

PETER STRAUB: PICTURES IN THE FIRE

By John Tibbetts

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He knew that the street with its rising lawns and tall elms was only a picture over the face of a terrible fire.

—Peter Straub, “In the Realm of Dreams”

The secret that resides in the life and work of the man who has written some of the darkest, most complex, and most disturbing tales of literary horror (he staunchly defends the genre), is that Peter Straub is a kind, generous, and sensitive man, esteemed among his peers and would-be writers alike.

Moreover, he’s *funny*. He smiles a lot.

Take that as you please. I think it might be the most authentically enigmatic thing about him.

I’ve come to interview Peter at his five-story townhouse on Manhattan’s Upper West Side on a bright sunny day in late May.

Peter Straub is a big man, over six feet, sturdily built, with a round face that irrepressibly breaks into quick bursts of laughter. The night before, he had given a public reading of a new story at a Manhattan bookstore, “The Ballad of Ballard and Sandrine” (it appears in issue 56 [2011] of the literary journal, *Conjunctions*).

THE INTERVIEW

“It’s a very strange piece of work,” Straub confides, as we settle ourselves in his parlor near a brightly sunlit window overlooking West 85th Street. “Afterward I met my great friends, Leo and Diane Dillon.” Straub suddenly pauses and leans forward confidentially: “Diane told me about something very strange. She told me that once she saw from her apartment window something that looked like a flying saucer that was moving across the sky. It was disc-shaped and enormous; and bands of light were flashing across its surface. She called Leo over. He saw the same thing.”

Straub pauses again, gauging my reaction. “Now, this is a woman who is not out of her mind! She’s very sensible, totally sane, and has great taste and possesses every decent human quality. Yet . . . she *saw this thing*? What do we make of that???”

Straub sits back in his chair.

“*The world is unknowable!*” he proclaims, with a satisfied smile.

Interspersing Straub’s remarks in the following are background notes contextualizing the topics at hand.

I remark that this reminds me that long ago a lot of us boys spent delicious nights dreaming of flying saucers outside our window and monsters hiding under the beds. Were you also like that?

Peter Straub: Not like that, exactly. As a boy I wasn’t worried about monsters or UFOs so much; but I do remember a big empty meadow beyond my house during the years seven to fourteen; and there was a dark forest ‘way at the back of it. At the center of the woods was some sort of mansion made of stone. I had many fantasies about the place and had a lot of fun playing there. I cooked up some pleasurable fears, mainly involved with playing soldiers, or cowboys and Indians, or spies, or Things from Outer Space. . . . Nowadays you can’t be afraid of such

things anymore. Take that new movie, *District 9*: The aliens aren't frightening at all, although they're grotesque enough. They're too easily confined, too buried in social commentary. No, there was always a lot going on in my life, and there was always a lot of tension. And the child I was is still fairly present inside me. I have to keep him under control and treat him well while not letting him get the upper hand.²

“We Are Separate, Lost in Our Separation”

In one Straub's earliest published fantasies, “Something about a Death, Something about a Fire,” a mysterious character named “Bobo” appears, “his painted figure so akin to ours, and yet so foolish, so theatrical in its grief.” His adventures begin when one day he leaves his house, steps to the curb, and enters a waiting taxi . . . a *Magic Taxi*. No one knew just *why* it was magic. There was “no special apparatus or mechanism enabling it to astonish, delight, and terrify” (*Houses* 215). But it waited for Bobo. It transformed him. It was his destiny.

JT: Peter, was there ever a “Magic Taxi” that waited for *you*? That transformed the course of your career?

PS: That would have been wonderful! But no, I wrote that before any such thing happened to me. That was a long time ago, while I was still living in Milwaukee. One of the first stories I wrote. At the time I hadn't written anything worth noting at all. Even the poems in those years, 1967–68, couldn't get published. “Bobo” was one of a series of sketches, and I always liked it. It had a very strange, exploratory kind of feel to it. I threw everything else away and kept it with me in later years when I went to Dublin and London. God knows how I found it later. It's about wonder and close attention and the way close attention can widen out into a sense of mystery, of unknowingness; there's a sense that glory may not always end that way. Everything has its own twin that trails along after it. Actually, I guess you could say that story was my own “Magic Taxi.” Or that it indicated the existence of a good-sized Magic Taxi somewhere within my own mind and imagination.

“We Watch So Intently, We Crowd So Close”

There is a “close attention” in Straub's prose that creates an almost hallucinatory impression. Indeed, we share it with his characters. “I like being at my own little angle,” says Lee Harwell, the narrator in *A Dark Matter*. “It's like standing on the sidewalk, looking in through someone's picture window, trying to make sense of what I see” (250). At times it's an obsessive gaze that devours the absolute materiality of the world: “Nothing on earth means anything, or can mean anything, but what it is” (240). Consider another story, “Hunger, an Introduction,” whose ghostly “Invisibles” fix their *hungry* gazes on the living. At the end, the narrator, now an “Invisible” himself, stands apart and passionately describes in minute detail “the little miracle” of a small, none-too-clean child. “We watch so intently,” he explains, “we crowd so close. . . .” (*Magic* 248).

JT: I guess if you look at anything long enough, even the most ordinary of surface details, something almost hallucinatory can result. . . *Paranormal Activity* is a recent film that plays with that, don't you think?

PS: What I like about that is you have a situation when the viewer is forced to have *patience*, to just *look*. The world is its own meaning. You try to translate the actual world onto your page in the same way that the painter Corot set up his canvas in a field. I'm thinking of a writer like Flaubert—especially in *Madame Bovary*—where the details of observation are chosen so carefully and described so perfectly that the words disappear . . . And you find yourself right there on the page with them. Or there's Matisse. In one of his diaries, when he was living on the Mediterranean, he wrote about a mystical sense of *presence* in the physical world, which he wanted to represent in paint. 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, after all, I think. That's a sacred obligation for any artist.

JT: —or for hungry ghosts!

PS: [laughs] You must *attend* to things, as one is asked to do with those Andy Warhol movies in the '60s. You experience almost a supernatural payoff.

JT: I read somewhere that you have had some sort of mystical experiences of your own?³

PS: Only in just everyday things. Is the “everyday” just a kind of blank, or does it ultimately reveal a transfiguring reality? Is there a hidden radiance or a hidden nothing? There's no question which side of the duality I have chosen as the truth. That's why I'm fond of the films of Robert Bresson, his pace, the way he speaks without shouting. I just try to write *well*. My notion of what good writing is has evolved a great deal over the years. I used to try to write “pretty,” and I think you can see some perfect examples of that in my *Ghost Story*. But those kinds of rhetorical moments don't work for me anymore. I'd rather just draw the readers into my stories with their eyes wide open.

JT: Do you see yourself as a modern-day *flâneur*, like Baudelaire or Poe?⁴

PS: Hmm. To me, a *flâneur* is a gentleman who walks around his city, keeping his eyes open, sitting in cafes watching the parade go by while making mental notes. I spend a great deal of time looking at people in a way that I hope they don't notice or think rude. I'm fascinated by what you can pick up from the way people move and the way they gesture and treat other people, what sort of dramas you can imagine.

JT: In an interview I had once with August Wilson, he said he writes his plays while sitting in coffee shops, just watching, and listening.⁵

PS: Sometimes I've done things like that, but mainly in hotel lobbies, where you're a part of a stream of people going back and forth, throwing off hints about their lives. I helplessly imagine contexts and plot, all of which I'm sure are wildly wrong. I tell you something, though, my daughter, Emma, is a writer, and she does the same thing. But she's *not* wildly wrong. She's

published a collection of short stories called *Other People We Married* (available from a small press). She's got a deal with Riverhead Press and an editor named Megan Lynch for a novel. It'll come out next year. I think it's called *Laura Lipton: Her Life in Pictures*—a book about a movie star in the golden years of Hollywood.

Emma can look at people very often and determine their entire sociology, where they're from, what their parents are like, how well off they are, etc. She's proven this to me many times in airports. I'll see some scruffy dude hanging around the airport ticket counter, and I'll say, "Emma, look at that loser; he's probably getting a ticket to Nowheresville." But she'll say, "Dad, that guy was raised in Cape Cod, is a surfer and has an enormous trust fund and a wealthy mother!" And sure enough, a well-dressed, "waspy" dame will walk over and take him by the arm. I wish I could do that sort of thing as well as she. But as long as I can invent things, I'm okay.

JT: Did you resist Emma becoming a writer the way an actor resists a child becoming an actor?

PS: Almost. But there wasn't much choice with her! In my case, I wrote my first stories while I was in the second and third grades. I always wanted very much to write. I loved the whole idea of the blank page, of pencils, of a desk. Sort of a "sacred space" where you could go and make something up—

JT: Is this the "special place" you write about in some of your more horrific stories?

PS: Hardly! [chuckles] Nothing too horrific going on, I assure you! But there were stories about a spy who tried to kill himself by jumping out a window, which was pretty bleak and full of a sense of self-betrayal. Hmm. And my teacher didn't know what to do about *that*. It turned her against me, I'm afraid. That was the only case in my whole grade school life where my teacher didn't like me. And then, my next story was about Judas wandering from place to place and being stoned and driven away. I must admit that looking back it seems odd that a child's imagination would fasten on something like betrayal so early. That is mysterious to me. Anyway, my parents, when they had opportunities, advised me very strongly against making a living as a writer. I thought it was good advice, until the time came when I had to ignore that advice!

The Great Whatsit

"Nothing is known once only, nothing is known the first time," writes Straub in "The Juniper Tree"—"A thing must be told over and over to be really told" (*Houses* 329). Thus, Straub's new novel, *A Dark Matter* tells and *retells* mysterious events that occurred in 1966 in Madison, Wisconsin. Four high school students encounter a profoundly unsettling experience at the hands of an itinerant, charismatic guru named Spencer Mallon. Something goes wrong in that dark meadow of strange rituals and secrets—but what? Decades later, the group reunites, each telling the story, over and over—but in various and contradictory versions. We realize that, as Straub writes, Mallon had "peeled back the material of [their] world at least far enough for a horde of spirits and demons to come tumbling out." Finally, what is revealed is the Great Mystery and the Final Secret—although, as we learn, "we cannot tolerate the Great Mystery and the Final Secret" (*Houses* 386).

JT: In all your work you and your characters attempt to evoke, or describe the indescribable, whether it be the horrific or the transcendent. Shades of H. P. Lovecraft! Lovecraft will expend hundreds of pages in the attempt, but usually lapse at the end into inarticulate words and ellipses on the page. Are you up to something like that in *A Dark Matter*?

PS: *A Dark Matter* came out of a tremendous struggle and uncertainty and some pain. For a time I was at “half-candle,” and I felt that I was trying to build a house out of just a few planks and windows. That’s part of the reason it’s a strange book. But I’m very pleased with that book. It’s visionary in a way I could not have expected. The central characters have all denied or forgotten something crucial and determining about the event in the Meadow. It boils and smokes inside them. They’re imprisoned inside their own repressed worlds. You can only approach truth in *A Dark Matter* in a sidelong way, from many angles. And then near the end, Lee Hayward’s wife, who is blind, says, “Shut up! And I’ll tell you exactly what happened!” And she does! Sort of. And we do tend to believe her! She’s the source of wisdom in the book.

JT: We’ve been waiting for her!

PS: Yes, she’s been lying in wait the whole time, just ticking away. The whole structure of *A Dark Matter* is intended to set up something at the bottom of the book that keeps shifting about and is essentially indeterminate. I didn’t exactly intend this. It starts off with a kind of synopsis. In doing that I disobeyed the great rule of writing—don’t *tell, describe*. So I give you lots of pages with Lee Hayward *explaining* things, with a few bits of dialogue and movement in the past thrown in. And then he’s back to summarizing it all! And you have these images that are very important, like the glass of water shining on the tabletop. It’s an image of immense mystery: you can see through it, it’s pure and nourishing, it gives life, it’s inert, yet somehow magical, laden with inexpressible yearnings and meanings. Anyway, after that, we get a short story written by the guy who described everything the first time around! And that clearly displaces everything. And then you split off into the various characters, all of whom present the same event in their own style. The event itself depends upon things I read in a book by Cornelius Agrippa.

JT: This was a real person?

PS: Yes! Henry Cornelius Agrippa was the *man*. He was a Renaissance magician and had a very turbulent life. He wrote four great books of magic, including *Magical Ceremonies* [1565]. He died too young in a monastery, watched over by a bunch of priests who thought he was a heretic, even satanic character. He’s inexplicable. He described spirits conjured up that were beautiful and dangerous. I sucked them into my book. But this also seems dubious—where did Agrippa *get* this stuff? He’s describing stuff that would alter our own understanding of the world. Even if we’re not sure what that meaning is!

“The Divine Sepulcher of Life”

From his earliest days, poetry and its mysteries and ambiguities of meaning have illuminated all of Straub’s work. He is an informed and sharp critic of the art. “One of the things that I think is

true about poetry,” he tells me, “is that you can tell, if your ear is good, if a poet is any good or not, even if you don’t understand what he is saying.” Which brings us to his fascination with the poet John Ashbery.⁶ “There’s something about the way he uses language that has *authority*,” Straub explains. “His work couldn’t have had more authority, even though he questioned the very idea of authority itself. I was dazzled, and I remain dazzled.”

JT: Did your love of Ashbery’s work ever influence your own poetry?

PS: The unfortunate thing about that was for a long time I imitated Ashbery and wrote Ashbery-ish poems. My whole generation was dominated by him. You find some Ashbery in my “Open Air” poems [1973], which were published by Irish University Press. They’re now very hard to find. My friend Tom Tessier once said that my poetry is now going into my novels. But even before my novels, I had already begun writing long prose poems, and there are no enjambments there.

But we’re talking about John Ashbery. It really is hard to pin down the actual *meaning* of his work, but he clearly means *something*. Ashbery for me and for a lot of other people is the greatest living American poet. He began publishing in the ’50s, I think. He went to Harvard, was part of a brilliant generation. His work was always unlike anybody else’s, except certain sides of Wallace Stevens. Ashbery’s poems were as much about the *act* of writing and what goes through your mind while writing as what he was actually writing about what he calls “the divine sepulcher of life.”⁷ He talks of “hands that are always writing on mirrors.” He’s writing about all the other things that occur to him while writing. It’s too beautiful to be really just about the *process* of writing.

Dark Music

Part of the allure of poetry and prose for Straub is the sheer sensuous of words. In *A Dark Matter*, the character of Lee Harwell has an epiphany when he hears the sounds of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s words read aloud. It’s as if Lee is hearing a kind of dark music. It makes a profound impact on him, as opposed to the experience of merely reading the words. Harwell says it gives him “entry to a lost realm.”

JT: When *you* speak your texts out loud, what kind of music do you think *your* listeners are hearing?

PS: One wonders! When I read out loud, I try to let the inner workings of the sentences come through loud and clear. If there are a series of tricky spins off the verb into a series of independent clauses, I do my best to read the sentences so everything is all of a piece, so the person listening isn’t confused. I want the turns and swerves and straightaways to be *felt*. Over time, I’ve gotten to be pretty good at that. I read slower now, though some sentences should be read fairly quickly because of some internal necessity.

JT: So this really is a *musical* experience?

PS: In a way, yeah. I wish it were more musical! But we do what we can with what we have. Music itself has meaning, even if you don't exactly know what it is. If you're moved by it or thrilled by it, you know it's not just random sounds distributed in a way that sounds pleasant.

JT: Your love of jazz is obvious in stories like *Pork Pie Hat*.

PS: Oh yes, *Hat* is based on Lester Young, of course.

JT: And it seems to me there are two people who write so eloquently about jazz, and that's you and Charles Beaumont.

PS: Thank you! I included Beaumont's "Black Country" in my double anthology for Library of America of American fantastic tales. It's a knockout story. Just now I watched a documentary film by Jason Brock about Beaumont.⁸ I hadn't known that when "Black Country" came out, it flattened everybody. All of that circle of his, Bill Nolan, Harlan Ellison, Ray Bradbury read it, and it knocked them off their chairs. It's hard to write about music, and jazz is no exception. You can only do it if you know enough technically, but then that wouldn't mean anything to anybody who didn't know what a B-flat note or an augmented triad sounds like. The only way to do it is through metaphor. You have to soft-pedal it and not be too aggressive about it, or the metaphors fall flat. At the end of *Mr. X*, I tried my best to describe an alto sax solo by Paul Desmond of "These Foolish Things," and it sounded like I was talking about a landscape painting of mountain ranges. That was the best I could do.

JT: I know you collect jazz recordings. Do you identify with your character of "Little Red" in "Little Red's Tango"? He keeps stacks and stacks of jazz recordings everywhere in his little house—

PS: —I used to keep my jazz records like that, all labeled and catalogued. . . . Little Red is based on a guy I know, a wonderful character named Jay Andersen who lives on the corner of West 55th and Eighth, in an amazing, warren-like apartment with huge mounds of unnameable stuff all around him. He's such an extraordinary character. Just *staying alive* for this guy is a miracle. He's never been forced out of that apartment, although he has no visible means of support. *That's* a miracle. There's something both alarming and *blessed* about him. I took the best parts of him and used those as the basis for whatever inspiration I had. I gave him the story in manuscript, and he told me he laughed and cried at the same time, which is the best possible response.

"Everything Glows!"

Gary K. Wolfe notes that Straub sometimes suggests "a seed of exaltation in extremity, of what Straub . . . has termed transcendence" (135). This is controversial, to say the least. In story after story, including "Blue Rose," "The Juniper Tree," the novella *A Special Place*, and the gleefully diabolical "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff," the experience of torture and sexual abuse is imbued with something disturbingly wondrous or transformational. "Everything glows . . . everything is organized to take you somewhere," writes Straub in "The Buffalo Hunter"; . . . There's some

force pushing away at all the details, making them bulge, making them sing” (*Houses* 177). In “A Short Guide to the City,” he observes, “Violence, it is felt though unspoken, is the physical form of sensitivity”. . . . 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” (*Houses* 104–05). And the tortures administered by Clubb and Cuff reveal nothing less than “the meaning of tragedy.” As Clubb and Cuff explain, “We do not assault. We induce, we instruct, we instill. These cannot be crimes, and those who do them cannot be criminals” (*Magic* 323).

JT: You use the words “alarming” and “blessed” interchangeably. I admit that sometimes the extremes of violence and horror in your stories—like the Harry Beever’s tortures of his little brother in “Blue Rose”—make me uneasy, squeamish.

PS: Sometimes you are asked to go to places that nobody else has ever seen. That’s exciting. That’s what keeps me coming back to my desk. Yes, of course there are things that I’ve written that make me feel squeamish. When that happens, 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. Finally, I gave it to Doug Winter for an anthology.

JT: I’m thinking now of *Lost Boy, Lost Girl*. Despite the violent tortures and brutal deaths that have been revealed, we find in the conclusion that Tim Underhill, his nephew, and Lucy have all received some kind of, well, call it a *transfiguration* At least, I felt something like that, too!

PS: I’m very glad. At one point I thought I was going to subtitle it, “The Uses of Horror.” A way of dealing with grief. Certainly I felt as though something good descended upon *me* when I was writing the ending of that, when you finally see the ghosts—or, “remains,” as I call them”—of Tim’s nephew and Lucy Cleveland (Lily Kalender) together at last. I wanted to do a book with more about her. *In the Night Room*, a kind of sequel, if you will, which offers a monocular vision of *Lost Boy, Lost Girl*, the climax has Tim and his own fictional character drive in a car to where the real Lily Kalender is living. It’s at the end of a cul-de-sac, backed up against some woods. They see through the window this blonde woman carrying a cup of tea. And you’re supposed to think, “*Oh, my God, that’s her! There she is! And what a piece of work she is!*”

JT: There’s sometimes a touching, even beautiful reality to your ghosts, or whatever they are, isn’t there? They’re not just the result of some human psychological aberration.

PS: I wrote somewhere [“Hunger, an Introduction”] that although we all have to die sooner or later, we know surprisingly little about ghosts!

JT: No kidding! But in your stories we get glimpses of them out of the corner of our eye.

PS: That’s because Tim [Underhill] *wants* to see them, and he knows he wants to see them. One of the great advantages of an imagination is that it can give you possibilities that you know aren’t possible, but nonetheless are real because they’re in your mind. [pause] It makes us emotional. And don’t forget about my friend, Diane Dillon, who is completely sane, who reported seeing

something completely inexplicable? I think the human mechanism, as profound and mysterious as it is, doesn't take in *everything*. There are sounds we cannot hear, colors we cannot see, and that argues for another kind of dimensionality that passes through or in front of us.

JT: Maybe the only way we can cope with the inexplicable is to laugh in its face. We are always surprised by your diabolical sense of humor. The sort of thing you often find in John Collier. We get flashes of that in your stories, especially in "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff." Who knew that torture could be funny?

PS: Thank you! Although I'm not a big fan of John Collier, I do admire some of his short stories and the novel, *His Monkey Wife* [1931].⁹ I began to realize I could be funny in *The Hellfire Club*, when Dick Dart started flapping his tongue. I didn't have much control over that. I just wrote what I heard him say, which was always so surprising, as scabrous and wicked as he was. He could be really funny. Here I was, asking readers, fifty percent of whom were women, to laugh at the utterances of a serial killer who rapes and murders women. That's a tough thing to ask! But I did ask. Now, these days about all we hear about are the tortures of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. But there's another side to torture, you know! Think about Clubb and Cuff. They come out of nowhere. They give you what you really want, even though you didn't know what you wanted! It's their business and it's a sick, bloody business. It's an art form for them. They understand themselves to be artists, and who's to say they're not! They certainly get to where they're going, unlike most of us. When they get their hands on you, they're going to get the results they want.¹⁰

JT: And the narrator ends up suffering the very tortures he's hired them to do to others! Yet, you imply it's a kind of a transforming experience for him! Wow!

PS: That's right. And he would never have gotten there had he not been maimed and broken. You know, John Keats said something in a letter to the effect that in the creation of a soul, things that injure us affect the way our soul is written upon, the way our soul is able to expand. This is a guy speaking on the verge of death. He knew what was in store for him. He could understand what suffering had given him, which was a depth of understanding you don't get unless you are profoundly beaten up by the world.¹¹ We are *all* maimed.

JT: This brings up something. I had wonderful parents. I had a wonderful upbringing. . . *Did I miss out on something???*

PS: Oh, you have no idea what you missed out on, John!

JT: I'm actually quite serious. I could not have asked for a better set of parents. Have I suffered a *price* for that?

PS: It's a blessing! It means you can go through life in a stable fashion. At least you know you were loved, you were supported. You were not undone, you were not orphaned. You didn't suffer physical or mental abuse. Nothing luckier could happen to *anybody*. Also, you were born white and male, which is an immense privilege. That should be questioned, and it is being questioned, but still, in the '50s and '60s there was a whole mess of things you weren't aware of

and didn't need to be aware of. Most writers have had sketchy childhoods, in which something went awry, something went amiss, or they became aware of sexual dysfunctions which had to be concealed.

JT: Or create what you call in one of your books “a special place.”

PS: Indeed. But not *that* kind of “special place!” What I mean is that you're always looking at the world through the eyes of the fictional character you're pretending to be. When I was a kid, I was a fictional character, but the fictional character was *myself*, the self my parents wanted me to be, the self I would have been perhaps had I not been injured and abused as a small boy. I didn't want to be the person who was injured and abused. It didn't fit my *idea* of myself. I always experienced myself as a person of some integrity and wholeness; and also of a certain mental or spiritual force of some kind. I didn't see myself as being victimized. It was a horrible insult; it made me angry and humiliated and ashamed. So I had to pretend it wasn't true. I wasn't in the same ballpark as my friends. We could talk about baseball cards and my new toy gun, but I realized, that's *all* we can do.

In my early teenage years, in a suburb called Brookfield in Milwaukee, I used to walk down the street and ring doorbells of houses where there was a woman alone, and I would introduce myself and hope we could just talk about things. And they would invite me in for a glass of cocoa would just talk. I would listen to them talking about *their* mothers and about their children (they never talked about their husbands!). We'd gab like a couple of old ladies, and then I'd go home. I suppose some of the women thought it was creepy that I could talk eye-to-eye to them, and they didn't want that from a twelve-year-old boy. Others knew it was totally innocent.

This was a different sort of boyhood than you see in, say, Ray Bradbury.¹² I kinda envy that. What I had was *interesting*, at least when my father wasn't blocking the sun. But when I wasn't doing that, things were *boring*. I hated the 'burbs. I wanted to go downtown where there were bigger buildings and people stayed awake at night. As soon as I could, I discovered things that demanded I investigate them on my own—things like jazz and science fiction (which I got into very heavily when I was twelve). I got out of that when I read a novel for adults, Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* [1935]. One of the great books of wounded boyhood and romantic adolescence. I thought, this book is about *me*. . . . What could be better when you're fourteen?! And then I never looked at science fiction again. My parents would say, “Put down that book! Don't you want to go outside?!” Soon, there was no use in trying to persuade me to do things I didn't want to do. I was listening to records and going to jazz clubs.

Publish and Perish

As a writer with an academic and critical background of his own—he graduated with an Honors Degree in English from the University of Wisconsin and completed an MA at Columbia—Straub revels in exploiting the cherished and enduring Gothic devices of convoluted narratives, haunted places, and the disclosures of past sins.¹³ Perhaps nobody has shared more insights into the hazards and turmoils of *writing*. Moreover, his stories are filled with references to his favorite writers. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* provides thematic material for *Mrs. God*; Hawthorne's “My Kinsman, Major Molyneux” for *Ghost Story*; Carlos Fuentes's *Aura* for *The*

General's Wife; Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" for "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff"; Lovecraft's stories, for *Mr. X*, to cite only a few of numerous examples. The character of Hootie Bly in *A Dark Matter* has absorbed all of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and can communicate only by quoting passages and dialogue from it. Another character, the infamous Dick Dart in *The Hellfire Club*, hilariously debunks the great writers of our time (about Emily Dickinson, he snorts, "Bitch makes Jane Austen look like Mickey Spillane" [216]). And in *Mrs. God*, the poet Isobel Standish—or at least her baffling poetry—is based on John Ashbery.

Many of his characters are authors and scholarly researchers who come to no good end when their work turns inward and destroys them. Yet, Straub tells me he laments what he regards as the deterioration of literacy today: "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. 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 that—except keep writing."

JT: Speaking of the world of books. . . . You come down pretty hard on academia and academics. *Mrs. God*¹⁴ really speaks to those of us who find ourselves buried in libraries and archives in pursuit of God-knows-what arcane subjects. Who knew the horrors awaiting us?

PS: Any reader of H. P. Lovecraft will tell you how dangerous that is!¹⁵ *Mrs. God* allowed me a chance to express those glimpses I had had in my youth of the academic life. I had always wanted to do something involving a big English country house. So I made up one of my own, Esswood House, and gave it a huge library modeled after the Adams Library at Kenwood House at the top of Hampstead Heath, which is open to the public, and where we used to go to a lot while we lived in England. Professor Standish's pursuit of the hopelessly elusive poet Isobel Standish is really a pursuit into something very dreadful in his recent past.

I didn't want anything in that book to be very clear at all. I wanted there to be the *possibility* of old people being cared for, of big dollhouses down in the basement where tiny, malformed, people lived, of certain mysterious burials out on the lawn. All of that was a product of my having finished four years of really concentrated work on *Koko*. I felt that something marvelous happened to me. My level had gone up. I was working better than before.

Before that, my relationship to my writing had begun awkwardly, and I hadn't written for a year. I couldn't remember how to do a bunch of things. I couldn't remember the things that I couldn't remember how to do. It was like needing to do "finger exercises" on a "keyboard" that had become too limited, you know? Like Beethoven, I needed to find a few extra octaves. Over the three years I spend writing *Koko*, everything came back to me, much more. So one thing that also happened upon finishing *Koko* was a terrible sense of grief. What I then started to do was write a book which became *Mrs. God*, about a man who was driven crazy because he thought his wife was having an affair; and when she became pregnant, he forced her have an abortion because he thought the baby was another man's. But it wasn't another man's. It was *his* baby, and he had had it killed. At the end Standish himself has become a *huge* baby, all covered in grease.

JT: So in all of this, you're saying . . . ?

PS: This is really Peter Straub saying about finishing and leaving behind *Koko*—"Where's my baby???" I want my baby back!" I wanted all that to be hidden in *Mrs. God*, because it was

hidden from Standish himself. Any chance I could get, I put in implications of the *power* of the dead baby, the power of an *angry* baby . . .

JT: Small wonder, I guess, if some readers and critics don't know what to make of your stories!

PS: Not just critics, but readers out there who send me hostile notes.

JT: Well, I'm thinking in particular of the scurrilous attacks by that rascal, Professor Putney Tyson Ridge—

PS: —Oh yes. Putney was an academic who taught at Popham College, in Ohio.¹⁶

JT: Hmm, the same college you refer to in *Mrs. God*.

PS: Poor Putney! When my daughter first read this guy, she wailed, “Dad, why is he saying these awful things about you?!” I had to tell her I *invented* Putney. Over the years, I had read a number of reviews of my work by somebody who really *hated* my work. What he wanted was me to be Stephen King 24/7. He wanted really *direct* things, language that sounded like the guy on the porch, for the action to start in the second paragraph. I was all wrong for him. I thought to myself, he's complaining that I'm not *stupid* enough! So I invented an academic character at Popham College who looked down on my work because I was writing above myself, and if I had any sense about me, I would *try* to write like a sub-par, inferior Steve King and settle for the little effects that I'm capable of, that were within my range.

JT: You even write about Putney coming to stay with you at your house!

PS: That's especially uncomfortable for my wife! She's never liked the guy at all. I used to spend weeks writing about Putney and his critiques. Finally I had enough of insulting myself, so I dispatched Putney. He had a very sad ending. At Popham College, Iowa, the chairman of the college, Bob Liddy (“Old Bob”) was involved in a certain scandal we never speak of and was forced out. His replacement had no use for Putney, so when Putney got in trouble (again), he was forced out of his digs in Bluebell Lane. He had been doing research into erotic journalism. And he had an archive in Bluebell Lane of erotic materials. While he was moving them out of his apartment, he was felled by a stroke. And he was found lying beside a huge pile of pornographic magazines—

JT: Doubtless with maybe an ecstatic light in his eyes?

PS: [laughs] Putney left behind a few graduate students who cherish the memory of his greatness and who are still pissed at me. Anyway, that was fun. I suppose Putney represented both my confidence in my writing to confront critical attacks; but at the same time, those reservations I have about myself. Putney was very hard on some things that were happening to me, and I have to admit that I wasn't happy about them, either.

Epilogue

It's late afternoon. The sun is slanting at a radical angle, throwing long shadows across the room. As I prepare to take my leave, I remember the words of the jazz musician Hat in *Pork Pie Hat*, who muses, "You start to grow up when you understand that the stuff that scares you is part of the air you breathe" (89). Indeed, as Straub insists, "I don't see any book from now on as my last, but I do know I'm in the late phases of my career. And I think I'm writing really well. But here I am, filled with infirmities, without the stamina I have been used to. My wife says, 'Remember, Peter, you're not forty anymore!' [laughs] Okay, I don't write as fast as I used to, and it takes me longer. But right now I'm trying to write a book which I hope I can finish in two years. I'm thinking of calling it *Hello, Jack!* And Stephen King and I want to do another book together. He doesn't shilly-shally around. It's obvious *he* hasn't slowed down. Although I use the good old iMac and even of late have dictated some things, I still sometimes write in long hand. In moments of stress or trouble, I always revert to that."

We're outside. Peter stands at the top of his front steps and bids me farewell.

And yes . . . *he's smiling.*