampton made a film called *(nostalgia)*. It's a sort of leave-taking of photography. Frampton burns his photographs on a hot plate, and always out of synch with the disintegrating image on the screen is a voice-over describing the circumstances of the making of each picture. The narrator recounts the motivations, and usually the shortcomings and regrets associated with each image. The tone is melancholic and self-deprecating.

On one level *(nostalgia)* is permeated by a sense of regret over things never said, amends not made, a sense of failure and real loss for the moments and people no longer in Frampton's life. But towards the end of the film there's a twist, and one of the chief moments of regret turns out to be a bit of a charade. Frampton's nostalgia (and he spells it with a small *n*) is real, but it is also wrapped in distancing irony and wit.

The film ends on a strange note of terror, with the narrator saying: "I think I shall never dare to make another photograph again."

VULTURE/KITE

In *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* Freud interprets an early memory of Leonardo's, of being in his cradle and having a vulture swoop down and bat its tail between his lips. I think this is where Freud concludes that Leonardo was gay. But it turns out there's been a mistranslation from the Italian, that it wasn't a vulture at all, but a kite. I remember telling Dr. Y about this mistake and saying to him that I thought it seriously discredited psychoanalysis. He was dumbfounded that I'd take such an extreme position.

Rereading the case study now, I can see it probably makes no difference to Freud's interpretation that it was a kite rather than a vulture. But at the time I was quite literal-minded and convinced it was just another nail in the coffin for psychoanalysis.

THE FUNDAMENTAL RULE

I remember very few details of my verbal exchanges with Dr. Y. An exception was a rather stupefying moment towards the end of my analysis that had to do with Freud's Fundamental Rule, the idea that you have to say everything that comes to consciousness, every horrible, hideous thought that crosses your mind while on the couch. Ever obedient and fearful of authority, I had been endeavoring to follow this rule, with all the pain and self-loathing one can imagine might come with this burden of disclosure. One day a discussion of the basic premise of the Rule ensued and Dr. Y, in a moment of uncharacteristic straightforwardness, breezily informed me that of course I had never been obliged to follow the Rule. No one was forcing me. Rather, he suggested, my servile adherence to the Rule said something about my character. This rule had been tormenting me for over five years. Dr. Y's interjection left me feeling relieved and duped in equal measure.

HUBRIS

[*This section of the video is unnarrated. A radio in the background is tuned to NPR moments before Patrick Fitzgerald's much-anticipated press conference on the grand jury investigation of the leaked identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame and the indictment of White House adviser I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby: "I'm Patrick Fitzgerald, I'm the United States Attorney in Chicago. "*]

WORK

Frampton said that the "nostalgia" of the title of his film had to do with the "wounds of returning," of reconstructing "the lumps [he] took" in those days before he'd made a name for himself as an artist. Some of the struggles Frampton talks about in *(nostalgia)* are uncomfortably familiar to me from the days when I was just

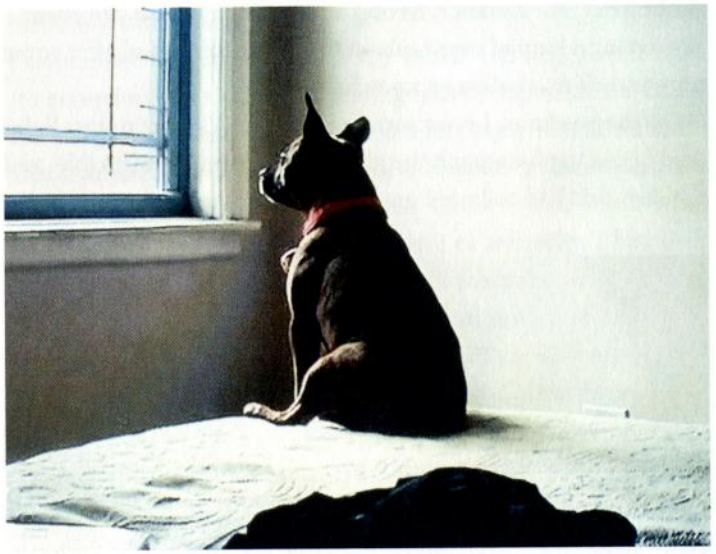
starting out. For instance, having an idea for a picture, but eventually feeling a kind of inertia about the whole thing, and after some time and effort, chalking it up to failure.

On the weekend I took some pictures of J's 45s in dim light. And I tried to photograph the glare on an LP on the turntable, and the dust that had collected on the needle. I take far fewer pictures

now, but it can still happen that I'll get that sense of heightened absorption and suspended time that comes with the first idea and the notion of a latent image.

THE END

The end occurred soon after that revelatory moment about the Fundamental Rule. One early October day in the sixth year, shortly after the August break, Dr. Y imparted that he was anxious to return to the minimum four-day-a-week schedule as mandated by his



particular school of psychoanalysis. I was no longer living in Hoboken but had moved to Washington Heights, and this he surmised would make it much easier for me to resume coming again four times a week. But at that point something in me snapped. It was the realization that this man, who'd been listening to me talk about the conflicts in my life for over five years now, could also realistically expect me to show up here four days a week. That was my last day of analysis. I said goodbye and shook his hand (still not looking at his face), and walked out and bought a bar of soap on Madison Avenue.

THE CITY

Yet, if I have any feeling of nostalgia toward New York City, it is mapped through my trajectory to and from Dr. Y's office on the East Side. My daily travel was like a circle drawn around the heart of the city. The solidity and sometimes glamour of Manhattan became

like the ballast, the reassuring counterweight for the muck that spewed forth in the confines of that small, decorous office.

And here I will add a final note: while I have few positive memories of my analysis, I have to admit to the possibility that it helped me, that it gave me something I needed. Despite all the irksome formalities, Dr. Y was generous and kind, and he still occasionally makes an appearance in my dreams in that guise.

THE FRIDGE

I began writing this collection of thoughts in June 2003, and didn't look at it again until the fall. By then the August 14th blackout had happened on the East Coast and many of us here relived some of the apocalyptic fears of September 11th. I also spent that summer reading Peter Handke. I wanted to write this without ever saying "I feel" or "I felt," with Handke and Natalia Ginzburg as my models, but I have not succeeded. I have used those expressions, or variations of them, at least ten times.

And here's one final thing about the fridge: Had I been really honest, I would have told about how I let the milk freeze at the back so it will last longer, and about how I bark at my child if he stands too long in front with the door open, or about how my biggest fights with the man I live with have to do with his propensity to cook in large quantities and stuff the fridge with leftover food. Had I been really honest, I would have told about how proprietary and controlling is my relation to the fridge, and about how the food it contains brings out my most anxious and miserly tendencies, as though by fixating on the process of consumption and replenishment I can control my destiny. All right, there, I've said it. And I could say more, but for now that's enough.

Fifty Minutes is a work of autofiction.