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REPORT FROM THE INTERIOR
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In the beginning, everything was alive. The smallest objects were endowed with beating hearts, and even the clouds had names. Scissors could walk, telephones and teapots were first cousins, eyes and eyeglasses were brothers. The face of the clock was a human face, each pea in your bowl had a different personality, and the grille on the front of your parents’ car was a grinning mouth with many teeth. Pens were airships. Coins were flying saucers. The branches of trees were arms. Stones could think, and God was everywhere.

There was no problem in believing that the man in the moon was an actual man. You could see his face looking down at you from the night sky, and without question it was the face of a man. Little matter that this man had no body—he was still a man as far as you were concerned, and the possibility that there might be a contradiction in all this never once entered your thoughts. At the same time, it seemed perfectly credible that a cow could jump over the moon. And that a dish could run away with a spoon.
Your earliest thoughts, remnants of how you lived inside yourself as a small boy. You can remember only some of it, isolated bits and pieces, brief flashes of recognition that surge up in you unexpectedly at random moments—brought on by the smell of something, or the touch of something, or the way the light falls on something in the here and now of adulthood. At least you think you can remember, you believe you remember, but perhaps you are not remembering at all, or remembering only a later remembrance of what you think you thought in that distant time which is all but lost to you now.

January 3, 2012, exactly one year to the day after you started composing your last book, your now-finished winter journal. It was one thing to write about your body, to catalogue the manifold knocks and pleasures experienced by your physical self, but exploring your mind as you remember it from childhood will no doubt be a more difficult task—perhaps an impossible one. Still, you feel compelled to give it a try. Not because you find yourself a rare or exceptional object of study, but precisely because you don’t, because you think of yourself as anyone, as everyone.

The only proof you have that your memories are not entirely deceptive is the fact that you still occasionally fall into the old ways of thinking. Vestiges have lingered well into your sixties, the animism of early childhood has not been fully purged from your mind, and each summer, as you lie on
your back in the grass, you look up at the drifting clouds and watch them turn into faces, into birds and animals, into states and countries and imaginary kingdoms. The grilles of cars still make you think of teeth, and the corkscrew is still a dancing ballerina. In spite of the outward evidence, you are still who you were, even if you are no longer the same person.

In thinking about where you want to go with this, you have decided not to cross the boundary of twelve, for after the age of twelve you were no longer a child, adolescence was looming, glimmers of adulthood had already begun to flicker in your brain, and you were transformed into a different kind of being from the small person whose life was a constant plunge into the new, who every day did something for the first time, even several things, or many things, and it is this slow progress from ignorance toward something less than ignorance that concerns you now. Who were you, little man? How did you become a person who could think, and if you could think, where did your thoughts take you? Dig up the old stories, scratch around for whatever you can find, then hold up the shards to the light and have a look at them. Do that. Try to do that.

The world was of course flat. When someone tried to explain to you that the earth was a sphere, a planet orbiting the sun with eight other planets in something called a solar system, you couldn’t grasp what the older boy was saying. If the earth was round, then everyone below the equator would fall
off, since it was inconceivable that a person could live his life upside down. The older boy tried to explain the concept of gravity to you, but that was beyond your grasp as well. You imagined millions of people plunging headlong through the darkness of an infinite, all-devouring night. If the earth was indeed round, you said to yourself, then the only safe place to be was the North Pole.

No doubt influenced by the cartoons you loved to watch, you thought there was a pole jutting out from the North Pole. Similar to one of those striped, revolving columns that stood in front of barbershops.

Stars, on the other hand, were inexplicable. Not holes in the sky, not candles, not electric lights, not anything that resembled what you knew. The immensity of the black air overhead, the vastness of the space that stood between you and those small luminosities, was something that resisted all understanding. Benign and beautiful presences hovering in the night, there because they were there and for no other reason. The work of God’s hand, yes, but what in the world had he been thinking?

Your circumstances at the time were as follows: midcentury America; mother and father; tricycles, bicycles, and wagons; radios and black-and-white televisions; standard-shift cars; two small apartments and then a house in the suburbs; fragile health early on, then normal boyhood strength; public
school; a family from the striving middle class; a town of fifteen thousand populated by Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, all white except for a smattering of black people, but no Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims; a little sister and eight first cousins; comic books; Rootie Kazootie and Pinky Lee; “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus”; Campbell’s soup, Wonder bread, and canned peas; souped-up cars (hot rods) and cigarettes for twenty-three cents a pack; a little world inside the big world, which was the entire world for you back then, since the big world was not yet visible.

Armed with a pitchfork, an angry Farmer Gray runs across a cornfield in pursuit of Felix the Cat. Neither one of them can talk, but their actions are accompanied by a steady clang of jaunty, high-speed music, and as you watch the two of them engage in yet another battle of their never-ending war, you are convinced they are real, that these raggedly drawn black-and-white figures are no less alive than you are. They appear every afternoon on a television program called Junior Frolics, hosted by a man named Fred Sayles, who is known to you simply as Uncle Fred, the silver-haired gatekeeper to this land of marvels, and because you understand nothing about the production of animated films, cannot even begin to fathom the process by which drawings are made to move, you figure there must be some sort of alternate universe in which characters like Farmer Gray and Felix the Cat can exist—not as pen scratches dancing across a television screen, but as fully embodied, three-dimensional creatures
as large as adults. Logic demands that they be large, since the people who appear on television are always larger than their images on-screen, and logic also demands that they belong to an alternate universe, since the universe you live in is not populated by cartoon characters, much as you might wish it was. One day when you are five years old, your mother announces that she will be taking you and your friend Billy to the studio in Newark where *Junior Frolics* is broadcast. You will get to see Uncle Fred in person, she tells you, and be a part of the show. All this is exciting to you, inordinately exciting, but even more exciting is the thought that finally, after months of speculation, you will be able to set eyes on Farmer Gray and Felix the Cat. At long last you will discover what they really look like. In your mind, you see the action unfolding on an enormous stage, a stage the size of a football field, as the crotchety old farmer and the wily black cat chase each other back and forth in one of their epic skirmishes. On the appointed day, however, none of it happens as you thought it would. The studio is small, Uncle Fred has makeup on his face, and after you are given a bag of mints to keep you company during the show, you take your seat in the grandstand with Billy and the other children. You look down at what should be a stage, but which in fact is nothing more than the concrete floor of the studio, and what you see there is a television set. Not even a special television set, but one no bigger or smaller than the set you have at home. The farmer and the cat are nowhere in the vicinity. After Uncle Fred welcomes the audience to the show, he introduces the
first cartoon. The television comes on, and there are Farmer Gray and Felix the Cat, bouncing around in the same way they always have, still trapped inside the box, still as small as they ever were. You are thoroughly confused. What error have you made? you ask yourself. Where has your thinking gone wrong? The real is so defiantly at odds with the imagined, you can’t help feeling that a nasty trick has been played on you. Stunned with disappointment, you can barely bring yourself to look at the show. Afterward, walking back to the car with Billy and your mother, you toss away the mints in disgust.