

PETER STRAUB: A MAGELLAN OF THE INTERIOR

By John C. Tibbetts

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Peter Straub is one of America's most successful and esteemed contemporary writers of imaginative fiction. He was born in 1943 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. After receiving his BA at the University of Wisconsin and his MA at Columbia University, he taught English at a boys' school in Milwaukee in 1966-68. ("It was my only real job," he says.) During subsequent travels in Dublin and London, he wrote a volume of poetry, *Open Air* (1973), and his first novels, *Marriages* (1973), *i* (1975), and *If You Could See Me Now* (1977). In his "breakthrough" novel, *Ghost Story* (1979), he took the elements of fantasy and horror that had been present in his earlier work and developed them into the full-throated gothic expression that has marked all of his subsequent writing. *Shadowland* (1982), *Floating Drago* (1982), *The Talisman* (1984)—co-written with Stephen King, perhaps his only competitor in the American popular horror fiction market—*Koko* (1988), *Mystery* (1989), and, most recently, *Black House* (2001, a re-teaming with Stephen King), *The Lost Boy* (2003), and *In the Night Room* (2004). Straub has edited the Library of America volume of H.P. Lovecraft (2005), and he has confirmed that he and Stephen King will begin work on another collaboration late in 2010.

In most of his works the webs and complexes of a past, or repressed, evil inevitably surface to threaten our well-ordered, "normal" world. These long and intricate novels may be read on many levels—as psychological studies, scary horror thrillers, or simply as richly allusive literary entertainments. They synthesise into a unique contemporary expression the styles and subjects of many writers he claims as inspiration—the gothic stylists Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, contemporary novelists Marguerite Duras and Gabriel Marquez, and poet William Ashbery. He has won the British Fantasy Award, the August Derleth Award, the Bram Stoker Award, and the World Fantasy Award. His latest book, *Houses without Doors* (1990), is a collection of short fiction whose characters and themes are linked with his novels.

The focus of our conversation is his seminal collection of interrelated short stories, *Houses without Doors* (1991). As he speaks from his workroom, you should picture the scene around him—a crowded desk with a computer; a stack of handwritten journals (one of which bears the cryptic, scrawled title, "The Strange Fate of the Mind's Eye"); a coffee table stacked high with compact discs and the manuscript of his new novel, *The Throat*; a leather couch; and shutters drawn against the sunlight ("I never look out the window unless I have to," he says. "I want artificial light here, not sunlight.")

THE INTERVIEW

JCT: You're one of a handful of the most popular so-called "horror" writers in the world. But you're unique in the prestige your books have in a more "literary" sense. Can you have it both ways—to be, as one critic has put it, a hit at the checkout counter as well as in the English Department?

STRAUB: Sure, I've heard that complaint before and frankly, I don't see what's wrong with that! When my latest book, *Houses without Doors* came out, one critic gave it a good review while another complained that I was trying to be a "literary" horror writer. He made a word with a pretty positive top-spin sound terrible. To me, "literary" still sounds pretty noble. I sense there's something wrong in the reviewer's mind when he does that particular kind of "push-up."

JCT: *Houses without Doors* is your first collection of short stories. I guess we think of you as primarily a novelist. Did you enjoy the greater restrictions the short story format places upon you?

STRAUB: It comes close to being my favorite book. I think I've changed a bit since *Shadowland* and *Floating Dragon* and moved on to a shorter kind of book, or at least to writing with more concision. I would love to write more stories like these.

JCT: Lots of childhood pain here, lots of characters misshapen from terrible things that happened to them in their youth. I have to ask if some of this is autobiographical.

STRAUB: There is probably more about my childhood there than—well, there's a lot I wanted to repress and a lot I had to repress about my childhood. My childhood was marked by big ups and downs. In a word, it was traumatic. In my new novel, *The Throat*, which isn't out yet, I have my narrator call childhood "Vietnam before Vietnam." That child I was is still fairly present inside me. I have to keep him under control and be sort of nice to him.

JCT: Are you referring to a story like "The Juniper Tree?" [a harrowing account of a young boy whose sexual molestation by a stranger in a movie theater affects his adult development]

STRAUB: I wrote "The Juniper Tree" because I was struck by the situation of a boy being molested and having a complicated response to the man who does him tremendous damage. Reading Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* awhile ago, which was about the sexual abuse of a young girl, was another influence on that story. We never lose that child inside us, really. Unfortunately, now a psychologist on PBS, John Bradshaw, has made all this sound sort of soppy—you know his phrase, "your inner child"? But that's the whole point of *Houses without Doors*—that things that are crucial and important in our childhood may be buried. But one day they come up, they speak again. Most of the central figures in these stories have denied or forgotten some crucial and determining event that boils and smokes inside them. Like Bobby Bunting, in "The Buffalo Hunter," who never really does find out what it was that almost comes up into his mind. It scares him so much he pushes it back down. And therefore, he's imprisoned within this odd little repressed world, this childish world that he's created about himself.

JCT: But your stories seem to suggest that you've kept your lines of communication open back to your own childhood.

STRAUB: I wrote my first stories when I was a kid. And I've thought about them a lot, about how odd they were. When I was a child in the Second and Third Grades, I wanted very, very much to write. I loved the whole idea of a blank page, of pencils, of a desk. Of a sort of "sacred space" where you could go and make something up. Once in the Fourth Grade I wrote what seemed to me to be an amazing story, about a spy who tried to kill himself by jumping out a window. It was really bleak and full of desperation and a sense of self-betrayal. And my teacher was nonplused. She had no idea what to make of this tale. And it turned her against me, in a way. The only case in my whole grade school life where my teacher didn't like me. Then my next story was about Judas wandering from place to place and being stoned and driven away--

JCT: What a strange subject for a child to write about!

STRAUB: It always struck me as very odd that a child's imagination would fasten on betrayal so early. That is mysterious to me. I turn those old stories over in my mind now and then. I remember what it was like to write them. And how they felt.

JCT: Anything you could tell me about why you were always writing horror stories?

STRAUB: I always knew I could write them and that I was deeply serious about it. It seemed to me, looking around at other horror writers, that some of them were not very serious about it. And also that they were not very good. So I drew a lot from the great American writers in the field--who were simply good writers, not just good fantasy or horror writers, by the way. Henry James, especially. And Hawthorne.

JCT: You even name some of your characters in *Ghost Story* after these guys.

STRAUB: You mean the members of the Chowder Club? Sure. They had read those authors! Hawthorne was a very powerful writer. He had a deep streak of whimsy, even of perversity, of seeing behind the face, seeing what impulses lurked behind the respectable face, the hypocrisy behind conventionality, like in "Young Goodman Brown." Our literature starts with a vision of blackness and I think that has a lot to do with the fact that our country at first was mostly untameable forest. There were truly bad things out there. Now we don't want to have that. Now in America we want to believe in the surface of things. We put a lot of faith in appearance and spend a lot of money trying to look good according to some rule we have in our minds. But I think daily life is still filled with uncertainty, anxiety and fear. Nobody's life is really safe. Nobody's job is secure. Nobody's children have a guaranteed future.

JCT: I thought you were going to add that nobody's books are safe from the movies, either!

STRAUB: You must mean the movie made of my book, *Ghost Story*. Yeah, there are crucial parts of the book that they decided could be left out of the movie--but then they left everything else out, too!

JCT: So, you didn't care for the movie version?

STRAUB: I did feel almost personally wounded after I really realized what had happened to my book. I don't want to point any fingers because many, many people went into it with good feelings and with good intentions. The actors certainly did, and the screenwriter certainly did, and most of the people surrounding that project had good feelings about the book. But somebody didn't and the thing didn't work right. So that has made me a little wary about film versions of my books and I have turned down some projects because of that. I also remember the Stephen King film projects, which have almost been universally botched. I have no wish to be made ridiculous and I don't need the money.

JCT: You and Stephen King are friends, and you have collaborated on a book, *The Talisman*. It strikes me that the two of you were instrumental in getting the horror novel onto the bestseller lists back in the mid-1970s. Yet you're both quite different, in temperament as well as in your books. How did you ever get together?

STRAUB: I think Stephen King drove a wedge into the Bestseller lists and it didn't happen accidentally and it wasn't just a matter of timing that led people to buy horror books. It happened because Stephen King was a genuinely talented and immensely powerful writer. And I happened to be standing next to him at the time. We both first published this stuff in the same year, 1973. His *Salem's Lot* came out at the same time as my books, *Julia* and *If You Could See Me Now*. All of them did well in paperback. *Julia* saved my life and made me a decent amount of money so that I could support myself. I bought a house and my wife and I lived in England where everything suddenly became decently comfortable in the way that one thinks it ought to be!

I started thinking about what to write next and Steve and his wife were also in London. They didn't like it so well so they left after a couple of months. But not before we got together late one night and Steve said to me, "Why don't we collaborate on a book?" And I said, "Gee, that'd be nice, but I have this two-book contract and that'll take me about another four years." And he said, "Okay, in four years let's write a book!" In those four years everything turned upside down. We moved back to America. We had our second child. Steve's life entered the truly fast track. But we formed a really good, decent friendship because we understood each other.

JCT: I understand you both wrote *The Talisman* on word processors that were interconnected in some way.

STRAUB: We did that because he lived in Maine and I lived in Connecticut and we didn't want to have to depend on the mail and ship two-and-three-hundred page packages back and forth. So I persuaded Steve the summer before we started to buy word processors and learn to use them. He thought that was okay, so it just made it technically easier. After finishing a segment, all I had to do was punch a few buttons and push a special button on my telephone (which was hooked up to his modem) and

then all those pages would just zip through air and arrive in Steve's memory bank in about a second and a half!

JCT: I can't think of a precedent in popular fiction before this for that sort of collaboration.

STRAUB: It was a nice experience. But the nicest part was the beginning and ending of the book when we just sat together and wrote side by side. Sometimes Steve would sit down and zip along, steam through five or six pages, and I'd sit down later and everything would still be smoking. And I'd do my little riff. It went on very happily. Then we would each rewrite a little. It was dancing and making music and making love. It was intensively collaborative.

JCT: And yet. . . it's amazing, considering how different you both seem to be. You have a deliberate way of writing, while—

STRAUB: That's pretty accurate. Steve has almost instant access to his imagination. I thought he was like a guy in whose living room there's a diving board and a deep pool and all he has to do is walk off the board and he's immediately in the pool. And I have to walk outside and walk around the pool a little bit.

JCT: Or maybe it's just that you prefer to use the ladder to descend into the pool!

STRAUB (laughing): It takes me a little longer. But Steve sits down and his eyes glow and his fingers warm and he starts to rattle away. It sounds like a guy hauling chains across the deck of a boat. The extraordinary thing was the way I could move through his mind and he could move through my mind. And that's an experience writers never have. And it was very, very moving to have done that.

JCT: I take it you're not likely to find another collaborator so agreeable. . . ?

STRAUB: No, I would never collaborate with anybody else. First of all, Steve is a workhorse. I mean, he's a horse. He's strong. He can lift whole buildings with one hand. That's a valuable thing in a collaboration!

JCT: Wasn't there anything about the collaboration that was difficult?

STRAUB: Well. . . Steve hates to make changes and he wouldn't ever suggest any and he didn't want to hear about any. We ended up making plenty, but we had to make a rule that if anybody suggested something, it had to go. It had to come out. I quite happily took out everything he thought I should; and he took out everything that he really, really loved. Except one little bit.

JCT: Lets talk about the process of writing. Frequently in your stories you describe authors as working in front of a kind of "blank screen." You do this in *Houses without Doors*. What do you mean? Is this describing a writer before a word processor? Or

are you using a metaphor for the creative process? As if to say the writer is like a painter in some way?

STRAUB: It's very interesting that you made that kind of connection, because I never would have. I enjoy paintings and buy them at art galleries here in New York. You see there on the wall two works by R. B. Kitaj. But writing for me is still a longhand kind of thing. I went back to that after *The Talisman*. It seems more comfortable and more like real writing to me. No, when I write about an author looking at a kind of "screen," what I have in mind is sitting in front of a large horizontal plane, like a desk. The writer puts his hand on this big panel and wherever you touch it, something springs to life. You see trees, a road, and fairly soon a whole landscape is visible before you--complete with human beings moving through it. This image suggests itself to me because of what seems the magical nature of creation. I sit down and begin writing something without being too sure of what it is I'm really writing, or where it's going to go. It seems to take on life by itself, as if images come up on the surface of the screen by themselves.

JCT: What do you mean by "images," then?

STRAUB: Writing—at least the kind of writing I do—is all about representation. Trying to represent the real world through symbols. Through words like "leaf," "path," "cold," "skin." You try to translate the actual world on to your page the same way that Corot set up a canvas in a field and tried to paint the field. If you get it right, something really astonishing happens. There's a thrill that comes through the words or strokes of paint because of the seamlessness of the illusion. It's so good that it isn't an illusion, I think.

JCT: Is this what painters call *trompe l'oeil*, fooling the eye?

STRAUB: Not exactly. I'm thinking of a writer like Flaubert, especially in *Madame Bovary*, where the details are chosen so carefully and described so leanly and perfectly that the words disappear and you're right there on the page with them.

JCT: You say, "real world." But in your stories there are many worlds, separate realities. You can't tell if a dream is more real than reality itself. Or if a movie or book is more real than the world surrounding the reader or the viewer. Even fairy tales, like in *Shadowland*, become as real as anything else.

STRAUB: Right.

JCT: But aren't you making lots of heavy demands on your readers—to keep things straight? My head was spinning at the end of *Ghost Story*!

STRAUB: It seems to me that the sorts of demands I make have more to do with thought than endurance! Either the reader "gets it" or doesn't. If he doesn't, he doesn't miss it. If he does get it, I think it's sort of like a light bulb that goes on in his head.

JCT: Need we “get it,” as you say, to enjoy your stories?

STRAUB: Let me answer that this way. I discovered a poet named John Ashbery in 1966 when I read his book, *The Tennis Court Oath*. That book made it possible for me to write. What staggered me about it and what really did change my life was that those poems seemed to make no sense at all! Yet, they were perfect. They had a sort of power and authenticity and rightness that was inexplicable to any of the means or techniques that I had been taught. When you read my story, “Mrs. God,” in *Houses without Doors* you'll discover that my character of Isobel Standish is this kind of poet. Well, my books are like these poems—events repeat themselves like words that rhyme with each other. Rhymes are repetitions, too. In *Shadowland* I wanted every event in the first part of the book to be echoed—or rhymed—later in the latter part. And if you look through the book carefully, I think you'll find everything is repeated in that way. In “Mrs. God” that's about the only kind of organization that there is, how one event “rhymes” with another.

JCT: But I still think these central meanings can be pretty elusive. I think of the line in one of G. K. Chesterton's detective stories where Father Brown says: “Gentlemen, we have come to the end of the world. We have found the truth, and the truth makes no sense!”

STRAUB: Well, that's a sort of nightmare. To think there really is no meaning in life is to live in an empty, dead world, I think. Is the everyday a kind of blank or does it reveal a transfiguration? Is there a hidden radiance or a hidden nothing? There's no question which side of the duality I have chosen as the truth. I like the drawing by Chris Van Allsburg in his book, *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* [See the interview with Van Allsburg elsewhere in these pages]. It could have been from *The Talisman*. It shows some children pedalling a machine through a desert; and there before them is a huge palace. The caption says: “If it was anywhere, it was there.” Although I don't really think there is a theological or supernatural motif that breathes through the world, what I really believe is that the world is its own meaning. If it's just dead matter, then we're left in a sort of pointless hell, it seems to me.

There are certain meanings all through *Koko*, *Mystery*, and *Houses without Doors*—but I would hesitate to make them explicit. For example, in *Mystery* the real crime at the center of the book is never brought up to the surface of the novel. It's alluded to, it's the mainspring for everything that happens. But it's never directly described. I got a few letters asking about *Mystery*: “What's really happened here?” But there was another letter saying that by not saying that incest is the central crime, the core of the book, I acted like society in denying or repressing the revelation. To me, it was a little off the point. What I was doing was a dramatic strategy. A book that has its whole origin and its emotional energy from the crime of incest can't be said to deny incest. The same thing we talked about with the childhood of Mr. Bunting in “The Buffalo Hunter” in *Houses without Doors*. It's that business of repressed memories, events that have been rejected and buried.

JCT: It's like Schopenhauer's metaphor about the artist as an archer. While most of us might notch our arrow and aim at a target, the artist aims at a target the rest of us cannot see.

STRAUB: That's good! I sometimes think I'm aiming at a target that nobody else can see!—judging by the reviews I get sometimes! Somebody might praise or damn some book the he or she read, but one that's different from the one I wrote! Yes, every sentence should be an arrow to the secret heart of the book. I have my character in “The Juniper Tree,” an author, say that. No sentences should be wasted, no scene should be just there because it's cute or funny or ‘good looking.’ Every element in a book, even the punctuation, ought to serve some central purpose I have in mind.

JCT: Horror stories by their nature try to scare us, or unsettle us, at least. I have found myself very disturbed at times while reading your stories. The grisly murders in *Ghost Story*, for example. Or the sexual molestation scenes in “The Juniper Tree.” Do you ever feel you should pull back at times? That you might be going too far?

STRAUB: Usually when I think that, I know I'm on to something! But I admit “The Juniper Tree” spooked me so much that I didn't even look at it for two years after I wrote it. I didn't even type it up. I revised it very carefully and just put it away and didn't want to look at it. Finally, I took it off the shelf and rewrote it again by hand.

JCT: Most of us would avoid something that disturbs us so much.

STRAUB: What about the readers who buy my stories? They read them, don't they

JCT: What about new projects? What's on tap?

STRAUB: By the Fall of 1991 the paperback edition of *Houses without Doors* will be out. My new novel, *The Throat*, is linked in important ways to my earlier novels, *Koko* and *Mystery*. You don't need to have read them, but they do form a trilogy I call the “Blue Rose” trilogy. That's a reference to the “Blue Rose” murders that are mentioned in *Mystery*. Some characters will reappear from those books. The book should be out in a little more than a year. There are some filmmakers who have spoken to me about doing *Koko*, but that's all I can say about that right now.

JCT: What about Peter Straub as a person, a guy to talk with and get to know? Any mysteries—any surprises for us?

STRAUB: When people meet me, they're always amazed at how friendly I am! I'm always interested in what people have to say. And I guess I seem kind of playful.

JCT: As if we were expecting some kind of monster straight out of *Ghost Story*?

STRAUB: Right. I've been told I'm not at all what people expect. But then again, they are meeting the social person that's out there to be met. They meet the person I'm

willing for them to meet. When some writers go out, they just babble. I'm the reverse. I don't say much unless I really feel comfortable. I want to know what others are saying. I eavesdrop. I sit in bars and in cafes with my ears open, just listening to crazy things that people routinely say to one another.

Otherwise, it's hard to spend your whole life alone, and that is a demand that the job makes on you. The ultimate reward is that you're not alone at all. You make up this whole world—or you go exploring for it—and it's full of extremely interesting, entertaining folks. You listen to them talk and you watch what they do. You're exploring some inner country, being a “Magellan of the Interior,” as I say in one of my stories. You get these ideas that are full of excitement because you don't know what they mean yet, or quite know where they're going. But you go along anyway.

NOTES ON PETER STRAUB "Houses without Doors"

Curious symmetries, repetitions, echoes and reverberations throughout the six stories and seven brief pieces.

A. Some recurring images/motifs--

1. The world as a kind of fable. In "The Juniper Tree" he says: "Fables boil with underground explosions and hidden fires, and for this reason, memory rejects them, thrusts them out of its sight, and they must be repeated over and over." (73-73) Later in the story, as a writer, the narrator explains the process of writing: "Before me, half unseen, hangs a large and appallingly complicated vision I must explore and memorize, must witness again and again in order to locate its hidden center." In "Mrs. God," the narrator writes: "Nothing is known once only, nothing is known the first time. A thing must be told over and over to be really told." (329)

2. The image of "the big bloodstain moving toward the drain like a living thing" ("In the Realm of Dreams," p. 57) In "The Buffalo Hunter" Bunting several times inspects his shower: "The tub was empty--only a thick layer of blood lay on the bottom of the tub, slowly oozing down the drain." (161)

3. the sense of one world lurking underneath another. The unnamed man in "In the Realm of Dreams" cannot entirely efface images of the war afterward: "H/e knew that the street with its rising lawns and tall elms was only a picture over the face of a terrible fire." (57) In "The Juniper Tree" the narrator says, "Beneath this world is another. . . ." (89)

4. the reader getting lost in the world of words and print/ in the images of movies. The young boy in "The Juniper Tree" locks himself away from school and the rest of the house to read comic books. He populates his world with Alan Ladd and Donna Reed. Bunting in "The Buffalo Hunter" is engulfed by the words on the pages of Luke Short and Raymond Chandler novels: "What had happened to him was both deeply disturbing and powerfully, seductively pleasurable. It was as if he had traveled backward in time, gone into a different body and a different life, and there lived at a pitch of responsiveness and openness not available to him in his real, daily life. In fact, it had felt far more real than his 'real' life." (144)

When he returns, it is to a "shrunken and diminished" world. (147) In "Mrs. God" William Standish is absorbed by the obscure manuscripts of the poetess "Isobel Standish." Her experiences and sensory impressions of Esswood house seem to become his own.

5. Man as a fragmented creature, a bunch of separations. Spectators of "Bobo's Magic Taxi" in "Something about a Death, Something about a Fire" feel this kind of separateness: "We are separate, lost in our separation." At this point we remember our sins, our meagerness, our miseries." (217) In "The Juniper Tree" the Grimm fairy tale the child says he is "set apart" from the rest of his family. He dreams "I was buried beneath a juniper tree, and the cut-off pieces of my body called out to each other and wept because they were separate." (80) (He dreams that he is underground; and at the end he tells us that as a writer he lives underground.)

6. Can these separations be healed, or the pieces rejoined? Straub seems to sense that art can do it. The viewers of "Bobo's Magic Taxi" are pulled out of their misery: "His painted figure is so akin to ours, and yet so foolish, so theatrical in its grief, that

we are distracted from our own memories. We are drawn up out of u happiness by our love for this tinted waif. . . ." (217) For the boy in "The Juniper Tree" Alan Ladd and Donna Reed become his parents. In "The Buffalo Hunter" Bunting realizes how complete and chosen the world of art is. He tells a girl on a date: "Everything means something, because it was all chosen. Everything you see, touch, feel, smell, everything you notice and everything you think, is organized to take you somewhere. Do you see? Everything glows! In painting too, don't you suppose? There's some force pushing away at all the details, making them bulge, making them sing." (177)

Straub also suggests that violence can do it. In "A Short Guide to the City" he says: "In violence there is often the quality of yearning--the yearning for completion. For closure. For that which is absent and would if present bring to fulfillment. For the body without which the wing is a useless frozen ornament." (104)

7. The author. He sits before a wall of images: as someone facing a wall of images. In "The Veteran" the Vietnam veteran faces a wall of mementoes. He goes out little and says his books are his psychotherapy. In "The Juniper Tree" the narrator describes his working room the same way: "Before me, half unseen, hangs a large and appallingly complicated vision I must explore and memorize, must witness again and again in order to locate its hidden center." (90)

Ultimately, the author is compared to the dreamers, the sundered creatures, escapists, and misfits of the stories. The narrator describes himself: "To maintain this hobbled pace of a novel every four years, I must sit at my desk at least six hours every day; I must consume hundreds of boxes of typing paper, scores of yellow legal pads, forests of pencils, miles of black ribbon. It is a fierce, voracious activity. Every sentence must be tested three or four ways, made to clear fences like a horse. The purpose of every sentence is to be an arrow into the secret center of the book. . . . Lately I have had the impression that the general perception of me, to the extent that such a thing exists, is that of a hermetic painter inscribing hundreds of tiny, grotesque, fantastical details over every inch of a large canvas." (84-85)

8. The interior world. In "The Buffalo Hunter" Bunting realizes his life is taking an inward direction. His books, the baby bottles on the wall and on top of his bed: "They led him inward, and inward was where everything important lay. He felt that though his entire way of life could be seen as a demonstration of this principle, he had never really understood it before. . . . Bunting imagined himself entirely renouncing this worthless, superficial world to become a Magellan of the interior." (151-52)

9. More images--
"Like sweat or semen, anxiety was a physical substance that poured from a self-replenishing well." (226)

The departure from the everyday to the extraordinary can happen in a twinkling--

In "Something about Death, Something about a Fire," he concludes with this marvelous description as a man describes the metamorphosis of Bobo: "/W/hat I like to picture is the morning that he walked out of his house, going to work in the ordinary way, and found the Taxi waiting for him at the curb, not knowing that it was his destiny, entirely unforeseen, black and purring softly, pregnant with miracle." (219)

B. What kind of a world, half dream and half reality is Straub describing? Does it reveal any truths? Maybe. This sense of reverberation Straub compares to rhyme schemes in poetry. In "Mrs. God" Standish senses that scattered incidents are interrelated, creating a world where things are "rhymed with another in the poem it was." (331) Is this an implied sense of a truth or meaning? Rhyme here is linked with that other theme, repetition and recurrence. Standish's back story is that he insisted on his wife aborting the child conceived from an illicit affair (or was the child really Standish's?). He confronts in Esswood House a labyrinth of ghostly babies, torn fetuses, dolls' houses. . . and a hidden connection he shares with others who were claimed before him by the wicked and inbred and diseased Seneschel family. He seems at once the only character existing in the house and grounds, yet beset by dozens of others who had come and deteriorated before him.

But elsewhere he says any truth is unknowable. Standish senses a "Meaninglessness /that/ was worse than death, because the meaninglessness existed at the center of a mystery, like the whorls of a beautiful pink and ivory shell that wound deeper and deeper into the glowing interior until they came to--nothing." (341) /like Father Brown's maze without a center?/

Likewise, are people capable of achieving any meaning in their lives? Straub seems doubtful. Is it the restriction or the ambition that breaks us? In "The Juniper Tree" the boy's father sees the boy looking at his face in the mirror. He slaps the boy. "What do you think you're looking at?" he asks. The boy says, "Nothing." Dad echoes: "Nothing is right." It's a refrain in "The Buffalo Hunter": "/Bunting's/ whole problem was that he always forgot he was nothing special." (192)

INTERVIEW WITH PETER STRAUB (5 May 1991)

Side One

R. B. Kitaj a favorite artist.

He's a fairly well known guy, from Cleveland who went to Royal Academy of Art at same time as David Hockney. Lived most of adult life in England. A graphic designer and painter.

I've been buying more art since we moved to New York and I don't really think of myself as a collector. But I do go to art galleries and buy paintings.

EARLY WRITING

I wrote my first stories when I was kid. And I've thought about them a lot, about how odd they were. When I was a child in the second and third grades, I wanted very, very much to write. I loved the whole idea of a blank page. I loved the whole idea of pencils. I loved the whole idea of a desk. Of a sort of "sacred space" where you could go and make something up. And I told stories all the time. When I was in the 4th grade, we were told to write stories. And I wrote what seemed to me to be an amazing story. I was pleased by it. It was a very childish story, a free-association about a spy who was killing himself by jumping out a window. It was really bleak. Full of desperation and a sense of self-betrayal. And my teacher was nonplussed. She had no idea what to make of this tale. And it turned her against me, in a way. Maybe she never liked me in the first place. The only case in my whole grade school life where my teacher didn't like me. Most of my English teachers cherished me. They came to my mother and said, "Now I know why I'm a teacher!"

But I loved the whole experience of writing that story. After that, my next story was about Judas wandering about from place to place being stoned and reviled--

(What a strange thing to be writing about as a child!)

It always struck me as very odd that a child's imagination would fasten on betrayal immediately. That is mysterious to me. But I would bet that none of the other kids wrote stories even faintly like that.

(Was there something in your life creating those tensions?)

There was always a lot going on in my life and always a lot of tension. But there wasn't anything specifically about betrayal. Anyway, I turn those old stories over in my mind now and then. I remember what it was like to write them. I pretty much remember how they felt.

STORIES ABOUT CHILDHOOD TERRORS AND PROBLEMS

(Most of us get disconnected from our childhoods. Do these stories keep the lines open for you, all the way back?)

Pretty much. There's a lot I wanted to repress and a lot I had to repress. That child that I was is still fairly present inside me. I have to keep him under control and be sort of nice to him.

My stories are attempts to deal with events in my early life. Some of the are described in another fashion, or they're cloaked, or they're disguised. But my childhood was marked by big ups and downs. In a word, it was traumatic. That's the reason the child that I was still lives inside me and has got to be sort of "taken of." I'm sorry John Bradshaw came along and made all this sound soppy.

(Who is John Bradshaw?)

He is a psychologist who has a great vogue now. His key word is, "your inner child." Until he came along, I thought I made this stuff up. At least, I didn't want it to become a cliché. But because Bradshaw had a big series on PBS, like Joseph Campbell.

AUTHOR AS A KIND OF PAINTER

It's interesting you made that connection, because I never would have. When I write about an author looking at a kind of screen, or wall in front of him, what I have in mind is sitting in front of a large horizontal plane like a desk (except it's all gray). So it's like

the desk on which one writes. Except the writer puts his hand on this big panel and wherever you touch it, something springs to life. You see trees, a road, and fairly soon a whole landscape is visible before you--complete with human beings moving through it. This image suggests itself because of what seems the magical nature of creation. I sit down and begin writing something without being too sure of what it is I'm really writing or where it's going to go. It seems to take on life by itself, as if images came up on the surface of the screen by themselves.

(When working on a word processor, you are arranging things, aren't you?)

There is a graphic aspect to the computer screen.

(Does this mean you've taken to working on PC?)

I really prefer writing by hand and in moments of stress or trouble, I always revert to that. It seems more comfortable and more like real writing to me. Obviously, because it's the way I began.

Where it really seems to count is in the matter of details. The kinds of paintings I buy are either abstracts or on the verge of it. But in the more traditional kinds of paintings it seems to me that what is at stake is the meaning of representation itself. Writing--at least the kind of writing I do--is all about representation. Trying to represent the real world through symbols. Through words like "leaf," "path," "cold," "skin." You try to translate the actual world on to your page the same way that Camille Corot set up a canvas in a field and tried to paint the field. If you get it right, something really astonishing happens--to the painting and to the person standing in front of it. There's a thrill that comes through the words or strokes of paint because of the seamlessness of the illusion. It's so good that it isn't an illusion, I think.

(Are you referring to a "trompe l'oeil" process?)

I'm talking about Impressionist paintings in which you get the feel of the real world--not as one-to-one as "trompe l'oeil." I'm also thinking of a writer like Flaubert, especially in *MADAME BOVARY*, where the details are chosen so carefully and described with so leanly and perfectly that the words disappear that you're right there on the page with them. A sort of transforming power comes through them, so that you can see what is being described, as though you're standing before it. /compare to Bunting in "The Buffalo Hunter"/

DOES STRAUB EVER GO TOO FAR?

(I freely admit that sometimes reading your works I feel uneasy, even squeamish. Like reading about Bunting and his baby bottles.)

That didn't make me feel squeamish, that made me feel delighted. It was such a great image that I was very taken with it. I got it from a friend of mine, a sculptor named Rona Pondick, who had a show in New York called "Bed, Milk, Shoe." There are things that I've written that do make me feel threatened and squeamish. When that happens, then I know I'm on to something. "The Juniper Tree" spooked me so much that I didn't even look at it for two years after I wrote it. I didn't even type it up. I revised it very carefully and just put it away and didn't want to look at it. Finally, I took it off the shelf and rewrote it again by hand and did some more. Then I typed it up. Then Doug Winter, who had been asking me for a piece for an anthology for a long, long time--I gave him that.

(Your comment about being uncomfortable, and then going on with it--you guys really are "Magellens of the interior.")

Sometimes it does seem that you are asked to go places that nobody else has ever seen. You're not sure what's there. After all, that's what's exciting. That's why I keep coming back to my desk. Because there is the implication of a long, long journey to an unknown place.

DEMANDS UPON THE READER

(You make demands upon your readers too. Maybe they have to decide at times whether to go on or not. When have you learned to back off from that and when have you kicked it up another notch?)

I think that's allowable. I don't back off. If a thing like that occurs to me, I'll always go ahead with it. It seems to me now, though, that the sorts of demand I make have more to do with thought than endurance. For example, in MYSTERY, the real crime at the center of the book is never brought up to the surface of the novel. It's alluded to, it's the mainspring for everything that happens. But it's never directly described. So the reader either "gets it" or doesn't. If he doesn't, he doesn't miss it. If he does get it, I think it's sort of like a light bulb that goes on in his mind.

I got a few letters say, well what really happened there? I got one letter saying, I loved that you didn't explain it, because two days later it came to me. And I got a letter saying that by not saying that incest is the central crime, you act like society in denying or repressing this knowledge. To me, it was a little off the point. What I was doing was a dramatic strategy and a book that has its whole origin and its emotion energy from the crime of incest I don't think can be said to deny incest. In any case, as I wrote this woman, if I did wrong there, I'm going to redress it in the book I'm doing now. The main character of MYSTERY, Tom Passmore, is kind of a walk-on part in which he explains that his grandfather sexually abused his own daughter and thereby set in motion events that Tom in his youth had to deal with. It gets explicit eventually.

ULTIMATE GOALS IN HIS FICTION--'TARGETS'

(quoting the line about sentences and words being like arrows pointing toward a target. Is that a description of Straub?)

It's something like the ideal me. If I could write every moment with an absolute concentration, it would be like that. I do certainly work 5-6-7 hours a day most days. I do consume reams of paper, tons of pencils, gallons of ink. And I do want every sentence to be an arrow to the secret heart of the book--in the sense that no sentence should be wasted, no scene should be just there because I think it's cute or funny or good looking. Every element in a book, even the punctuation, ought to serve some central purpose I have in mind.

(quoting Schopenhauer's dictum about aiming at a target you can't see--what kind of target are you aiming at?)

(laughs) That's a good question! I sometimes think I'm aiming at a target nobody can see--judging by the reviews I get sometimes. Which do praise some book that the review read, but one that's different from what I wrote! There are one or two reviewers out there who really get it. Who some time ago put the pieces together and saw what I was trying to do. But most of them--and I'm not blaming them at all--pick up a book,

look at the cover, look at the way it's being marketed--and say, OK, this belongs in this category and then they review it as one of those.

FINDING THE MEANINGS--THROUGH REPETITION AND 'RHYME'

(repetition of events like rhymes in poems?--quote line)

In SHADOWLAND there are a lot of examples of that. In fact, I remember that when I was writing it, I wanted every event in the first "school" part of the book to be echoed later in the Vermont part. Not echoed in a one-to-one kind of way, but echoed in a grand, overblown, exaggerated fashion. And if you look through it carefully, I think you'll find everything is repeated that way. That always seemed to me to be a particularly satisfying way to organize things.

In MRS. GOD that's about the only kind of organization that there is. The progress of William Standish' unconscious to the surface of his life--from a kind of unwitting fascination and obsession with babies, he becomes a baby. Apart from that, the only real structure is the way one event "rhymes" with another.

(Is there a poet who in this sense is a model for you?)

There is a poet whose work has been a model specifically for the short novel, MRS. GOD. And that is John Ashbery, who is a very important poet. He lives in New York and is one of the founders of what has been called "The New York School." I discovered him in about 1966 or 1967 when I bought his second book, called THE TENNIS COURT OATH. That book made it possible for me to write. What staggered me about that book and what really did change my life was that those poems seemed to make no sense at all. Yet, they were perfect. They had a sort of power and authenticity and rightness that was inexplicable by any of the means or techniques that I had been taught to read. Isobel Standish is John Ashbery.

(You also have Standish talk about the mystery like the whorls of a pink, ivory shell that winds deeper and deeper into--nothing. Like the Chesterton line, "Gentlemen, we have come to the end of the world. We have discovered the truth and it makes no sense." Are you saying that perhaps no meaning is possible in this world?)

Well, that's a sort of nightmare. I do think there's a certain mean, and I would hesitate to make it explicit, but it is all through KOKO, MYSTERY, AND HOUSES WITHOUT DOORS; and in some cases is damned near explicit in those books. It is the meaning of whatever is present--to think there really is no meaning is to live in an empty, dead world, I think. I'm not saying that there is a theological motif or supernatural motif that breathes through the world, because I don't think there is. What I really believe is that the world is its own meaning. If it's just dead matter, then we're left in a sort of pointless hell, it seems to me.

(Doesn't most horror fiction thrive on that tantalizing notion that maybe even if there is a meaning, we're not going to figure out?)

That may be pretty scary, but it's also pretty reassuring, it seems to me. It means there's always something else to attain toward. I kind of like that, actually.

CRITICAL REACTIONS

(quoting Gene Lyons on GHOST STORY--having it both ways, as wanting a hit at the checkout counter and in the English Departments as well. Is this something you've heard before?)

Sure I've heard before; and frankly, I don't see what's wrong with that! When *HOUSES WITHOUT DOORS* came out in hardback, it was reviewed in the Daily Times and given a good review. And was reviewed in the Sunday Times by somebody who had long ago made up his mind about me and read the book in the light of his preconceptions. He said, "Straub is yawn-yawn the most 'literary' of the horror writers. He wants his writing to be mistaken for art. Blah-blah." He made words with a very positive top-spin sound terrible. To me, 'literary' still sounds pretty noble.

I sense there's something wrong in the reviewer's mind when he does that particular 'push-up.'

(quoting Barbara Matthews in McClean's--images are piled so high and haphazardly finding meaning is like trying to find your coat on a bed at a party.)

Is that true? I don't know. It seems to me I've always tried to take some care with my writing. And now I actually learned how to take more care with it and not to pile image upon image. As I'm talking, though, I do remember a certain extravagance to *SHADOWLAND*. Either you like that sort of thing or you don't. If she didn't like *SHADOWLAND* I bet she hated *FLOATING DRAGON*. It was even more extravagant.

MUSIC

What is the meaning of music? This topic has filled several books. When you listen to it, you know there's a meaning. If you're moved by it or thrilled by it, you know it's not random sounds distributed in a way that sounds pleasant. There's some big 'motif' lying beneath it; but it's not quite definable, is it? Mahler's music I was once described as a "pain sandwich."

ON HAWTHORNE

I probably read some Hawthorne in high school, but did not really read him with any seriousness until I was a sophomore or junior in college. I read *THE SCARLET LETTER* and *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*, which I particularly fancy. We need to read everything after high school. You read it in high school, you know what the teacher says about it, and unless you're a very rare student, it doesn't connect to you personally. Unless you're a potential assassin and the book you're reading is *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*.

(Does Hawthorne still "live" for us?)

Does Henry James live for us? Probably the same question. I feel more attuned to James than Hawthorne. In *GHOST STORY* I wanted to allude to the story, "My Kinsman, Major Molyneux," which had a great impact on me. It's the story about a young man in some kind of trouble during a time of great political turmoil. He makes his way through some kind of troubled, very dangerous landscape to a town. And the town itself seems to be going crazy. There's a hint of sexual danger present. He's trying to find his uncle because he thinks his uncle can give him a job. And when he finds his uncle it's as if he's been tarred and feathered--ridden out of town in terrible humiliation and disgrace. It's a very nightmarish, powerful story. And I think the kind of people who buy a horror anthology find the story speaks to them.

ON EDUCATION

The only job I ever had was teaching English in a boys' school in Milwaukee. I taught English to sophomores, juniors, and seniors. It was fun and it was very, very tough. I never had had an educational course and no one had ever given me a job of educational theory. So I just sort of winged it. For two years it was a lot of fun. The third year it was just tedious. I brought to the class D. H. Lawrence, and Hawthorne and Henry James and Jane Austen--and they moaned and groaned and expired publicly. A few kids "got it." A few got turned on.

I love Manhattan. It's a wonderful, exciting place to live. A very nourishing place to live with the book stores and record store, and very interesting people. But when I walk down the streets, I notice that (a. I never see anybody reading a book on the street any more (and sometimes you used to see that). But most of the people I see look as if they would never read a book. Especially the teenagers. There are some, like me, who are welded to books and would never go anywhere without one. But most of them look as though given a choice between a book and the tube--there'd be no contest. Ever. This is a real pain, a kind of anguish. Something quite valuable is in danger of being lost. I don't know what to do about--except keep writing.

(Have we gotten lazy? Can we exercise with literary weights the same way we do with barbells?)

Yeah. It doesn't really hurt to do that. It just takes a tiny bit of work. I wonder how hard it would be for fifteen year olds to read BLEAK HOUSE, say. In which the only struggle might be the slight formality of language. I think they would have to make a conscious effort, to stick with it, before it became a natural language. When you come to James you come to another order of difficulty. But the rewards of coping with that are enormous. Maybe we also should hear them read--after all, he dictated them, spoke them out loud.

HOUSES WITHOUT DOORS

It comes close to being my favorite book.

(Can you connect the story in it, "The Juniper Tree," with KOKO first?)

Well, both have the same narrator--author, let's say. Tim Underhill secretly wrote KOKO and Tim Underhill wrote "The Juniper Tree" when he was trying to "warm up" his imagination. They are both informed with childhood pain of a very specific kind. The pain of sexual abuse.

(We always talk about the horrors of Vietnam. What about just the horrors of growing up?)

Yes, exactly. In the book I'm doing now, THE THROAT, which is again narrated by Tim Underhill, there occurs the sentence about "Vietnam before Vietnam." Childhood. Of childhood. This is probably more about my childhood than about anybody else's. It seems that untroubled, blissful childhoods are so rare as to be almost impossible.

(That kind of idyllic childhood might itself be an aberration. Must we have read KOKO to understand "The Juniper Tree"?)

No, I don't think so. I wrote "The Juniper Tree" before I wrote KOKO because I was struck by this idea of a boy being molested and having a complicated response to the man who does him tremendous damage. The real spark had to do with my reading the Marguerite Duras novel, THE LOVER, which struck me as being really beautifully written. I love the sort of slack, affectless tone of that, which seemed to me to conceal

a whole range of extraordinary feelings. But that book in a sense is about sexual abuse, but the little girl being abuse seems to be the abuser because she has so much power over the Chinese man.

(These things that can happen are repressed--)

That's the whole point of HOUSES WITHOUT DOORS--that things of great influence may be buried. This is true and it cannot be disputed anymore. A short time ago a woman playing with her daughter in some part of the midwest, saw on the girl's face something that suddenly reminded her or brought back to her that she herself had seen her father sexually abuse her friend and then kill the friend. When she was a child. She went to the police. Her father was arrested, put on trial, and then convicted. That sequence of events had been buried inside her; and then one day, blessedly, they came back up. It spoke.

(In "Juniper Tree" you say fables "boil with underground explosions and hidden fires and for this reason memory rejects them, thrusts them out of sight; and they must be repeated over and over." This sense of repetition--in "Mrs. God" you say "nothing is known once only--the thing must be told over and over." Is this some kind of Freudian therapy?)

ONce you really learn about it, you can stop repeating it. That's how it reads in Freud. And it's fairly true in life. Most of the central figures in HOUSES WITHOUT DOORS have denied or forgotten some crucial and determining event that does boil and smoke inside them; and therefore, they are at its mercy.

Bobby Bunting never does find out what it was that almost comes up into his mind. It scares him so much he pushes it back down. And therefore he's imprisoned within this odd little repressed world, this childish world that he's created about himself. If you notice the repetitions that you're going through, then you see your own pattern; and if you see your own pattern, you can see what your life means, what its structure is.

(There's a particularly terrifying line there when you say about Bunting, "He always forgot he was nothing special." Wow.)

Terrible thought. That comes from his father. Bunting's father is always saying, "Look, Bobby, we know what you really are. Will you forget all this fancy stuff. You don't amount to much." Bunting is liable to say now, "Oh, my God, I almost forget I'm zilch, nothing."

"The Guide to the City"

(There's this unforgettable image of the man with the wing.)

There's a Marquez short story that went straight into my bloodstream about children who find this beat-up, tattered old angel in a packing case. And they try to kill him. They throw stones at him until he flies off. It struck me as though I should have thought of that. And I use it here and there in stories. What it alludes to or what it's about is the presence of the marvelous in a degraded world; and how people respond to it. In the world I grew up in, people would have thrown stones. No doubt about that.

"Something about Death, Something about Fire"

(quoting the last paragraph when Bobo finds the taxi. Do we all have some sort of a taxi waiting for us?)

That's a good point. Is it a curse for Bobo or the reverse? I included that story because it seemed thematically locked in to the book. I wrote it a long, long time ago. I came across it almost by accident. What pleased me about it and the reason I decided to include it in the book, was that it showed me that even way back then when I had first started to write seriously, that the same kind of duality was very much on my mind. And there was no question as to which side of that duality I had chosen as truth. That is, is there a kind of transfiguration in the everyday, or is the day blank. Is there a kind of hidden radiance or a hidden nothing?

(Opening and closing vignette)

(Doesn't that word "radiance" bring us to the opening and closing vignettes?)

Exactly.

(Has this woman who finds this man found her taxi in some sort of way?)

That's good! Nobody ever said that before. That's great.

(Your stories let us participate in the process of making sense of them.)

I guess that's true. When *HOUSES WITHOUT DOORS* came out, most reviewers separated the interludes and the stories and dismissed them. But nobody really thought about why those short pieces are there and how they connect the stories.

(In one of the vignettes a girl encounters an ageing, fading poet and ignores the wonderful power of his words. Reminded of the old professor who got turned down for a fellowship in "Mrs. God.")

That vignette is about "getting it" and "not getting it." That girl who wrote to the poet and asked if he wanted to go to dinner (because she had seen some jacket photo taken some 20 years earlier) goes along to the reading, is offered a transcendent experience, but won't take it and is glad the guy didn't write back. It goes right over her head. In the same way that in the first of those interludes doesn't quite understand the "offer" she gets from the guy--a vague intimation but no more. By the end of the book, she's ready. And it seems to me this is the choice one has to take if it ever occurs to you it's being offered.

(Bobo's Magic Taxi)

(If I or anyone else came up to you and asked, just what was going on with Bobo's taxi, how would you react? Would you say, My gosh, you missed the point; or, would you be glad we're asking you and pursuing it beyond the limits of the story?)

Well, of course, I'd be glad that anybody cared enough to ask. But there is no answer.

(It strikes me as like Van Allsburg's *MYSTERIES OF HARRIS BURDICK*)

I know, I love that whole idea. And one of those illustrations is from *THE TALISMAN*. It has exactly the feeling that Steve King and I had. It's the one with children pedalling some odd kind of machine and there in the desert is a huge palace up ahead. And the caption says: "If it was anywhere, it was there."

(Bobo is one of your earlier stories?)

I wrote that while my wife and I were living in Dublin--around 1970, I think. In that year, I wrote a whole batch of stories. None of them were published, and that one is the only one that'll ever see the light of day. It was the first short story I had published.

I figured after failing to have any of those short stories published then made me think that form wasn't for me.

(Allow me to suggest that the short story form is well suited to you. It gives your work a greater compression.)

I don't blame you. I feel the same. I think I've changed a bit since SHADOWLAND and FLOATING DRAGON and moved on to a shorter kind of book, or at least more concision. I would love to write more stories like the ones in HOUSES WITHOUT DOORS. But that is a matter over which I have no control.

I really never want to write stories when anthologists call me up with a particular mission--a haunted house book, or ghost towns in the far west, etc. I get invitations to contribute to anthologies at the rate of about two a week. And I never accept any of them. Because I know I could not write a story that way, to a preconceived theme. I can't sit down with a preassigned theme and write a story that will interest me at all. Many times story ideas occur to me, but I already know what they're about, how they begin and how they end. And I don't care. It's too much trouble to write them. Even if I did, it would "weigh" very much, it wouldn't count much. I ought to be writing novels instead. The only time I write stories is when something really unavoidable happens--some idea I cannot turn away. Something that is full of excitement because I don't know what it means; I don't quite know where it's going; and it's full of juice.

NEW PROJECTS

The only thing that will be out by late summer is the paperback of HOUSES WITHOUT DOORS. THE THROAT I hope will come out in hardback in the Fall of '92. It is the last volume in what I realize now is the "Blue Rose" trilogy, consisting of KOKO, MYSTERY, and THE THROAT. It's about those "Blue Rose" murders that Tim Underhill once wrote about in a novel called THE DIVIDED MAN /referred to in MYSTERY/. He assumed then that homicide detective was the murderer who committed suicide. As it turns out, that poor, alcoholic, embittered guy was not the murderer. The book is about what happens when in the town of Millhaven these murders begin again. Tim Underhill, who is sort of stalled on a book, is called by a Vietnam friend of his to come to Millhaven. I would hope that when people read THE THROAT that they might go back to KOKO or MYSTERY, but otherwise it's self-contained. Tom Passmore does wander in and say some crucial things that move the plot along.

There's a young group of screenwriters trying to do something with KOKO, but otherwise no tv or movies pending.

LUNATIC FRINGE IN HIS LIFE?

(In talking to Bradbury recently, I was horrified to learn of the weird readers out there who dog his steps. Anything like that in your life?)

That has really never happened to me. Most of the mail I get is thoughtful and without an ounce of threat. People write because they've enjoyed or been moved by something I wrote. And they just want me to know about it. Occasionally, I attract a "serial writer", so to speak, who just won't stop writing. I write back a time or two before I realize what's going on. And I stop, but they keep on writing. Once a month I get about ten pages. I don't know what they're about. I wonder if I'm on a list--if they

send the same letter out to others as well as me. Because there's never a job about me, it's all about them. It's strange, but it isn't scary. I occasionally irritate somebody and they send me a hostile note. So I write back and say, if you didn't like that one, don't get my next one!

GETTING AROUND IN NEW YORK

I'm not recognized very often. One really is anonymous in New York. Even famous people are anonymous in New York. I saw Rod Stewart in Park Avenue South, ambling around wearing big sunglasses, and nobody was paying the slightest attention.

STRAUB ANECDOTES

When people meet me, they're always amazed at how friendly I am. I'm always interested in what people have to say. And I seem kind of playful. I have been told very frequently that I'm not at all what people expect. Now, when people meet me, they meet the social person that's out there to be met. They meet the person I'm willing to have be met. When people know me a little more, they meet the person who writes those books.

It's hard to spend your whole life alone. And that is a demand that the job makes. The ultimate reward is that you're not alone at all. You make up this whole world and it's full of extremely interesting, entertaining folks. But you have to make them up first; make them up right and then they're real. You listen to them talk and you watch what they do. There is a big price to pay for that. When some writers get out, they just babble. I'm the reverse. I don't say much unless I really feel comfortable. I want to know what others are saying. I eavesdrop. I sit in bars and in cafes with my ears open, just listening to crazy things that people routinely say to one another.

NEW RESIDENCE

I definitely renounce Connecticut. My wife and I found that anytime we wanted to have any fun, we came into Manhattan. And that Westport, as charming as it was, was really not the place for us. We had that gorgeous house and we hated to lose it, but a gorgeous house anywhere costs a lot of money to maintain--not to mention the mortgage on it. And at the time we were spending most of our time in New York, going to Westport only on weekends and holidays.

We sold it last year. We live now in a house, a brownstone, red-brick 5-story brownstone.

(Would you tell us about your house now, what you see around you as we speak?)

The first conspicuous thing I see is a very, very crowded desk with a computer. I see my journals that I'm writing in, the front cover of which I've turned into a collage, bearing the words, "The Strange Fate of the Mind's Eye." I see John Ashbery's new book, FLOW CHART. And two other books I'm reading. The coffee table is stacked high, including the manuscript of THROAT. There's a leather couch and some lamps are burning. The shutters are drawn. I never look out the window unless I have to. I want artificial light here, not sunlight. I still have those two graphics by R. B. Kittaj. And a jumble of CDs on shelves. Stacks of books everywhere.

"My defence at any Last Judgment would be that I was trying to connect up and use all the fragments I was born with."

Letter to Forrest Reid, quoted in Peter Parker, "Name on a mirror," *TLS*, 29 April 2011, p. 3-4.

Gary K. Wolfe, "Fractal Evil," in Peter Straub, *A Special Place* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2010).

Wolfe points out that just as Raymond Chandler's books correct the classic detective story in portraying a complex and corrupt world that permits of no simple solutions that restore order to society, a similar movement has taken place in horror or supernatural fiction: "It is no longer possible to restore the world to normalcy by driving a stake through the heart of a single vampire, because there's never just one vampire anymore; a vampire isn't just a monster, but a *condition*. Much the same could be said of zombies and werewolves—and for that matter, of serial killers, torturers, and sadists. . . in some sense, they're the pure products of America, the promise of the self-made man turned horribly awry." (131)

Moreover, Straub sometimes suggests "a seed of exaltation in extremity, of what Straub, in interviews and essays. . . has termed transcendence." (135)

