Younger Than Yesterday

Alan Bernheimer
SWAZZLE
In the summer of 1971 I felt the tidal pull of my generation (Michael Brownstein: “We’re not supposed to be in the east; we’re supposed to be in the west”) and set out to thumb my way from New York City to San Francisco. I was a year out of college, a year back home, clerking at the East Side Bookstore on St. Mark’s Place.

A job and possible career in publishing had beckoned, with an interview to be the personal assistant to Michael Korda (then editor and chief at Simon & Schuster), thanks to an introduction by a family friend. Korda let me know I’d likely spend six months editing manuscripts such as *The Settlers*, a hefty saga by Meyer Levin about pre-WWI Zionist pioneers in Palestine, and handed me the five-inch-thick typescript to take home. Every page swarmed already with penciled author edits. I can’t recall how far into it I waded, but I returned it to Korda the following week, saying I’d decided to hitchhike to California instead. He took another look at my shoulder-length hair and handed me a copy of the recently published third Don Juan book by Carlos Castaneda to take along.

But I was traveling light. Although I owned a backpack and other camping gear (the East Side Bookstore had a

Visual or auditory illusions involve just two of the senses. Hypnosis is also a well established method of producing anesthesia. (In the days before Novocain was common for drilling, my dentist uncle tried to put me under but I just didn’t trust him.) A standard test for trance is to tell the subject they won’t feel pain in, say, their hand and then sharply pinch them, or even use a pinprick. Conversely, it’s claimed that a cool spoon applied to the skin can both produce a burning sensation and raise a blister in a subject who is told that it’s red hot. No wonder the placebo effect has become part of medical orthodoxy. And in several recent studies, optimists had as much as a 50 percent lower mortality rate from cancer and heart disease than pessimists. Faith healing is just a step beyond.

And speaking of optimism, the National Crystal Co. was almost certainly the mail order business started in the 1960s by Julian Simon, later an economist and controversial “population growth optimist,” as a way to employ his out-of-work parents. His father had run a two-man washing soda business under the same name in nearby Newark that folded during World War II.
sister shop called the Survival Store), the poet Harris Schiff advised me against any encumbrance that couldn't be easily dropped when you needed to run. He didn't mean run to catch the ride that had just pulled over for you. Eyewitness error, fabricated memories of scenes, and what has remained with me is the mind's ability to create its own truth, to get my head around the idea of being simultaneously successful at all with self-hypnosis and a flop straw hat. So, in the hot August sunshine, I took up my stance near the entrance to the Holland Tunnel and waited. My recollection is that I waited a long time, but eventually someone picked me up and dropped me near the row of gas stations on the Jersey side. A lot more waiting.

Of the thirteen rides it took me to reach the West Coast, I can clearly recall only three. The worst was early on, somewhere in New Jersey or Pennsylvania. Three teenagers from Yonkers, two boys and a girl. Think of the Joaquin Phoenix and Casey Affleck characters in To Die For. It was the girl's car. Maybe a Mustang. They'd set off from Yonkers, two boys and a girl. I think of the neurologists we've already met: the neurologist who is the mind's ability to create its own truth, to see (or not see), independent of objective reality: "These aren't the droids we're looking for."

Four or five years later I did try my skill one more time on J., a Eurasian student from Wellesley visiting me at Yale for the weekend, a friend of friends. There was no spark of romance, despite our adolescent hormones and the late '60s climate—even a friendly back rub led to nothing more. J. was interested in quitting cigarettes and, sitting in a red butterfly chair one fall evening in my wainscoted Saybrook College room outfitted with fireplace, leaded glass casement windows, and enormous double bedstead with roses carved into its dark oak, she was a ready subject and successfully took the post-hypnotic suggestion that cigarettes taste like burnt rubber. And so they did, for at least a few days, since such suggestions need periodic reinforcement in order to persist. And then they didn't, for at least a few days, since such suggestions need periodic reinforcement in order to persist. My recollection is that I waited a long time, but eventually someone picked me up and dropped me near the row of gas stations on the Jersey side. A lot more waiting.

Of the thirteen rides it took me to reach the West Coast, I can dearly recall only these: The world was colorful, the Jersey side. A lot more waiting.

I don't know if I'd make a good subject myself. I had no success at all with self-hypnosis, but I do recall reading Glass cages and cages asinnen windows and enormous double bedstead with roses carved into its dark oak, the kind of room with leaded glass casement windows and enormous double bedstead with roses carved into its dark oak, the kind of room where you could lie down at night and think of nothing more. I was interested in quitting cigarettes (which I had been smoking at the time), so I used the hypnosis track and led to the fence, climbed a friend of friends. There was no spark of romance, despite our adolescent hormones and the late '60s climate—well, a friendly back rub led to nothing more. J. was interested in quitting cigarettes and, sitting in a red butterfly chair one fall evening in my wainscoted Saybrook College room outfitted with fireplace, leaded glass casement windows, and enormous double bedstead with roses carved into its dark oak, she was a ready subject and successfully took the post-hypnotic suggestion that cigarettes taste like burnt rubber. And so they did, for at least a few days, since such suggestions need periodic reinforcement in order to persist. My recollection is that I waited a long time, but eventually someone picked me up and dropped me near the row of gas stations on the Jersey side. A lot more waiting.

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Harris also gave me a happy straw hat. So, in the not
or deepen a trance. Clearly I should have picked a less strong-willed and stubborn subject for my first experiment on an adult, since success breeds confidence in the operator.

This setback and two other factors contributed to my abandoning a budding career as mesmerist. Although each successful trance induction produced a small thrill of conquest, I was becoming bored by the available effects and activities to pursue with the hypnotized subjects. Although I was reading about hypnotherapy, I was clearly too callow to attempt anything in that line, and I knew that simply removing symptoms of neuroses through hypnotic suggestion without getting at underlying causes was believed to result in new and perhaps more problematic expressions of the unresolved issues. This being the early ’60s, smoking cessation was not yet on anyone’s mind. Frankly, I was getting creeped out by the sense of exerting power over others, even though I took it on faith that subjects cannot be induced to do anything harmful or morally objectionable. But they were still doing whatever I told them to do, instructions they would not have followed without hypnosis. I decided this ability to mold another’s will through arcane technique was not a side of my personality that I wanted to encourage.

Somewhere in western Pennsylvania the next day, the engine seized up. The guys had neglected to add oil. The two young gallants hitched off on their own, leaving the girl stranded and broke by the side of the road. I gave her some cash ($10 meant something in those days) and kept going too.

My plan was to rendezvous in Iowa City with Merrill Gilfillan (who had recently retired from the Survival Store), spend a week there, and push on together. Merrill had given me the address of Darrell Gray, his Writers Workshop friend, who was willing to put us up, but the day I arrived all the poets were out of town at a conference in Michigan. I managed to break into Darrell’s apartment through a flimsy back door and sacked out on the living room couch. Hours later I woke in the dark to “Aha! A person,” uttered with much sangfroid by George Mattingly—apparently the one Iowa City poet somehow not in Michigan—who had come to feed the cat.

Merrill eventually showed up, as did Darrell, Allan Kornblum, and the other conferees. The week that followed is a blur of Midwestern summer heat, barroom afternoons, collating parties for Allan’s Toothpaste Press, the quarry swimming hole, beers at the Old Mill, late night feeding at the Skelly truck stop on the interstate—getting to meet the local heroes like artist Dave Morice, Allan’s girlfriend Cinda Wormley, Chuck Miller, John Sjoberg—the
ghost of recent visiting "lecturer" Ted Berrigan still very much present. Somebody said Louise Glück was in town, staying with an aunt. They could take us to meet her. Merrill and I sat awkwardly in the aunt's living room through some stilted conversation. I'm pretty sure we were sober. Maybe that was the trouble.

We headed west. The next stop was Colorado, where friends of Merrill had a rustic cabin up Boulder Canyon towards Nederland. But first, Denver, where we met their friend Tammy with her '40s Ford pickup that wouldn't start without a running push down the road. It got us to the cabin. There the food was macrobiotic. Brown rice and vegetables with occasional chapatis for a treat. No electricity. A slew of mountain dogs and cats: Rosy, Mingus, Sebastian, Bobo, Calico, Tee, and Eff. There was also a sweat lodge of old tarps on a frame, hot rocks, rosemary switches, and a run naked down the hill, across the road, into the freezing creek, startling more than one passing driver. It was 1971 and they were more than one passing driver. It was 1971 and they were

Peter's younger brother was similarly suggestible, and I had not suggested amnesia.

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nothing from the session which is not unusual, although

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Surprising, too, since my line of patter as a hypnotist was good enough to put half a dozen subjects under. And patter, along with confidence, is all there is in the hypnotist’s bag of tricks.

As a young man, my father had hypnotized a few summer campers when he was counselor, and so I had close-hand evidence that it could be done, as well as a tendency to follow in his footsteps. I mailed away for and received the “Hypnosis Handbook” from the National Crystal Company in Millburn, New Jersey, whose order form for additional publications on judo, tattooed women, helpful hints for horseplayers, handwriting analysis, yogism, and chastity girdles accompanied the sixteen-page pamphlet.

Peter R., my New York City apartment building upstairs neighbor and boyhood friend, was my first subject. This would be freshman year, high school. One evening, I sat him down in a reclining aqua blue Danish modern armchair with a matching footstool whose top tilted up to complete a comfortable lazy S. A reading lamp on a scissor mount behind his head shone on the pencil tip eraser that I held about a foot from his face, a little above the eye line. The rest of the room was in shadow, including me. I started the standard patter about concentration, relaxation, and drowsiness and soon his eyelids began to flutter. He went under during the sleep count, and the

The dog and cat names are the first journal entry I see. Then this: “What is better as I get west / is dope & record collections.”

After a week we were on the road again. Somewhere in the high country we got a ride with two guys in an Econoline van, and rocked and rolled on its floor all the way to the eastern entrance of Yosemite National Park early one morning. We hitched our way down to the Valley, which turned out to be the toughest stop on the trip. A whole day of thumbing got us nowhere with the parade of families going home, and we crashed in the woods that night.
We finally made it out of the park. When we neared the Bay Area, Merrill recalls, a car stopped for us and as we lumbered toward it they took off laughing in a cloud of gravel. The second-to-last ride dropped us in Berkeley. There, at the University Ave. entrance to I-80, we were picked up by a chatty young woman with long hair in a BMW and the unlikely name of Circe Shapiro. She was vaguely connected to the San Francisco rock music and drug scene. She seemed to enjoy talking to us. Somehow, and this makes no geographic sense, we ended up in Pacific Heights, tumbling down the steep blocks at high speed. Haltingly, she said, "Bullitt!" I was driving shotgun. At one intersection I notice a vehicle approaching on my side, with just enough time to say "Uh oh" before it hit us. While I had no ready access to a good script or director, however, I had no ready access to a good script or director. As a former school dramatics, especially in comedic roles, I was having fun. In my capacity in high school, I was writing, directing, and performing in my own productions, and misdirection that cloaks sleight in illusion and deception artful to art—a surprising deficiency in light of the success I was having with high school productions. However, I was the magician's patter—the weave of personality, narrative, momentum, and misdirection that elevates artifice to art. In magic, however, I had no ready access to a good script or director.
CREATURES FROM OUTER SPACE
(STEPPING FROM FLYING SAUCER)

avoid rapid forceful movements
use no shrill sounds
breathe quietly
avoid giving a direct menacing gaze

•

SURVIVAL ON THE MOOCH

Keep moving
Give your hosts a breather—take hotel room
Accept all offers of hospitality

•

Good car
Bad karma

•

Ants gather before putrid meat, and flies are attracted by odorous waste. Our officials are no better.
—Taisuke Mitamura, Chinese Eunuchs: The Structure of Intimate Politics

I WAS A TEENAGE HYPNOTIST
for Suzanne Stein

I always loved sending away for things by mail. Forty years before the Internet and Amazon made armchair shopping commonplace, you could easily obtain a small monkey, a teacup Chihuahua, or a ventriloquist’s swazzle through the mail-order ads in comic books. Army surplus Jeeps, needing some assembly but costing under $100, could be had in the classifieds at the back of *Popular Mechanics*. But for category breadth and kitsch, nothing compared with the Dorothy Damar catalogue, each page featuring eight or nine selections ranging from household gadgets like a serrated grapefruit spoon (set of four, $1.49) to novelties like an ant farm ($2.98) or a drawcabin called “tells time backwards” ($8.98). My taste ran to novelties and I did buy the farm—the little farmers shipped separately.

I bought but never mastered the swazzle, a half circle of leather, metal, and plastic the diameter of a quarter—marketed as the secret to throwing your voice, but really just a device to produce whistling noises and ducky speech.

In a related ambition as conjurer, I made the transition from operator of store-bought practical jokes (the dribble glass, the bottomless spoon), gaffs, gimmicks, and
avid commerce in dumb shit
is filling up our streets
taking our sheep
the great ideas from angel to love
in little pot-bellied
cadences
the smart ones are maneuvering for beauty
some investigate the extraordinary machinery
that is out of this world
the great ideas from angel to love
in little pot-bellied
cadences

At intersecting tivers

On their slippery elbows
Passing slowely going backwards
Everyone waves distantly

THE RATING OF THE TRAMPS BY "A. NO. 1"

Mush faker
Umbrella mender who learned
for $7.61.

THE FAMOUS TRAMP WHO CLAIMS TO HAVE TRAVELED 500,000 MILES

The famous tramp who claims to have traveled 500,000

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THE RATING OF THE TRAMPS BY "A. NO. 1"

Mush faker
Umbrella mender who learned
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arrests Gompers. The young man is tortured and becomes sexually disabled. Linda is forced to enter the White House. Refusing to submit to the President, she meets secretly with Gompers, who has contrived to gain access to the White House by becoming a eunuch. The two lovers are discovered and arrested. Gompers is sentenced to death. To save her fiancé’s life, Linda consents to submit to the President. Moved by the young couple’s love, the Chief of Staff tries to help the two escape. Both he and Gompers are killed in the attempt. With hope dead, Linda manages to avenge the deaths by killing the President in his bed.

—Nels Anderson, The Hobo

Wangy Begging by selling shoestrings
Timbers Begging by selling lead pencils
Straight crip Cripple
Phony crip “
Pokey stiff Handouts solely
Gink or gandy stiff Labored a day or two
White line stiff Confirmed alcohol user
Bundle stiff
Blanket stiff
Stew bum, ding bat, fuzzy tail, grease tail, jungle buzzard = dregs of vagrantdom
Yegg Roving desperado
Hay bag Female stew bum
Punk Boy discarded by Jocker
Gonsil Boy not yet adopted by Jocker

I’ll sleep like the Rock of Gibraltar tonight, and wake up in Spain.

Changing reality was
His job—but love made
Him an outlaw in time
Sherlock Holmes after all is mostly an attitude and a few dozen lines of unforgettable dialogue…

When in doubt have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand.

Common sense is the guy who tells you you ought to have had your brakes relined last week before you smashed a front end this week. Common sense is the Monday morning quarterback who could have won the ball game if he had been on the team. But he never is. He's high up in the stands with a flask on his hip. Common sense is the little man in a gray suit who never makes a mistake in addition. But it's always somebody else's money he's adding up.

—Raymond Chandler

In the dappling east appeared unwelcome dawn. Dapples the drowsie east with spots of grey.

The gentle day… Dapples the drowsie east with spots of grey.

—Wordsworth

Winter is here. The fly can't fly. He is just walking on the floor.

It [mourning] shoes it [life] with the cothurnus.

—Huizinga

Tantalus means the impossibility of drinking the waters of thought which are always gleaming and waving within sight of the soul.

—Emerson, "History"

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—Emerson, "History"

When in doubt have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand.

My feet where I put me—I go to watch on the floor. He is just walking. He can't fly. Where is here

Winter is here.

Washington—huizinga

These money he's adding up. He's high up in the stands with a flask on his hip. Common sense is the little man in a gray suit who never makes a mistake in addition. But it's always somebody else's money he's adding up.

Monday morning quarterback who could have won the ball game if he had been on the team. But he never is. When in doubt have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand.

Sherlock Holmes after all is mostly an attitude and a few dozen lines of unforgettable dialogue…

Ambitious for power, a government official orders his daughter Linda to become the President's concubine. Having secretly become engaged to a young man named Samuel Gompers, the girl refuses. Enraged, her father
nail. With soft and inferior metal all the energy is not transferred to the nail, hence the drive per blow is less.

•

My life has been a series of emergencies.
   —Lana Turner

•

My true friends will slop gin on my fresh grave.
   —John Godfrey

•

Young Men for some time have an idea that such a thing as happiness is to be had and therefore are extremely impatient under any unpleasant restraining—in time however, of such stuff is the world about them, they know better and instead of striving from Uneasiness greet it as an habitual sensation, a pannier which is to weigh upon them through life.
   —Keats to John Taylor, April 27, 1818

•

After all, art is only consummate artfulness.
   —Jack London, *The Road*
Henry Miller says whenever he's frightened he always laughs. What I need now is a desk and a typewriter and $750 to see me through till spring.

STAYING HUMAN

• Be careful
  
  • Strive to be human

“Keep off the grass!” That's the motto by which people live. —Henry Miller

HAMMERS HARD AS NAILS

Women, stars, constellations, marine animals—name-sakes for sailboats.

Futurists students look ahead with such tools as “Delphic probes.”

There are cities and between them there are airplanes and red routes through clouds of crew cut martinis.

Action people use yellow pages.

The force that drives the nail is due to the inertia of the hammer, and this depends upon the suddenness with which its motion is brought to rest on the nail. With hardened steel there is practically no give and all the energy possessed by the hammer is transferred to the
doing bird calls and whistling tunes. This bookkeeping work is psychotic, in its insistence that a vital, adventurous human mind constrict itself to perform an infinitesimal process in a vacuum of emotion. The result is stress, in a self-reinforcing spiral, that begets hatred of self and others, of course, alienation and societal disquiet. The most florid men I’ve ever seen work at nearby desks, their purple faces pulsing out the anguish they live.

•

SECRETS OF FLOWERS

If an apple is cut in half on Christmas Eve, and the left half is placed in the bosom and right half by the door, the Desired person will be found near the right half at midnight.

Cure for headache: snuff made from moss growing on a skull in a churchyard

•

There have been so many cafés in our lives.

—Marcel Duchamp

One might say that the public history of modern art is the story of conventional people not knowing what they are dealing with.

—Robert Motherwell, The Dada Painters and Poets

•

A monstrous aberration makes people believe that language was born to facilitate their mutual relations.

—André Breton

•

I write to kill time.

—Knut Hamsun

•

Tonight’s menu was beer, roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, salad with marinated mushrooms, gravy, rolls, and wine… The food was good. We saw The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara. Everyone was a little flighty, as at the time of great social disturbances, e.g., the assassination of a president. We all hear squealing tires. This could be misinterpreted as the signal to be serious… Also a time of fluorescent ambition. (Wonders: What about my handwriting? Is it too late to change?)… There is the hum of a car motor and drowned voices standing around. Finally the door slamming and it drives away.
The discovery of phionics—a branch of knowledge so rare the phenomena it descends from are totally metaphoric.

Poems are about things that can't be remembered otherwise. This is why you have your foot in your mouth.

When I leave town all my friends go back on the sauce—

—Ben Fagan (Philip Whalen), in *Big Sur*

Stage effect, from a dream. Against a dark green curtain figures in head-to-toe costumes of dark green with quarter-sized polka dots cavort in bright light. The light shifts to dark green, the figures disappear to leave an array of barely discernible polka dots.

A bald old gent named Simon tonight on TV lit twelve cigars and placed them with shaking hands one by one.

When I leave town all my friends go back on the sauce.

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From Dickens’s point of view “good” society is simply a collection of village idiots.
   —George Orwell

•

Cigarettes, gloves keep us apart.
   —*The Grand Illusion*

•

The three graces:
   Aglaia – Brilliance
   Euphrosyne – Joy
   Thalia – Bloom

•

Men are the technical morons of the tribe, women keep some proportion, remain sound even in debauchery, relate the parts to a whole, act, that is with the body, the related parts, together, not a part of it, as to be sure, they must to survive.
   —William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography*

•

**IN A NUTSHELL**

a wooden floor
white walls
a chair
mattress
bedding
2 pr. shoes
2 shoulder bags
1 poncho
3 shirts
2 T-shirts
5 utrou
12 socks
1 sport coat
4 pens & pencils
ink
glue
envelopes
letters

•

Baltimore is famous for the delicate sensibilities and conscientiousness of its inhabitants.
   —Gertrude Stein
Hypnosis traces the main nerve lines down the back and along the tail. We respond linearly in respect to the ancestral path of our tail undulations.
You choose among the many meanings of a word when you use it. If the context receives all its meanings the word has a certain high rate of resonance. Stresses, friction, between some of its meanings and those its context literally permits produce overtones in the space of the poem.

O river
Play me that river song again
Wash me with your buckets
Hanging from the green ears of your banks
—Michael Brownstein