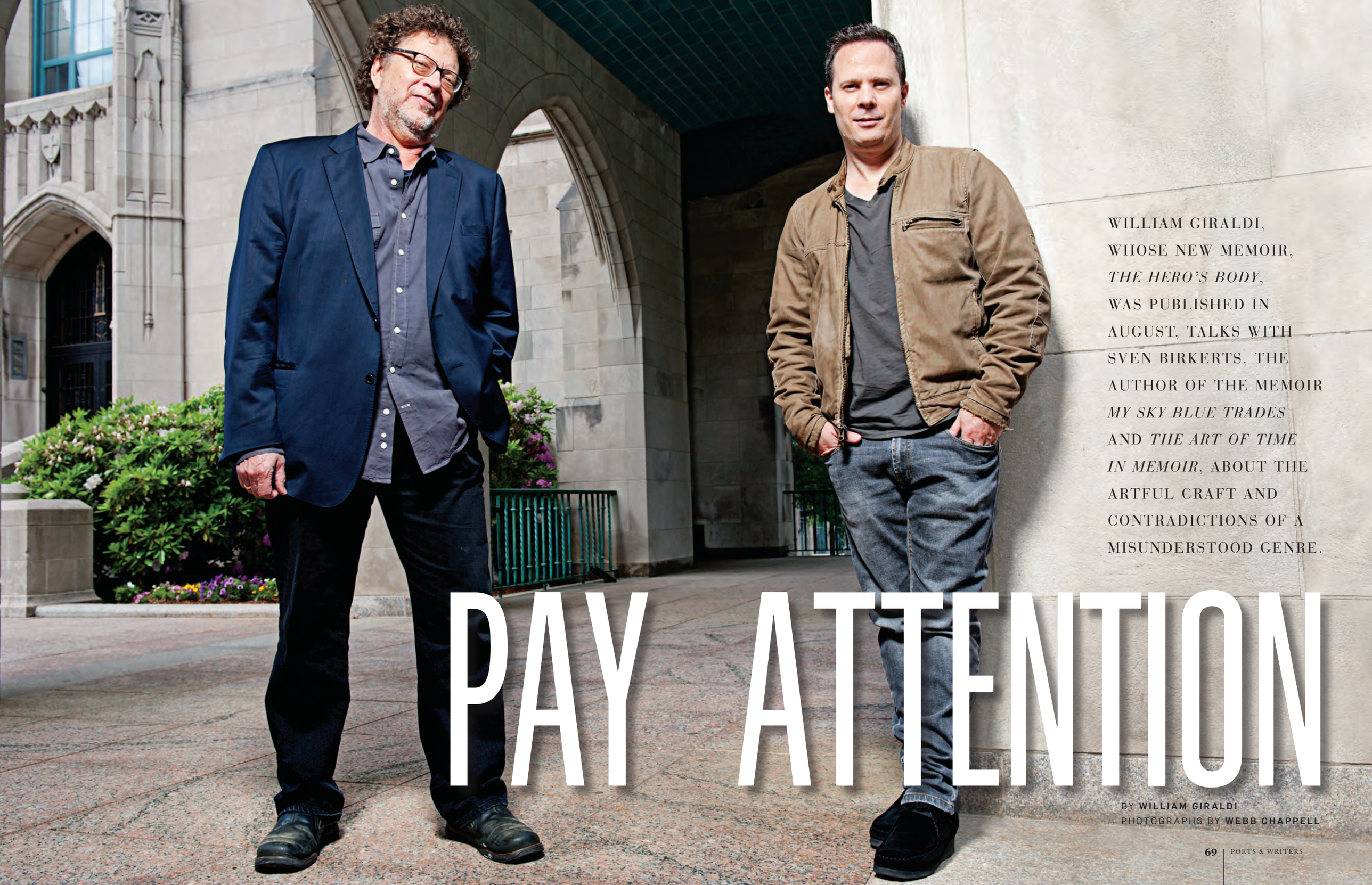


WILLIAM GIRALDI, WHOSE NEW MEMOIR, *THE HERO'S BODY*, WAS PUBLISHED IN AUGUST, TALKS WITH SVEN BIRKERTS, THE AUTHOR OF THE MEMOIR *MY SKY BLUE TRADES* AND *THE ART OF TIME IN MEMOIR*, ABOUT THE ARTFUL CRAFT AND CONTRADICTIONS OF A MISUNDERSTOOD GENRE.

PAY ATTENTION

BY **WILLIAM GIRALDI**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **WEBB CHAPPELL**

WHEN I was asked if I'd sit down with Sven Birkerts to discuss the state of the American memoir, the answer wasn't hard: He and I have been having that conversation, in one guise or another, for the better part of a decade. I'd recently finished sixteen years' worth of fitful, fretful work on a memoir of my own, *The Hero's Body*. In the book I wrote about my time as a teenage bodybuilder and my father's fatal crash racing motorcycles, and so all of the difficulties and contradictions of the genre were still very much with me. Birkerts is the author of ten books, including the memoir *My Sky Blue Trades: Growing Up Counter in a Contrary Time* (Viking, 2002) and *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again* (Graywolf, 2007). He also edits the journal *AGNI* and directs the Bennington Writing Seminars, where he teaches memoir. Our conversation began in the *AGNI* offices at Boston University and continued over e-mail.

William Giraldi: In the aftermath of the James Frey debacle a decade ago, I remember going to speak at certain writers conferences, and those attempting to write memoir had the look of the hounded, a kind of exasperation born of their anxiety that not only would their work not be published now, but that if it was, it would be subjected to some nefarious tribunal out to dub them liars. When I saw some of their work, it read like reportage when it didn't read like diary: a litany of facts or else an incontestable barrage of emotion—a swaying from the timid to the rigid. I emphasized the vital differences between imagination and falsehood, between artistic assertion and deliberate deception. Books are true or false in their sentences before they are true or false in their facts. Style doesn't lie. You were, and are, on the front lines at the Bennington Writing Seminars, and I'm guessing you remember the climate then.

Sven Birkerts: It was certainly in the air, and there's still a lingering haze of gun smoke. Such a confusion across such a spectrum. On one side we have the bean counters, who would insist that if you hadn't recorded a certain conversation, you could not legitimately use it in a memoir—memoir being a subspecies of nonfiction, a close relative of the documentary. On the other side—and this is certainly still a going thing—the genre-blenders, who see no problem stirring fiction together with "what really happened," the rationale there being that *everything* is ultimately invention. Then there was that fringe development called "auto-fiction," and I'm still trying to figure out its metaphysical underpinnings.

When the question comes up in my workshops, I sometimes deliver a spiel on the "spirit" and the "letter," arguing, in effect, that we must be absolutely scrupulous in honoring what we feel to be the spirit of the event, but that we are entitled to certain presentational allowances. We don't have to have all five uncles in the room necessarily, if they don't serve the feeling-truth of the memory; we can have people saying what we believe they said—at least those people that we know. But we cannot import anything that we know did not happen or get said just to enhance an effect. It's a fine line, no question, and the aesthetic conscience is at every moment being tested. I believe Stéphane Mallarmé's injunction: "Paint not the thing, but the effect it produces." I also believe that it's possible—maybe even inevitable—that if we stay absolutely pinned to the verifiable minutiae, we may end up with something monstrously skewed in terms of its relation to the felt truth of what happened. And if we are not honoring the felt truth, then what is the incentive for writing in the first place?

Giraldi: Robert Louis Stevenson has a great bit about the difference between "truth to facts" and what he calls "truth to sentiment" or "truth in spirit"—precisely what you're saying. You can hardly bring up this subject without someone assailing you with questions from Epistemology 101: *What is Truth?* and *Who owns the Truth?*—always *Truth* with that hollering, Emersonian uppercase. I suppose that's part of the ill legacy of postmodernism, still with us: Everyone is entitled to his or her own truth, no matter how false. It seems to me that the memoirist's task need not be so fraught with such shenanigans, or with anxiety over the inherent fallibility of human memory. Say what really happened, as you remember it, and show what it really means, how your selfhood was forged in the flame of the world.

I'm not sure if you experienced this when you were writing *My Sky Blue Trades*, but it was something that was with me every day while I was trying to wrestle *The Hero's Body* down onto the page: the conviction that if I could just get the sentences right, the facts would take care of themselves. The issue I take with so much contemporary memoir is not truth doctored to enhance interest, or even the formulaic trek from dispossession to deliverance, but the chummy artlessness of the prose, as if the memoir as a form must not aspire to something so lofty as art.

Birkerts: I have always thought that finding your right prose style—your tone, your diction, with that little buzz of a current flowing unimpeded between the words and sentences—was the only way you could tell that you were saying what you needed to say. I'm just rephrasing you here. The point is that just because it's nonfiction, and therefore part of the same family tree as documentary, does not mean it can't aspire to art. Documentary flies the banner of objectivity, whereas memoir is necessarily subjective. It's not proving or arguing anything, but *evoking*.

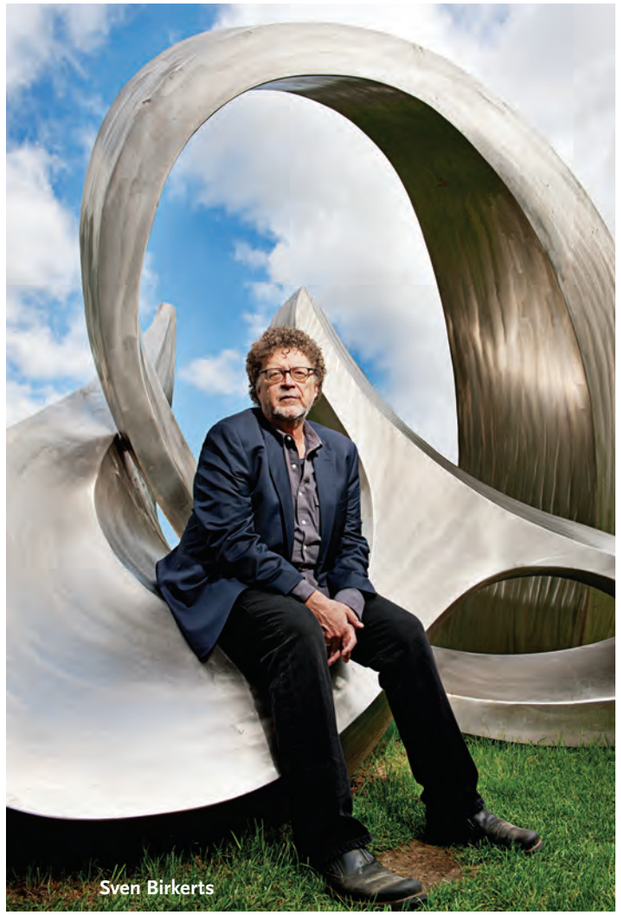
When I was writing my memoir some years ago, I felt like I was lowering myself through successive fathoms of water—of time. I needed to get back to the sensations of childhood and adolescence, and to do that I had to get very focused in myself. Insofar as the past opened up to me, it was in terms of specific images, moments, and they were mostly moments of vivid sensory encounter. They were also, I would add, unmediated; they had to do with the world's direct, immediate impacts. I did not retrieve anything of value from the murk of my TV watching. But tell me about your process in writing the memoir: What did you access, how did you do it?

Giraldi: I spent lots of time thinking that the tag *memoirist* was a low-rent version of *novelist*, a lesser title, inherently confessional, narcissistic, self-promotional, and everything in me went taut against writing a memoir. My publisher wanted to put out *The Hero's Body* before my last novel, which was only my second novel, and I had to fight them gently on that. I didn't want to be tagged a memoirist. In fact, it was you and Steve Almond, as I recall, who pushed me to write about the material in this book in the first place—my years as a competitive bodybuilder, my father's death racing motorcycles. The material seemed so compelling to you both when it didn't at all to me, and you essentially said, "You have these unique experiences; get them down on the page."

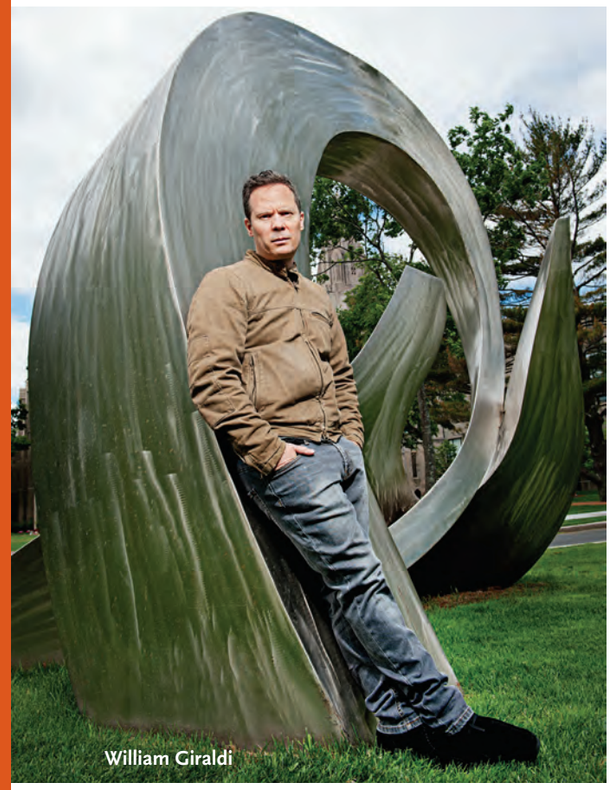
But of course the writing of a memoir is not simply the relaying of experience, not simply storytelling or a chronicle of emotion or the expression of another identity crisis. I was intensely aware of how Chesterton damned Swinburne: all self-expression and no self-assertion, his inability to manifest his substance in his style. Self-expression is simple: Just weep your tons, as Dylan Thomas has it. Self-assertion, on the other hand, requires a marshaling of one's whole selfhood, a wedding of the cerebral with the emotional. It requires, I think, a staunchly literary sensibility, a consummate interiority. And you know, reading Augustine, Rousseau, Casanova, Cellini, aware of how Cellini defined *excellence* in a life—my own memoir seemed bound to the domestic, the quotidian, the hopelessly middle-class American, unless the book could also be a chronicle of thought, which is what I attempted to do. The book is about motorcycles and muscles and the imprecations of masculinity, yes, but it's also a love song to literature.

And I wanted to crib from you where I could, but it wasn't possible. *My Sky Blue Trades* has an enveloping sociohistorical consciousness; it asserts not only a self among a family but a generation among some roiling decades. I don't have that history. Your particular engagements weren't open to me in my tiny New Jersey town in the late '80s and early '90s. Outside of bodybuilding and the violent death of my father, and, recently, the birth of my sons, not many things have happened to me. I'm reminded of G. B. Shaw's typically Shavian boast in his autobiography, to the grand effect of *Things haven't happened to me, I have happened to them!* Not my lot, alas. But literature has happened to me, and I'd argue that all literature ends up being about itself—without literature I could have never said how I became me. Perhaps my particular challenges with memoir are not what your twentysomething students are grappling with, though, ensconced as they are in the electronic moment. I'm not plugged in, not to the extent that they are. How are you reading this weather upon us?

Birkerts: Memoir is, basically, a hindsight narrative, coherence wrested or created from what had been the immediacy of circumstance, so what will happen once the nature of that circumstance changes? Because I do think things happen in new ways now. We


Sven Birkerts

WILLIAM GIRALDI is the author of the memoir *The Hero's Body*, published in August by Liveright, and the novels *Hold the Dark* (Norton, 2014) and *Busy Monsters* (Norton, 2011). He is the fiction editor for the journal *AGNI* at Boston University and a contributing editor at the *New Republic*.


William Giraldi

are, all of us, immersed in the great dissipating surround of electronic media. We interact in new ways, we attend to things differently; it may even be that we process experience and think differently. People get irritated when I suggest this, but I think it's worth asking about these things. You know my position—that the nature of contemporary experience is incredibly fragmented and dissipating of focus, and that we need art more than ever as a counter. Art requires and creates attention.

What I'm wondering is: If we increasingly find ourselves distracted, spread out among various platforms, attending to our phones and consoles, what will this mean for later? It relates to memoir, sure, but even more fundamentally it asks *how* and *from what* do we build our sense of distinct identity, what Elizabeth Bishop gets at in her "Waiting Room" poem: "you are an *I*." A good part of it comes down to language, whether it can capture and dramatize what has become the stuff of our lives. It's not enough to itemize the parts of your experience—as a memoirist you need to get inside and discover shape and purpose. I think this is what you mean by "self-assertion." It's the willingness to grant experiences their deeper implications, *provided* that they exist, and then to honor them. That's what art does—it moves things from the realm of mere contingency, from "this happened and then this happened," and into the arena of meaningfulness. "This happened and then this happened *because*…" and "Here's what I realized…."

To bring this back to our new modes of living—the question is very simply whether all of this fragmented busyness, this constant synaptic excitation, is amenable to meaning. Whether it signifies—and if it signifies, whether it does so in a way that lends itself to compelling narrative. I should say, since we're talking about a literary genre, "compelling *verbal* narrative." Because it's not just that we are more and more sound-biting everything—if I can create a verb—but images, video and photo, are the new coin of the realm. That "self-assertion" we're talking about also requires a certain doggedness of follow-through. It's really not enough to string together snippets of impressions; there has to be a felt force of making. Verbal making.

Giraldi: It seems sinister to me how we've volunteered, *ecstatically volunteered*, to place these illuminated rectangles between ourselves and the world. How eagerly and expensively we buckled, surrendered the immediacy of experience, the tactile facts of our being, to a battery-operated autocrat. I ponder the spiritual helplessness, the puncture at the hub of us, that facilitated such a happy vassalage. The way memoir responds to such an atomized and electronic world, the way *all* literary art responds, is not by attempting to compete with it, to adapt to its dictates, to reflect its deadening white glow—literary art responds by remaining steadfastly itself, by doing what it's always done: by honoring its responsibility to inwardness, to that slow and silent waltz with the self, to those aesthetic glimpses into wisdom and beauty, into evolved versions of ourselves.

Your formulation "verbal making" is essential to this, I think. Images began to supplant linear script about halfway into the last century—photography had had a nice coexistence with literature, but TV was "the little rift within the lute"—and we see now with the Internet the crescendo of images. Whether or not we can fashion a language to deal with it all is, as you say, the question. But I recall a remark by Oscar Wilde—it must have been Wilde—that our belief should be that *nothing* is beyond language. You know, it doesn't really matter what your subject matter is, the cyberspatial strafing of our culture or a warrior's death on the sand of Ilium, because every literary gesture involves making the language anew. There's that great quip by Karl Kraus about language being the universal whore he must make into a virgin. Every book should be like that.

For instance, writing about my father's death in *The Hero's Body*: Never mind the inherently Freudian challenges of that task—I had a problem dealing with the way we discuss death in our culture, the rabid euphemisms and other tricks of speech we've designed *not* to see it, *not* to take its pulse.

When you throw away all the clichés we employ to discuss death, you aren't left with much. And so for the entire half of the book about my father's fatal motorcycle crash, the physics of it, what happened to his body on that machine, and our grief that ensued, I was in search of new ways of seeing, of assimilating, how he died. There's a large section of the book that tries to parse the death certificate and the accident report, the baffling and sometimes unintentionally apt language of those documents. I worked on the memoir, on and off and on again, for sixteen years, and it's not a long book. What took me so long? The *words*.

Birkerts: You talk about the "words," as I do all the time, and I feel like we should say what we mean. The "words" are code for everything. We're talking about how words, put into certain combinations, make a music, complicated and rhythmic, and how that music can, if done right, simulate, to an extent, the movement of thought or the inner orchestrations of emotion. Reading pages about your father, I was taken by the verbal precision, both your expressed desire for it and the way you exemplified it on the page, and to me that in itself communicated strong emotion. When you care about something absolutely, then as a writer you need to get it absolutely right. I think of those great lines by Robert Lowell, on the Vermeer painting. He writes:

> Vermeer gave to the sun's
> illumination
> stealing like the tide across a map
> to his girl solid with yearning.
> We are poor passing facts,
> warned by that to give
> each figure in the photograph
> his living name.

That gets so much of the business right there. Writing *My Sky Blue Trades*, my challenge—and it was, yet again, a language thing—was to find an idiom that would sound like me, whatever I imagined that was, that would allow for different levels of retrospective reflection, and that would somehow honor the truth I was after. The truth that so much of what came to feel significant to me about my life was to be found not in the conventional red-letter moment, but in the stray detail, among the interstices, as it were. To find and sustain that idiom was the real work, the unseen and unheralded labor hovering over one phrase and another—testing, listening, revising. And for all that, I was never sure I hit it. It. My life. We memoirists are all too close to the target—but I can't think who else will do it.

Giraldi: Too close to the target, yes, and at the same time "poor passing facts." To go in search of my memory's idiom, my own lost time, I required whatever madeleine I could grasp, and I found several. And that seems to me the grand challenge for those wed now to their gadgets of distraction: What

will be their madeleine? When your experiences are continually denuded of their full-frontal forces, when you have only a portion of the sensory engagement, where then is your path into the past? Never mind the language for now: I'm talking first of the scratches on the soul and mind, the almost literal indentations the world should be making on you, the bounty that words then go looking for.

I passed a funeral the other afternoon, and I stopped at the cemetery gate to look, as I normally do—grief's grimace is irresistible to me. And there was a boy, maybe sixteen years old, closely related to the dead, from the way people were patting his shoulder and speaking to him. But he had his phone up, filming things, and then tapping buttons, and then filming again, tapping again. He wasn't *looking* at what was happening, and perhaps this was his way of coping, perhaps he truly needed that barrier between himself and the event, but I thought, "There's one more potential memoirist ruined." And not just memoirist, but any species of imaginative writer, really. He won't have access to this grand event, the burial of a loved one, because it won't really have happened to him. Even if he one day finds his would-be madeleine, it will lead into a resounding vacancy.

Birkerts: Well, that gets it, I think. For there to be a certain quality and intensity of expression in the work—and if we're not shooting for that, let's not bother—it has to draw from a source. You can't create a vivid image, phrasing, character, or anything if you don't have that vividness inside of you. We're talking about memoir here, I know, but really we are talking about art in general. We create from those things that marked us, that we were not just aware of, but extraordinarily attentive to. Full stop. The rest is a kind of excelsior, packing material. Henry James long ago urged the writer to be one "upon whom nothing is lost," and I think this is what he meant.

We're moving ever deeper into the age of the synthetic signal, the Great Dispersion, so all of this is relevant, the more so because I don't think we'll stop identifying as selves and having lives that bear our own copyright—lives that still have to *mean*. So the urge to give memoiristic shape to our lives, or to read memoirs of those who have, will not disappear. The question is how we will gather our fragments, our widely strewn experiences and sensations, and fit them together into some semblance of coherence. We should not forget that memoir, like any other art form, is a kind of mirror. We look into it not necessarily to see ourselves, but to renew in ourselves the narrative understanding, that very strange idea that for all the seeming chaos of the day to day, there is a story being told, and that the recognition of that is the point of it all. I have reduced all my thinking to a single phrase, a mantra: *Pay attention*.

Nine More New Memoirs

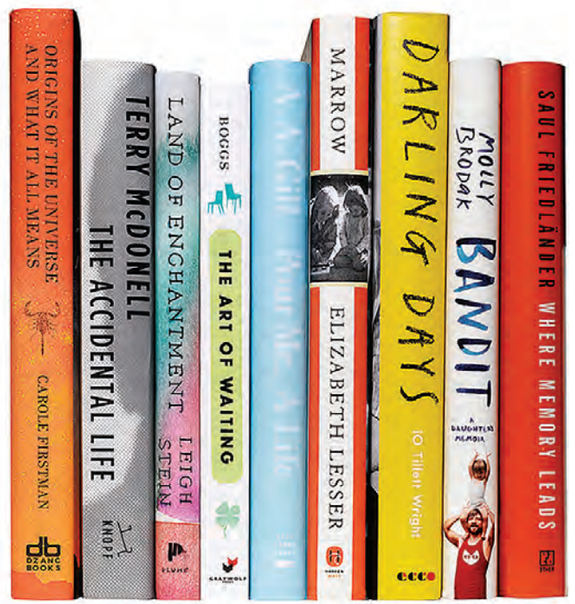
Origins of the Universe and What It All Means
(Dzanc Books, August)
by Carole Firstman
Combining evolutionary research with travel narratives and childhood memories, Carole Firstman reflects on her distant relationship with her father, an eccentric but skilled biology professor. This formally innovative memoir investigates both the origins of the father-daughter dynamic and the evolution of life on Earth.

The Accidental Life: An Editor's Notes on Writing and Writers
(Knopf, August) by Terry McDonell
Over the last four decades, Terry McDonell has been at the helm of thirteen magazines, including *Rolling Stone* and *Esquire*, working with Hunter S. Thompson, Kurt Vonnegut, and others. In a series of sharp vignettes, McDonell takes readers behind the scenes of the publishing world to reveal the humorous and at times difficult relationships between writers and their editors.

Land of Enchantment
(Plume, August) by Leigh Stein
After her ex-boyfriend dies in a motorcycle accident, Leigh Stein wrestles with the complicated emotional impact of his destructive love. Set against the stark and surreal landscape of New Mexico, the "Land of Enchantment," this lyrical debut navigates the complex cycle of an abusive relationship.

The Art of Waiting: On Fertility, Medicine, and Motherhood
(Graywolf Press, September)
by Belle Boggs
A meticulous investigation of the complicated sociopolitical issues surrounding fertility, infertility, and medical intervention, this memoir blends personal experience with cultural inquiry. Belle Boggs looks to history, literature, and firsthand accounts to create a meaningful meditation on the many paths to making a family.

DAVID HAMSLEY



Pour Me a Life
(Blue Rider Press, September)
by A. A. Gill
Restaurant critic and London *Sunday Times* journalist Adrian Gill pieces together the physical and emotional destruction wrought by years of alcoholism. Sincere and wry, with a touch of Englishman's wit, Gill's powerful account of addiction and recovery demonstrates, without preaching, the possibility of a life transformed.

Marrow: A Love Story
(Harper Wave, September)
by Elizabeth Lesser
Best-selling author Elizabeth Lesser narrates the year following her sister's cancer diagnosis and subsequent bone-marrow transplant. This profound memoir traces the love between two sisters as they travel together through "thickets of despair and hope," their bond deepening beneath the bone to the "soul's marrow."

Darling Days
(Ecco, September) by iO Tillett Wright
The child of a showgirl, gender-defying writer and artist iO Tillett Wright spent her early years on the gritty streets of downtown New York City in the 1980s. Those experiences form the foundation of a visceral examination of counterculture, identity, gender, and familial bonds. Wright's unique voice shines and sears in this candid memoir of a young person in search of an authentic self.

Bandit: A Daughter's Memoir
(Black Cat, October) by Molly Brodak
Labeled the "Mario Bros. Bandit" by the FBI, poet Molly Brodak's father robbed eleven banks when she was thirteen years old. With unwavering patience, the author attempts to reconcile her childhood memories of a man with many secrets and his fracturing impact on her family.

Where Memory Leads: My Life
(Other Press, November)
by Saul Friedländer
Forty years after the publication of his acclaimed first memoir, *When Memory Comes*, Pulitzer Prize–winning Holocaust historian Saul Friedländer revisits his formative years in France, Israel, and the United States, and the harrowing events that influenced his studies of Jewish life and history.