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### Graziano, Frank

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## ORIGINS

My paternal grandfather, Nunzio Graziano, migrated from Partinico, Sicily, when he was sixteen. He came through Ellis Island with his brother, was quarantined there, and eventually settled on Logan Street in the East New York section of Brooklyn. After other efforts he established an appliance repair business that evolved into a retail appliance store, on Fulton Street near the Norwood Avenue station of the elevated train—the el. My Aunt Frances and Uncle Tom lived above the store and their apartment shook every twelve minutes when a train passed. They both worked for decades in downtown Brooklyn at the McCrory’s department store, Tom as a stockboy in the shoe department and Frances in the cafeteria. Every year around Christmas Tom asked for shoe sizes of all the kids and stole some sneakers for us. Frances stole green plastic plates—I imagine one a day—and I had a set of these when I was in college. I never knew my paternal grandmother—she had died before I was born. My grandfather remarried a Sicilian woman and moved to a house on Fountain Avenue beside the Hammer soda factory. I remember an Easter dinner at rows of long tables in the basement—Italians liked basements in those days—with a lot of step-relatives I’d never met. I ran around their legs with my cousins until our parents parked us for pasta at the children’s table. Decades later I visited my grandfather’s hometown in Sicily and spent time with my father’s cousins and their families. They showed me the house where my grandfather was born, a humble affair on Via Nasso. On his deathbed he said, “Give the kids \$10 each.” I don’t think we ever got it.

Not much is known about my mother’s family except that her father was insane and abandoned my grandmother and four daughters. My grandmother worked in sewing sweatshops to support the family as best she could—not too well—and the girls worked too as they got older. When the father—my grandfather—ran into some hardship of his own my grandmother allowed him to return to the apartment as a boarder. He divided the refrigerator with a tape line down the middle, my mother told me, with his food on one side, pretty much nothing on the other, and penalties for any hungry girl’s infractions. The particular nature of his insanity

isn't clear but the oldest girl, Ann, later became schizophrenic. She lived with my grandmother into adulthood and was institutionalized when my grandmother died. The two moved often because Ann always thought that landlords were entering the apartment surreptitiously to exchange vegetables in the refrigerator with inferior ones. She also argued a lot with people no one else could see. My grandmother died young of some combination of exhaustion, loneliness, sadness, and despair. I remember a kidney-shaped formica fake-marble couch table, with matching end tables.

Brooklyn was important in my teens because my father and Uncle Tony took over my grandfather's store on Fulton Street and opened another on Liberty Avenue, at Crescent Street. I spent Saturdays and summers working there, sometimes alone, sometimes with my father's boyhood friend—Nicky—who was the principal employee, and sometimes with one of the local guys who hung out on the corner. I delivered and installed washing machines, dryers, air conditioners, televisions, and so on, to apartments and projects in East New York, pre-gentrified Brownsville and Bedford-Stuyvesant, adjacent areas of Queens (Ozone Park, Cypress Hills, Richmond Hill), and on occasion Manhattan (called "the city") or the Bronx. I remember one delivery to pre-gentrified Red Hook; this was the only time I felt endangered, by some gang guys.

Once I went with a truckload of twelve-inch black-and-white televisions to a store that wholesaled from us in the South Bronx, known then as Fort Apache. I remember unloading the tvs through an alley door and then going inside the store, among a lot of customers, it felt like a crowd, and the owner or manager behind the counter made some strange hand gestures, like he was doing a magic trick, I guess in order to inconspicuously hand me the brown paper bag filled with cash payment. I returned to the back of the store, hid behind some boxes, counted the money (probably around \$5,000—it seemed like a million then), shoved the bag down my pants, and got in the truck more or less certain that I would be robbed at gunpoint at the first red light. I didn't breathe easily until I was over the Whitestone Bridge.

My father ran the store on Liberty Avenue, and it was burglarized often. As a boy I didn't realize how devastating that must have been. Insurance in the store neighborhoods was so expensive

that it seemed reasonable to play the odds—if you got through a year without a major burglary you came out ahead—so the stores were often uninsured. Security evolved in reaction to burglaries. First, early on, exterior gates and an alarm were installed—that stopped most of the smash and grab. After burglars cut the gate locks with bolt cutters and no one responded to the alarm, an interior garage-door gate was added. That was thought to be foolproof—even if you broke in, there was nowhere to go—until we got to the store one morning and noticed a hole in the back wall. The store was on a corner, and around the corner but in the same building was a little barbershop, with no gates or alarm. The burglars easily broke into the barber shop, busted through the wall, and went to work.

After that burglary it was time “to get hooked up to Holmes,” as they said then. This private security company put vibration sensors on the walls, a red hold-up button under the counter, and some contraptions on the exterior basement door, but their main feature was a private security force and a silent-alarm system that made three phone calls. If there were any disturbance, and sometimes there were false alarms, a recorded message would go out to the police, to Holmes security, and to my father: “There is a hold up or burglary in progress....” I remember waking to that horrid message more than a few times.

One morning when my father and I got to the store he unlocked the exterior gates, unlocked the door, unlocked the garage-door gate, turned off the alarm, and turned on the lights. We stood there for a moment with a weird feeling, like something wasn’t right but we didn’t know what, and after whatever long instant it took to work through this confusion we realized that the store was half empty. A square hole had been cut in the floor beside the row of washing machines, and the burglars had taken displayed console televisions and stereos, together with a bunch of boxed goods, down the hole, into the basement, out the bulkhead doors, and into a waiting van. The alarm wasn’t triggered for the simplest reason: the burglars called the store’s number from a phone booth across the street and kept the phone ringing (this was before message machines) so that the calls to Holmes, the police, and my father could not go out. We were called eventually by the police—it was in the middle of a snowstorm—and when we arrived saw officers stuffing radios and electric shavers in their raincoats. On those drives to

Brooklyn, even under normal circumstances, there was never any conversation. WINS—all the news all the time—and that was about it.

## OCEANSIDE

I was born at the Evangelical Deaconess Hospital on Chauncy Street in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, and my parents' apartment was in Ozone Park. We moved to Oceanside, on the south shore of Long Island, during my first year, in 1955. The house was brick, three bedrooms and one bath, \$18,900 on a thirty-year mortgage. The total square footage was about one thousand, but the living room/dining room—"for company," with the crushed-velvet couch covered in plastic slipcovers—was used rarely, so the five of us lived in whatever space was left. My younger brother and I shared a room, first with bunkbeds and then twin beds, and my older sister had her own room.

The town was Italian, Jewish, and Irish. The Grazianos were flanked on one side by the Berkowitz family and on the other by the Abramowitz family. My friends had last names like Schiavone, Harrington, and Goldstein. There was one Puerto Rican family nearby—very unusual at the time—and the son, Perry, was my closest friend during my early teens. We would get on our bikes and cover great ranges, mostly to crab or fish for flounders, eels, and blowfish, but sometimes we would ride to an overpass and drop Cocoa Puffs on cars passing on Sunrise Highway, or catch frogs and sell them for five cents each to a pet store, or go to a schoolyard to play stickball.

One of the great mysteries of my childhood is a vivid scene that I don't know if I actually experienced. Perry and I planned to go fishing early one morning, to catch the tide right, so I woke by alarm, got dressed, and went outside in what I remember as pre-dawn half-light. There was a woman in a red coat across the street from my house. Perry lived about two blocks away, and as I walked in that direction she walked too and remained directly across from me on the other side of the street. When I got to Perry's house it was dark—he wasn't awake—so I went back home and the woman in the red coat kept the same pattern on the return. At the time I had the impression that she was a kind of guardian angel or plainclothes police, watching over

me so nothing would happen in the early hours when no one was around. To this day I don't know if those events actually happened—probably not, right?—or if I dreamed them. Why was I walking and not on my bike?

The other childhood scene in my mind with such vivid cinematic intensity is surely a screen memory. Our house in Oceanside was on a corner and the yard perimeter was defined by a rustic wooden fence. In the memory I see myself on a hot summer day turning the corner, which is to say walking along the fence for maybe six feet on one side and the same on the other side of the corner, and then the image fades away. I think behind the screen was an incident that deeply frightened me. I was outside playing stoop ball while my mother was getting ready to take us on a bus trip—this was before she learned to drive—to my grandmother's apartment in Queens. There happened to be some surveyors on the road in front of our house, one holding that stick thing and the other looking through the monocular thing, and I asked them what they were doing. One of them replied, "We're going to move your house." "What?" I asked, and then the guy repeated it with some spooky detail. I believed him and ran inside to tell my mother, who of course dismissed the news as childish nonsense. While we were on the bus I tried, without success, to convince her, and when we returned to Oceanside and were walking from the bus stop I was sure we'd find a void where once there was a home.

One day I was so excited to do whatever was planned that I got dressed quickly, put on my sneakers, and ran outside. A few minutes later a woman passing by looked at me and laughed, and when I looked down I discovered that I had forgotten to put on my pants. Shirt, socks, shoes, and underwear, but no pants. Sometimes I still get ahead of myself like that, and when I'm in that mode of overdrive I look down even now to make sure I remembered the pants.

My parents were active in the Catholic church, my father was in the Knights of Columbus (eventually a grand knight) and my mother in the K of C ladies' auxiliary, and they were involved too in the Sons of Italy. Before church my father massaged his Cadillac with chamois. God was a causal agent in our everyday lives. Once after confession I found a bird's nest and was ecstatic; God put it there to reward me. If you ate a cookie you weren't supposed to and then stubbed

your toe, God did that. Politics generally conformed to the religious and cultural milieu in which my parents moved, but my mother was an independent thinker. My father voted Republican pursuant to socio-cultural expectations, and when my mother saw things differently she liked “cancelling his vote.” They went to the polls together.

We didn’t eat much pasta, except on holidays, when my mother would make southern Italian red sauce—a huge pot on slow cook all day, with beef and pork and sometimes braciola (known locally as *brashall*) in the sauce. Chicken cutlets, lasagna, manicotti (*manigut*), sausage and peppers, and for dessert sfogliatelle (*sfoolyoudell*) and cannoli (*ganol*) from a pastry place in Lynbrook. There were some specialties—caponata (*gobanad*) and scungilli—that were served only on particular holidays. Sometimes there was an antipasto plate with cured meats like prosciutto (*brazoot*), soppressata (*supersod*), and capicola (*gobagaul*), together with peppers, olives, and cheeses, usually mozzarella (*muzadell*) and provolone (*bravaloon*). No one drank wine. There was a carafe of red wine perpetually in the refrigerator. It would come out on holidays, no one would drink it, and it would go back into the refrigerator until the next holiday. Sometimes we’d get a pizza from Joe Terzo’s and my father would always crack up because the oblong pizza never fit right in the box. We went occasionally to a Chinese restaurant (egg rolls and chow mein and a lot of noodles dipped in hot mustard) and to Carvel for ice cream (pistachio was the favorite—in a Christmas-green color). For special occasions there was a lobster place a few towns away, with thermidor and newburgh as the popular options, and once, when my grandmother and aunt came with us, I got a glimpse of the bill—\$45 for the seven of us—and went pale with fearful astonishment at the exorbitance.

I don’t remember much about elementary school, except that to get there I walked a long block from my house, crossed Long Beach Road, cut through Food Town (in the front door and out the back), and walked across the parking lot into the schoolyard’s back entrance. One day when I was walking home someone ran out of a house and said “Kennedy was shot”; that’s where I was. On Harrison Avenue. In the middle of second grade I was skipped into third grade and didn’t really understand what was happening. In preparation I had a meeting with the school psychologist for an IQ test, I think, but if I remember right she also gave me a Rorschach test. I remember too that Nancy Mahoney used to chase me around the schoolyard trying to kiss me.

I probably didn't run as fast as I could. In sixth grade I had my first girlfriend, Laura something. We used to sit together on a living-room chair and every once in a while turn for a dead-lip kiss.

It wasn't cool to be smart in my demographic—the Jewish kids were more studious—so I did my best to hide it, and my academic performance throughout my tenure in Oceanside public schools was mediocre. My efforts were well invested elsewhere, however, and at the conclusion of junior high school in 1969 I won the “most popular” award, although I was hoping for “best looking,” which went to my closest friend then, Paul Giampaolo. Things like “most likely to succeed” would never have occurred to us.

In ninth grade, when I was around fourteen, I hung out on weekend nights drinking in a dark area of an elementary school's grounds with a group of about ten friends, guys and girls, just talking and having a good time. One girl, Betsy, would get drunk and cry. Sometimes we would go afterwards to a diner and get French fries. No one ever bothered us except one night some fire officials came because an alarm had gone off and they thought we had pulled it. They lined us up on the sidewalk and made us hold out our hands, palms up, then passed a black light over them—you get invisible stain on your hand if you pull a fire alarm—to see if any of us were guilty. We were all clean and went back to our shadows thereafter undisturbed. In later years we traded up from the schoolyard to Nathan's, on Long Beach Road, which had a sort of airport-hanger-like space filled with picnic tables and kids, as well as legitimate customers. I had to be home earlier than everyone—even my dates—but I don't think it ever occurred to me to disobey or to protest, and I always ran to make it on time. I also hid my sins well (or thought I did).

My high school had fraternities and I pledged one in tenth grade. The rule was that once you accepted an invitation to pledge you stuck it out, but I got tired of getting beat up and quit. That put me in a dangerous position, because quitters were punished, and for the next year or so until I pledged again I walked in terror every time I was alone at night. One kid got beaten badly and thrown through a window, and had a halfmoon scar on his face from his right eye to his chin. The second time I pledged I vowed to persevere and take the pain. On hell night—the final night of the initiation—they took us to the beach, covered us in all kinds of goop, slapped



us around, and then lined us up for hits with a baseball bat cut in half lengthwise. You're blindfolded the whole time, which makes it more terrifying. You drop your pants and bend over, they put a folded jacket on your spine to avoid major injury, someone holds you up, and then one by one the brothers come to bat. Only two of us went through that before the police came and we were told to run. I was among the unfortunate and had raised welts on my butt and thighs for weeks. After we got some distance from the cops we went in the ocean to clean off and then hitchhiked home.

Most of the brothers were good people and a lot of them were athletes, but there were also some sadistic guys—likely dead or in jail now—who scared me even once I was a brother. I didn't really fit; the group as a whole was into fighting and I was into figuring out my romantic ideas, including girls, though I was too shy and insecure for much success. The fraternity president the year I pledged died of a heroin overdose; the vice president was an outstanding gymnast statewide. Academics were beside the point. I became vice president in my senior year and tried to move us away from fighting with rival fraternities and into more social service, like a yard sale to raise money for something I've forgotten. I also initiated sponsorship of a Vietnamese boy with fraternity funds. His name, unfortunately, was Phuc, which led naturally to: "Did we get a letter from Fuck? Let me see the picture of Fuck."

Oceanside High School was huge—I think there were eight hundred students in my graduating class—and we had hall ladies to keep order between classes. One day while a group of us were walking by one of these women someone in our group said "Blow me." This was reported to one of the coaches, his name was Mr. Milano or something like that, who lined us up in the gym and kept repeating, "Who said 'blow me'?" When you're fifteen and nervous that was riotously funny—to hear your coach say that—and we all tried as best we could to keep composure, with more or less success. No one confessed so we all got punished by paddle, track laps, and cafeteria duty with mops. In my senior year the hall ladies were replaced with bouncers—big guys with bald heads.

When you entered the high-school lobby you faced a glass wall with a courtyard behind it. Inside the courtyard there was a student sculpture of an arm and hand, maybe six feet tall, with

a dorky title something like “Reaching.” When we came to school one Monday most of the fingers were bent down, so that the hand was giving a new message with the middle finger. A classmate named Kavanaugh—Brian, I think—was busted for that feat; he had climbed over the roof to access the courtyard. Kavanaugh was expelled and later became a subway cop in the city and, if I’m not mistaken, was killed.

I only remember one teacher fondly, Mr. Brunetti—he’s one of the few who make a difference. I also had a sexy math teacher whose short dress got a little shorter when she wrote on the blackboard, like in a movie. One of the coaches was her boyfriend and class got interrupted periodically when he would show up and she’d go out to the hall to talk to him. It was weird to see her as a person, the way it’s weird when you run into people outside of the context in which you know them, but then she came back to the algebra of being a teacher.

Our house in Oceanside had a partially finished basement, and as a teenager I built a room in the unfinished part and hung out there when friends and girlfriends visited. There was a pool table in the finished part, sometimes covered with a pingpong table, and a lot of time was spent there too. The room I built had a black light, and I painted one wall a dark color and over it, in dayglow lettering that popped when the light went on, wrote “We shall overcome.” When my mother saw it she said, “That’s so stupid—overcome what?” Later I covered the wall with newspaper clippings and photos regarding war and all kinds of social and environmental problems. In the center I put a larger picture of the moon landing and beneath it, in dayglow red, wrote the caption “So what?” It was great being fifteen and knowing everything. My father called me “the professor” (*prafessuh*)—little did he know.

I attended Monmouth College in New Jersey for a semester right after high school, then took a leave of absence to work for my father, be with my girlfriend Nancy, and pay off a loan (\$2000) for a small piece of land I had bought in upstate New York when I was seventeen. During that semester I lived in a dorm—I never did that again—and raised a lot of hell. It was also a time of trying to figure out spiritual things. I had a friend, Mitch, who agreed with me that the purpose of life was cosmic consciousness. There was a huge deflation when we read that you couldn’t

get that until you're thirty-three, and we kind of looked at each other in dismay thinking, What the hell are we going to do for the next fifteen years?

After my leave of absence Nancy came to Monmouth, despite a lot of protest from my parents, especially my mother. Nancy and I had gotten engaged before that semester—I must have been nineteen. When we got to Monmouth we agreed to both get jobs to save for a honeymoon; we had already picked the perfect island out of some brochure. I got a job at a 7/11 in Long Branch and worked full time while also taking twenty-one credits—seven courses—per semester to graduate early and save my parents some money. I made minimum wage, which at the time was \$2, so after a forty-hour week and taxes were taken out I earned \$68. The store got robbed two nights in a row while I worked there. I was there for one but didn't see anything because I was stocking shelves with my back turned. Nancy never got a job, and while I was working she started an affair with a black guy who dressed like a pimp. Among the primary lifestyle options for students at that time were hippy and disco, with no reciprocal recognition or respect. We were hippy; this guy, and now Nancy, were disco. Somehow that felt like a double betrayal, like she wasn't half of who I thought we were together. Drugs followed and she eventually got expelled from the college. I broke up with her when I discovered the affair and we had to cancel the wedding, which was imminent, with the venue reserved and invitations out and engagement gifts that needed to be returned. It was horrible. Broken heart.

## LOOKING FOR AMERICA

From an early age I thought about leaving home as soon as I could, not because my homelife was bad but rather because it seemed like there was a world and life for me beyond Long Island. Even as a child I would cut ads out of *Popular Mechanics* and write for brochures about free land in Australia for people willing to settle it. After the breakup with Nancy I bought a Volkswagen camper (the one with the pop top) and went to look for America. When the moment came to leave, my mother was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee with a friend from across the street. I expected the kind of farewell you'd see on tv when a young man goes out into the world: "Be careful, son," as she holds your head and looks into your eyes, "and call

us collect to let us know where you are, and don't take candy from strangers." I was really startled because there was none of that, not even a hug, as though I were going out to run a quick errand, and I drove off sort of confused and unsure if I was expecting too much.

I went north first and planned to head west in Canada. That had something to do with a Doors song. I spent a long time at the border while a novice officer got excited about the oregano in my spice rack. The trip, like much of my life, was largely a lesson in loneliness. But it was also an adventure—loneliness in motion—and at that time I was reading a lot of Whitman: "Strong and content I travel the open road." The van wasn't too strong, though, and after a couple of weeks on the open road it threw a rod somewhere in Ontario. I sold the van, shipped the contents home on a Greyhound, and hitchhiked back to New York holding a fishing pole and a tripod (they didn't fit in the boxes). The last ride dropped me off somewhere on the north side of the city and I took the subway to my father's store. I remember his double-take as I entered.

With the money from the van sale I bought a plane ticket to Tucson. I knew little about Tucson but it sounded interesting—maybe the name—and it was the farthest place from New York that wasn't California. The arrival was intense; I stepped out of the plane onto one of those roll-up stairways into 110 degree heat and blinding sunlight reflecting off the plane's wing. I knew no one and had no idea where I was staying, so I went to the university's student union, looked on the roommate-wanted board, and chose the cheapest option, \$35 month, on Mabel Street. The roommate's mother was suicidal, or claimed to be, and after each new threat he'd get on a bus to LA to save her.

I got a job as a bellboy at an upscale hotel in downtown Tucson. My shift ended at midnight and I walked from downtown up Fourth Avenue to my room near the university. Fourth Avenue was lined with bars and with bunches of drunk guys tougher than me outside them, so at first I was intimidated and crossed the street as necessary. That evasion, I soon realized, only made me more conspicuous as a target—weak and fearful—so I changed my strategy: dissolve into the scene. Rather than crossing the street as I approached a group, I put a little bop in my step and began to sing, to give the impression that I was nuts, and walked right through them. Some stepped aside to open a passage.

Later I loved hanging out at the student-owned bar on Fourth Avenue—I think it was called Merlin’s—and listening to a Tom-Waits-like character with a patch on one eye—Hans Olsen—who often played there. I also spent time at a folk-music coffee house called The Cup, where Big Jim Griffith played banjo and sometimes a girl named Cantrell (with whom I was desperately, secretly in love) sang songs that made sadness feel good. Once a group of us from The Cup were going somewhere together and I found myself on the back of a pickup with Cantrell. I tried really hard (without success) to find the courage to talk to her.

That summer I took a poetry workshop and then enrolled fulltime at the University of Arizona. Those were great years—good friends, a girlfriend who became my wife, and lots of growth and adventure. Buzz and Kris Selby were my closest friends—probably the closest I’ve ever had—and we did all kinds of dreaming and fun things together. Most memorable were our trips to Mexico. Buzz was a medical student and whenever he finished with the overwhelming obligations imposed on him we’d drive at night (something you’d never do now) across the border at Nogales or Lukeville and through Sonora to camp at a deserted beach near Desemboque. Those experiences were magical for a kid who had just escaped from New York.

I spent a lot of time at the university’s poetry center and its events and—unlike any students I’ve ever had—my classmates and I were really into our studies and looked forward to the monthly readings. The rest of the courses were stuff you had to take, for better or worse, but the workshops were your passion. One of my professors, the poet Peter Wild, became a lifelong friend and—before email—we wrote each other reams of letters. My hero in those years was the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, and that interest was early inspiration for my later studies of Latin American cultures. In those days you could take a dilapidated train from Nogales to Mexico City for \$21—about a three-day journey—and I did that twice. Once I went as far as Honduras. On one such trip, somewhere in Chiapas, I think, or maybe Veracruz, the train screeched to a stop so abruptly that everything went flying, including the passengers, because the seats pulled out of the floor. I remember lying beside a moaning woman, with the metal rod of an upside-down bench seat against my chest, thinking, “What the hell am I doing here?” especially because no one knew where I was. I also had wild experiences with my girlfriend and then wife, Laura Hobson, bumming around Yucatan and Guatemala and, later, Peru. One night

in Lambayeque, in northern Peru, I woke to a weird sound, looked down, and saw a rat eating a roach beside the bed.

On one of the trips from Tucson, now somewhere in Honduras, after being alone for weeks, I saw a pretty girl on a bus. Near the end of a long ride and with my minimal Spanish I asked her if I could take her to dinner. She responded by saying that she needed to ask her brother, the two of them talked for a good ten minutes, and then she told me that her brother said it was OK but they needed to ask her father. About an hour after our arrival they came to my hotel to tell me that the father had approved the date, but with a condition: the brother had to accompany us. Near the end of the evening he left us alone, but with the warning that his father and uncle would kill me if I touched the girl. She and I sat on a road curb, maybe outside her house or my hotel, in awkward silence resulting from the death threat but also from our limited language skills. Finally, and completely unexpectedly, she kissed me on the cheek and ran away. I figured that kiss didn't qualify me for execution but nevertheless was relieved to leave town the next morning.

## POETRY

During my twenties and early thirties my life was largely in poetry. I did a BA at the University of Arizona in poetry writing and an MFA at the University of Iowa in the same, published six chapbooks and about a hundred poems in journals, had two state poetry fellowships, and did several residencies at writers' colonies, including the Millay Colony in upstate New York, Fundación Valparaíso in Spain, the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming, and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos. As an undergraduate I founded a literary magazine, *Grilled Flowers* (the title is from a simile—representing the eyes of prostitutes—from André Breton) that later evolved into a small press and then into another, Logbridge-Rhodes, that published poetry and poetry in translation. I founded L-R with Laura after we moved to Durango, Colorado around 1980.

In this period—the 1980s—I edited and/or translated several books, including a series of “Profiles” that situated poetry selections in a broader context, with interviews and critical

writing. The projects I remember most fondly were profiles of Alejandra Pizarnik, Georg Trakl, James Wright, and Mark Strand. Through the magazine and presses I developed relationships—mostly by mail—with several poets who I admired. Most of this correspondence is archived at the Lilly Library at Indiana University; papers from the Pizarnik project are in Special Collections at Princeton. I met Mark Strand when I interviewed him in NYC and years later, in 1993, we coincided at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center, so I got to know him better there. At night, after great dinners, most of the fellows would hang out and drink (I developed there my taste for Averna) and on occasion someone would play the piano. Strand was negotiating a job at Johns Hopkins by phone, and sometimes we’d talk about the details of this extraordinary offer. I was barely surviving on \$32,000 a year as an assistant professor at American University, and I told Strand that I was going to commit suicide and leave a note that said, “Strand’s salary.” A year or two later I taught a course at Hopkins (that extra income paid for the kitchen cabinets during a house renovation) and saw Strand there a couple of times.

While in Arizona I was hired into the Poetry-in-the-Schools program, which was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and administered locally by each of the states. I applied for the program without much hope, because undergraduates generally weren’t admitted, but I got lucky when Rollo the Clown got sick at the last minute and the arts council was desperate for someone to replace him for a gig at a Phoenix public library. About fifty kids were happily awaiting Rollo and instead got me and poetry. The pay was \$100—that was my monthly rent—which then seemed to me like a fortune. Thereafter I traveled for one-week residencies at schools. My first gig was on the Papago (now Tohono O’odham) Reservation, in a second-grade class of children who were learning English as their second language. That was tough. Later I went to a BIA school at Keams Canyon, on the Hopi Reservation, and several other sites I don’t remember. I also did Poetry-in-the-Schools in Iowa and Colorado.

After graduating from Arizona I got a six-month job as writer-in-residence for special audiences—at prisons, juvenile detention centers, and drug and alcohol halfway houses—for the South Carolina Arts Commission, again with NEA funding. Laura and I moved there and rented an apartment. I remember my first day, at Kirtland Correctional Institution in Columbia. It was before I had a prison ID and before I knew that outsiders didn’t wear jeans, because

that's what inmates wear. After my class I walked across the yard and went back to the main entrance to leave. The guard who had let me in was no longer there. I said to another guard something like, "OK--I'm ready to go" and he told me to step back from the gate. I explained. He asked for my ID; I told him I didn't have one. It took a while, and an appearance by the warden, to get that sorted out.

The most frightening experiences were at a civil-war-era brick dungeonesque prison called Central Correctional Institution. When you entered you descended into "the tunnel" and could feel the tension, a kind of hum. Once when I arrived guards were carrying out a dead inmate on a stretcher, with some blood on the sheet. The inmate council was running a campaign and some inmates wore buttons with the slogan, "Why do we kill killers, to show others that killing is wrong?" When I arrived for my first class no one was there. We tried then announcing the poetry workshop through the inmate council rather than the prison administration, and the next week the room was full. A bunch of huge guys with stockings on their heads.

Through my students I learned that within this maximum-security prison there was a place called the maximum security center, which was for psycho hatchet-murderer serial killer types, together with captured escapees. I had the idea that this center was where I'd find the real poets, and I asked my boss—a great guy named Dan Kelsey, who I ran into quite by accident in NYC about ten years later—if we could try to get a workshop there.

We met with the center's warden, a woman, who I think was amused by my naivete or audacity. She approved the workshop and called in a tall, barrel-chested guy in a white shirt: the chief of security. The chief imposed restrictions. Unlike my other workshops, which were done in classrooms with open access to the inmates, in the maximum security center I would be allowed only four students, who would be handcuffed in a cell with me on the other side of the bars, at a distance, and there would be a guard posted on me for the duration of the class. The chief made it clear that if I got taken hostage to extort escape I was on my own; no inmates leave. He then put the handcuffs on himself to show me the ways that the inmates could take me hostage even under the circumstances of these security precautions. With the handcuffs around my neck he explained that one inmate would grab my arm and pull me up against the



bars, and then another would immobilize me using the handcuff chain for a strangle hold. After these demonstrations the chief said, “Come on, I’ll show you the block,” and Dan replied, “I’ll wait here.”

The facility had three tiers of cells with iron bars. When I entered for my classes a guard above me on a catwalk would ask my name, but eventually he gave up and called me G-alphabet because my name had an unpronounceable excess of letters. He then would lower a hook on a string, on which I put my keys (no metal goes in, and there was no metal detector) for storage until my exit. One cell—called the barber shop because inmates went there for haircuts—was empty and that’s where the inmates were taken for class.

One of my students had killed eight people, including the prison printshop manager who was trying to help him get a retrial. During one class meeting, maybe the first, he asked me for a pencil. I hesitated because I wasn’t supposed to cross the line on the floor, and because I didn’t want handcuffs around my neck, but at the same time thought that it’s impossible to teach without rapport and my refusal would be received as a rejection. I also didn’t want to show any fear. I reached out my hand with the pencil, ready to pull back with everything I had if things got weird. They didn’t. I remember I was reading “The Bear” by Galway Kinnell when a strange disturbance began distracting me. Two men in the cell beside the barbershop were having intercourse, and the guard posted on me (he often wasn’t there) had wandered over for a closer look. Out of my left ear, without stopping the reading, I heard a debate along the lines of “Leave us alone” and “No, I want to watch.”

The workshop in the maximum security center didn’t come to much, in part because the circumstances were so bizarre and in part because the inmates were always “drunk,” as they called it, meaning they ate handfuls of unidentified pills that got smuggled in. I had great students, though, at Kirtland, at Manning Correctional Institution, and at the Lower Savannah Pre-Release Center.

Near the end of that six months we published a book, *A Season in the Hour*, of poems from the inmate workshops. I managed to get three or four of the inmates out of prison for the day—those who had the appropriate security level—to do a reading on the lawn of the arts council,

which was located in a beautiful mansion in Columbia. They arrived in handcuffs with guards, but thereafter the event was normal, with a lot of press and media coverage. The next morning I drove to buy a newspaper and was so excited to see a long, illustrated article—and to show it to Laura—that I drove over a concrete parking barrier and broke the car's exhaust manifold, just in time for a drive to Iowa.

## LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

In 1984 I got a fellowship through the Rotary Club in Durango for a year of graduate study in Peru. That application was adventurous because my Spanish language skills were clearly insufficient to the studies. The fellowship required advance admission to the university, San Marcos in Lima, which by then had been more or less taken over by Sendero Luminoso. Consequently I switched to the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú—la Católica—but I could not get a response for registration from them either. Rotary agreed to let me take my chances by traveling to Lima and enrolling once there, but they wouldn't release funds until I was admitted.

Such admission would have probably been unlikely if it weren't for the help of a friend, a Cuban poet in New York who at the time edited a leading journal of Latin American literature. He put me in touch with prominent poets in Lima, who in turn put me in touch with a dean, who walked me over to the admissions office and waited while they enrolled me.

I rented a fantastic apartment on Malecón Cisneros, overlooking the ocean. It took three busses and about two hours to get to classes, which were supposed to meet twice a week. Generally they met once every two weeks—because of a strike, because the professor didn't show up, or just because—so eventually I started going less frequently, with a hit-or-miss approach. The evasion was probably also due to my terrorized state during class, because I only understood a fraction of what was going on. By the second semester an anthropologist friend who taught at San Marcos agreed to do an independent study that satisfied my fellowship requirements, so I was able to work at home.

I was friends in Lima with some young poets including one, José Cerna, whose work I had read in translation before traveling. I eventually hired him for private lessons in Spanish, after which we'd join another friend, Santiago, and have great *borracheras* either in the apartment or in bars. I'm still in touch with José; he became a professor at Carleton College. I also spent some time with Enrique Verástegui. Enrique was from Cañete and didn't have, let's say, notable social graces; in the living room of my apartment he once put out a cigarette on the carpet with his foot. During a visit at Enrique's house he took me near the window above his desk, pointed outside, and said the neighbors across the way shoot at him while he's writing. In order to get a sense of the situation, of whether we were both on planet earth, I said, "Enrique, when they shoot at you do the bullets break the window?" You already know the answer.

I also spent some time with the anthropologist Alejandro Ortiz Rescaniere and his wife, Marie-France. I think the roots of my books *The Millennial New World* and *Cultures of Devotion* are in those conversations. Marie-France introduced me to Rosi, who had been a shrink in Paris and was now back in Lima and married to a leading psychoanalyst. About a year later, after my divorce and hers, we fell in love and were together for several years. The cultural differences were compounded by a class difference—Rosi was from the wealthiest family in Peru. My mother said, "You're making the same mistake twice," referring to my reception among Laura's old-money Southern family in New Orleans and Natchez, in which a middle-class Italian with a career in poetry had a certain romantic appeal but not one sufficient for acceptance. But I don't think either relation was a mistake. Laura and I had super solidarity and evolved together into shared values during our youthful marriage. We had an amazing daughter, Jessica, now herself a mother of three, and we've remained lifelong friends. And Rosi, despite the drama, arrived at a formative period in my life and inspired intellectual growth and exploration. She broadened my parameters for self-challenge and self-fulfillment—my potential—and also my emotional range.

At some point Rosi was a student in a PhD program at Columbia, and I lived with her for a semester in a brownstone apartment on West 80-something, between Columbus and Amsterdam. I was never really into urban living and think the highlights of those months were the pork chops at La Caridad (closed now), the slices at Joe's on Carmine Street (not as good

now), the knishes at Yonah Schimmel's (overpriced now), anything from Zabar's, and easy access to smoked mozzarella. Rosi liked New York for the derivative status it conferred on her identity, the little boost of self-esteem, in a way that Albuquerque, say, could not. The urban afterglow.

She spent a semester with me there, in Albuquerque, after I began the PhD program in Latin American studies at UNM. One weekend shortly after we arrived I got a newspaper and was really excited to see an announcement for Indian dances. "Look," I said, "there's a corn dance at such-and-such a pueblo—why don't we go." I was all in—a completely new cultural experience for me—and she came along reluctantly. The next Sunday I got the paper again and said, "Look, there's another dance at such-and-such pueblo—do you want to go?" Her response: "What vegetable is it this week?" *Antipatiquísima*. But at other times she was loving and giving and inspiring.

During my time in Lima I was fascinated by the novels of Ernesto Sabato and focused my work on a long analysis mostly of *Sobre héroes y tumbas*. As my time abroad was ending I had the idea to write to Sabato to see if he would meet with me, and he wrote back agreeing to a visit. He had just finished heading CONADEP—a presidential commission investigating Argentina's dirty war and the desaparecidos—but my interest at the time was his writing. Years later, it turned out, I wrote my dissertation and first academic book on the dirty war, and I met Sabato again at a café in Buenos Aires. He put me in touch with key people critical to my research. On the earlier visit, from Lima, I flew to Buenos Aires and took a train to Sabato's house in Santos Lugares, bringing a pasta frola as a gift. We talked for hours and I returned to my hotel happy and energized. The next morning, early, I woke to the ringing phone. It was Sabato. He said something like, "Graziano, we haven't finished our business," so I got back on the train and we talked some more. On that same trip my flight made a stop in Santiago de Chile and I spent the day with the poet Raúl Zurita.

Laura and I broke up after my return from Lima and I moved to Denver to take a job as assistant director of the Colorado Endowment for the Humanities. Several years later I married Joanne, the younger woman, and divorced a second time. Joanne and I had great fun for about five

years and should have left it at that, instead of marrying and sticking it out for fourteen. I think we had our best times DJing for each other—growing together in a shared, expanding repertoire and musical aesthetic, and sometimes going to concerts. We were also really good across a table from one another—not so much the conversation as shared enjoyment of the being-there, of being together in this ambience and with this food. I really miss that.

At the humanities endowment I was responsible for programing and did a huge Latin American poetry conference in Durango and, later, “Jazz: From Roots to Fusion,” which entailed scholar panels and concerts in Denver and an exhibit that opened at the state museum and then traveled statewide. I dated a woman named Donna, who was a semi-professional horse jumper and had amazing parallel muscles down the length of her spine, a strength of posture. I met her during a jazz-bar crawl that I had organized, during the stop at El Chapultepec, where I spent a lot of time in those days.

About a year at the endowment was sufficient to realize that I needed a job where you didn’t have to show up daily at an office, so I applied and was admitted to UNM with an eye toward an academic career. I had no idea what I was doing and that I should expect support in a PhD program, so when they offered me a Title VI fellowship with no teaching or service obligation I was pleasantly—ecstatically—surprised. I used that freedom to expedite as best I could through an interdisciplinary program in Latin American studies. I’ve always been autodidactic and have found academic courses...inefficient, to use a polite word, and these were no exception, but I learned a lot from Gustavo Sainz, maybe not so much from the content as from the way he thought. On the downside, the first half of my dissertation went missing for a period of weeks (I’m referring to typescript, before computers) until it was found under Gustavo’s bed.

After finishing my coursework but before taking comps and completing my dissertation I took a job in 1988 as assistant editor of *The Gettysburg Review*. Nightmare. In an office all day reading from the slush pile until there was no slush left, then killing time. I had a temporary reprieve with a semester-long fellowship at the John Carter Brown Library in Providence, where I researched for my book on Santa Rosa de Lima. This was during Norman Fiering’s tenure as director, so the library was at its prime. I spent time with the Peruvian historian Teodoro

Hampe Martínez (who has since died young) and the French anthropologist Jean-Jacques Decoster. Jean-Jacques was a godsend, because every day around 3:00 or 4:00, when you couldn't bear reading another line but felt an obligation to diligence, he would round everyone up to go to the bar. With support from Norman, Teodoro and I later organized a conference on Rosa de Lima at the JCB.

When I returned to Gettysburg I left the *Review* and taught first in the Spanish and then in the history department at Gettysburg College. I graduated from UNM in May, 1990 and the next year began as an assistant professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies at American University in DC. The first years were really hard. My classes were taught in Spanish and I was not yet fluent enough for that task, so beforehand I would rehearse every word—about five hours of prep—to make sure I had the vocabulary and could conjugate the verbs. I was tenured in 1996 and left in 1999 to accept a job as department chair and John D. MacArthur Professor of Hispanic Studies at Connecticut College.

I suspect others have more meaningful careers, but to me academe felt vacuous and sometimes pathetic. I had no interest in the ideological polemics, the thematic fads, the politics (“so vicious because the stakes are so low”), the disciplinary tribalism, or the ridiculous “faculty leadership” enthralled with self-importance. With the exception of a few who made it matter, I found that the students generally had little intellectual curiosity or self-motivation and were interested primarily in grades without earning them. That may be a consequence of the institutions where I taught. My semester at Hopkins was a great experience—smart, conscientious, engaged students—as likewise were the few classes I taught while at Duke in 2014-2015. Over the course of my career I published a lot of books and had a lot of fellowships and taught a lot of classes and gave a lot of talks, but it never seemed to add up to anything I could describe as moving or meaningful.

In 1991, while at AU, I got a Fulbright grant to Uruguay and spent four months in Montevideo researching for a book on the writer Felisberto Hernández. On arrival, to an apartment in the Pocitos neighborhood, I took a walk to survey the scene and get a sense of where I had landed. It was already nighttime and as I was walking I saw across the street, on the wall of a lighted

gallery, a painting that I thought was terrific. I went inside to check it out and eventually the gallery owner asked where I was from and what I was doing there. I told him I was writing a book on Felisberto Hernández, he got a funny look on his face, and then he pointed to the painting and said in excitement, “That’s by his widow,” or one of them, because Felisberto had four. Her name was Amalia Nieto, and she had done the painting in 1959 in the workshop of Joaquín Torres García. I saw Amalia frequently during those months, but most of my non-writing time was spent at the house of Felisberto’s daughter, where the manuscripts were kept. Amalia later sold me the painting for \$500—it’s still on my wall today. She also gave a couple of prints to my daughter Jessica, who was nine at the time and visiting. On return to AU I organized an international conference, “Homage to Felisberto Hernández,” which included an exhibit of Amalia’s work that I mounted in cooperation with the Embassy of Uruguay. My book, titled *The Lust of Seeing*, was published in 1997.

Among many similar activities at Conn College, in 2009 I organized a huge conference called “Undocumented Hispanic Migration: On the Margins of a Dream.” This event was an outgrowth of a book I was completing at the time, *Undocumented Dominican Migration*. In the years around 2010 I made several research trips to the DR and to Puerto Rico and by the end had interviewed about a hundred migrants, smugglers, and federal personnel at the Coast Guard, Border Patrol, the United States Attorney’s Office in San Juan, and the US Embassy in Santo Domingo. The opportunity to spend a lot of time with Dominicans was, without a doubt, the most moving research experience of my career. I don’t mean to idealize—the crime is severe—but despite their hardships, or in protest, many Dominicans exude an endearing warm exuberance that in me, at least, inspired attachment and reciprocation. I’ve already told my stories in the book, so I’ll include them here only by reference.

In 2003 I combined a sabbatical with two fellowships—one from Fulbright-Hays and the other from the American Council of Learned Societies—and was able to take a two-year leave from Conn College. Joanne and I were near the end at this point, I gave up the house we had been renting from the college, and I bought a little adobe in a village called Las Tusas, about ten miles north of Las Vegas, NM, near Sapello. My neighbor was Richard Torres, in his late seventies then, and we became fast friends during winter talks—not talks really; time spent together—

around his woodstove. Richard lived in a trailer that he had bought some twenty years earlier for \$200. He had countless cats. He was originally from El Cerrito, near Villanueva, and remembered his father's wake there, with the body laid out on a pool table. Richard was a boy then and could only see the soles of his father's feet; then his aunts made him do his homework. Later, when he was in his early twenties, he was driving in a snowstorm when a Coors truck lost control, rear-ended him, and launched his truck into flight off a hill. Richard somehow survived but spent the next six years in hospitals and rehab, a lot of it in Oklahoma. Early in his hospitalization some Coors lawyers visited him and offered a few thousand dollars of compensation, which sounded to him like a fortune, so he signed a document that released Coors from further liability. He was often in pain, and sometimes I'd see him going for firewood with his walker. I used to say to Richard "I'll see you tomorrow" and he always had the same reply: "Unless one of us..." and then he pointed to the sky.

When it came time for me to sell the house and return to work it was really hard to tell Richard. I explained that I was going to Connecticut, he asked where that was, and I said I'd bring a map and show him. We sat with the map and were so situated that east was to our left and west to our right. I pointed on the map—here's California, here's New Mexico, and I'm going to drive all of this, moving my finger, until I get to Connecticut here. Richard got a pensive look on his face and said, "this map is wrong." He knew that California was west of us, because his nephew Henry once lived there, and that in the position we were sitting west was to our right, so he turned the map upside down and said, "To be correct the map has to be like this." Now the world and the map were aligned. The subjectivity of perception.

I gave Richard a lot of stuff when I moved, and he reciprocated with a small pocket knife and a silver-dollar belt buckle, both of which I still cherish. Several years later I went back to Las Tusas to see him and it was apparent that his trailer was closed up. I feared that he had died but then I saw Henry, who told me that Richard was in an assisted-living facility in Las Vegas. I visited him there—a horrible place with a bleak institutional feel. Once you got the smell you pretty much had the story. I asked Richard how he was doing and he said, "This is my home now, and you love your home."



In Las Tucas I began the research and writing that resulted in a book called *Cultures of Devotion*. The Fulbright-Hays grant required four consecutive months of research abroad, so I planned a gargantuan trip in Argentina, Peru, and Bolivia to visit folk-saint shrines and archives. Near the end Jessica met me in Cuzco and we went to an Amazon lodge for a few days.

Most of the shrines were open to whoever wanted to visit, but one, of the Niño Compadrito in Cuzco, was at a private residence with protective owners. The security was indebted in part to real or mythic threats to destroy the image. These were attributed to the Catholic church, which at times has actively prohibited devotion to Niño Compadrito (an enshrined child skeleton dressed as a saint). An anthropologist friend in Lima, Juan Ossio, had told me that a film crew went to the Niño Compadrito shrine, offered the caretakers \$1000 for access, and were denied. I was worried that I might share that same fate. I had already rented an apartment for a month.

On my second day in Cuzco I showed up at the Niño Compadrito shrine with a cheese—what were my chances with that as a gift? I was standing outside the door, nervous and rehearsing what I would say, when suddenly, just as I approached but hadn't yet knocked, the door opened and a woman and I both jumped back, mutually startled. This was Clara, wife of Juan and co-caretaker of Niño Compadrito; she was going out to shop. Clara asked me my business, I explained, and she said, "The door opened because Niño was expecting you." Then she invited me in.

In 2011 I got a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a new book, *Miraculous Images and Votive Offerings in Mexico*, which I finished during a faculty fellowship at Duke. The research for that book required a lot of travel, mostly in Mexico but also in Spain and Italy, and to several museums and archives. The project was originally conceived as a study of the narrative votive paintings on tin known as retablos, but it then expanded exponentially once I discovered the variety of votive offerings and became fascinated by the nature—the ontology—of miraculous images. This was my fourth book with Oxford University Press. The first, *The Millennial New World*, attracted the interest of an editor there, Cynthia Read, just by dumb luck. I sent proposal letters to history editors—I wasn't experienced and that was the

best I could come up with—at several leading academic presses, but no one was interested. The history editor at Oxford kindly passed the letter (this was before email) to the religion editor, who published the book in 1999 and has been my editor since. I dedicated the book to one of my heroes at the time, the filmmaker Werner Herzog. Several months later, when I was in San Francisco, he and his wife Lena invited me to dinner at their apartment. When we were talking about the book Herzog said, “It’s as much a book by a poet as by a scholar.” That comment gave me enormous hope and lift; someone got me.

## NUEVO MEXICO PROFUNDO

In 2016 I took early retirement from Conn College and moved to a small valley near Chamisal. It took two years to find the type of property I was looking for—beautiful and private, but within budget. The land is on the Río de las Trampas and borders national forest on two sides. The first four months here, during the renovation, were hellish: I was living in a construction site with little more than a mattress, a chair, and a microwave, and working hard with my limited skills to help expedite some progress. No phone, no internet. I was too deep in the back of beyond to read. At dusk I would sit on the deck and watch swallows in graceful swoops for bugs, then go inside and sometimes sit on the chair and marvel at the day’s accomplishment, maybe some new framing or plaster, with long looks as though I were appreciating art. I knew pretty much no one except the construction workers and my great neighbors.

When the house was done (“done”) I moved in all of my stuff, started working, and shortly after got a contract from Oxford for *Historic Churches of New Mexico Today*. The beginning of the research was hard, because without contacts and trust most people weren’t willing to talk with me. More than once I thought about returning the advance and bailing. But then I went to Laguna, and Father Gerry there and the governor at the time, Virgil Siow, were so kind to me that I felt like I was gaining traction. Much the same happened when I talked to Father Julio at the Santuario de Chimayó. There were still hardships—people at hours’ distance not showing up for interviews—but I was able to compensate elsewhere.

During the research it became clear to me that the situation of historic mission churches was unsustainable, because the villages were largely depopulated, because society had become more secular, because the community culture of maintaining churches had weakened, and because the parishes and archdiocese were not in a financial position to invest in churches that were rarely used. From those thoughts I began to wonder if there was something I could do, to give something back, not only to raise money for the churches but also to diversify their uses, to make them more a religious cultural asset, especially because so many New Mexicans (and visitors) have deep feelings and appreciation for these churches. In view of that I began exploring ideas that evolved into Nuevo México Profundo, an organization dedicated, in part, to the mentioned activities. It was clear to me that years would pass before Profundo would gain credibility if I announced the project without an institutional base, so I hoped to interest and involve existing cultural organizations as collaborators.

In September, 2018, Pete Warzel, his wife Denise, and I had lunch at the Trading Post in Ranchos de Taos. Pete is the director of Historic Santa Fe Foundation, which later became Profundo's closest collaborator. On the occasion of the lunch I tentatively, awkwardly suggested the Profundo idea to see what reaction it might elicit, and Pete was supportive. That support elated me initially but then frightened me: Do I really want to do this? People later said things like "you don't know what you're getting into" and "it will take over your life." While I was in that zone of indecision I went to an event at Santa Teresita, in Mora county. En route I made my mandatory stop at Teresa's Tamales and before ordering talked with Gwen, one of the mayordomas at San Rafael in La Cueva, who works at Teresa's. I asked about the church and with calm control Gwen told me about the problems—hail damage, roof leaks—and how they were taking care of them. It was probably a combination of the calm and the commitment, but whatever Gwen said made me think, "How can you not do something, when people like Gwen are so dedicated and take on the challenge despite their other (jobs, families) obligations?"

From there we—Pete, Rebecca Montoya, and myself—began contacting pastors and organizations to see if the project was feasible. We had quick success with the organizational base thanks to Rick Hendricks (then the New Mexico State Historian) and Jeff Pappas (State Historic Preservation Officer). The recruiting then stalled and seemed unpromising, but Rebecca

saved the effort by convincing Cornerstones Community Partnerships and Spanish Colonial Arts Society to join the collaboration. Jeff Papas facilitated the addition of the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance. Father Julio in Chimayó and Father Fred in Mora gave us our first parish collaborations.

Then I went for my annual physical exam: “Has anyone ever told you that you have a heart murmur?” It turned out that I needed open-heart surgery, a mitral valve replacement. I faced that fate over a period of months with a sense of helplessness and astonishment and dread, a feeling of psychological blunt force trauma, drinking wine and listening to music and crying in fear and despair. You can’t deny it, you can’t hide behind hope, you can’t move to Canada—the only way out was through.

The surgery was done in March, 2019; I had no idea if I’d come home. Laura and Jessica came out from Virginia to help me through it. During the pre-surgery meeting the surgeon said in a neutral voice, as though he were talking about the weather, “We’re going to do this to you, we’re going to that to you, and then we’re going to stop your heart so we can work on it.” I hope you never have to hear words like that. But the amazing thing, in addition to a piece of a pig’s heart somehow gorilla-glued to mine, is that after a procedure that intense I was out of the hospital in four days and back home alone with no medication, no problems, and absolutely no pain. None whatsoever. How is that even possible? Father Fred said it was because a lot of people prayed for me. I have no idea.

During my stay in the ICU two women with clipboards wanted to sentence me to in-patient rehab for two weeks, but there was no way I would come out of that sane. Jessica had asked the surgeon what the criteria were for discharge, so two days after surgery I got to work (“It’s not a checklist, Dad”) and was walking around the ICU with monitor contraptions wheeling beside me and a kind nurse making sure I didn’t fall (I was a little wobbly). On one walk I got a round of applause from the staff. At home I began a rehab program of my own, walking around the outside of my house. I wanted to be close to something to hold if necessary, because a fall would injure my healing chest. First I did three laps, then three twice a day, then six, and so on, until eventually I used pebbles—dropping one off as I passed the porch—to keep count.

With Profundo's inaugural season approaching I tried to overcome my convalescent inertia and face the techno-torture of having to do a website (I hope you never have to do a website) and post on it the first events I had organized: some church tours and two concerts, one at the Santuario and one in La Cueva. The first year it was hard to sell tickets; by the second year most sold in a day. With thanks to the Thaw Charitable Trust, Cornerstones, Rebecca, and Our Lady of Sorrows Parish in Las Vegas, we also renovated our first church, San Agustín, in a spectacular setting in the Gallinas River Valley.

Perhaps the greatest threat to Nuevo México Profundo's continuity—especially regarding restoration initiatives—is uneven cooperation on the church side. Collaboration with churches requires consent at multiple levels—mayordomo, pastor/parish, diocese or archdiocese, and sometimes pueblo—that are often in disagreement or discoordination. That impediment is reinforced by other common disruptors of human interactions generally: indifference, incompetence, misunderstanding, procrastination, unreliability, discourtesy, and intransigence, to name a few. For someone like me, a volunteer whose efforts are dependent on cooperation, such conditions generate frustration and a sentiment—disillusion—opposite to the one that Gwen inspired: If the churches aren't committed enough to collaborate effectively, then why am I?

All of the 2020 tours were cancelled due to the pandemic; we're awaiting virus conditions before booking 2021 but have prepared new tours to offer when it's safe. In the meantime, we established the Profundo Heritage Archive, a series that, in the end, will have a hundred oral biographies of New Mexicans with various interests and lifestyles. That initiative inspired these autobiographical pages. The archive project is complex—identifying participants, correspondence, preparing for each interview, a lot of travel, the interviews themselves—but I love the intimacy of two human beings working out rapport in conversation.

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