

## MAIA SNOW

*Don't Look*, 2013  
oil on panel, 35 x 35 in



courtesy the artist

## JONATHAN FRANZEN

### Out from Underground Notes on Making Peace with Germany

I first came to Germany by way of the sitcom *Hogan's Heroes*, one of the most popular American TV shows of the late sixties and absolutely my own favorite when I was nine and ten. Why a comedy about a German POW camp ("Stalag 13") so appealed to Americans during the worst years of the Vietnam war has been a fruitful subject for academic cultural critics ever since. But to me the show's appeal was straightforwardly personal. Its premise—amusing Allied POWs pay lip service to their strict but lovable German captors while secretly leading an elaborate life underground—approximated my own situation with my parents. Indeed, I'm still a sucker for this particular kind of romance. It's how I construe the motley and embattled minority of people who continue to care about books and literature in an age of technological hegemony. It's how I think about the secret lives of birds under the oppression of human modernity. The people and animals I care about are the ones who are forced to lead lives that are in some sense underground.

My mother, who disapproved of *Hogan's Heroes* and my attachment to it, once made me read a newspaper column condemning the show for its implicit trivialization of the Holocaust. The columnist took particular exception to its portrayal of its Nazi characters as bumbling and sympathetic. I felt shamed by the column, but it didn't make me like the show any less. Being a child of American commercial television, I could see that there was also virtue in its nothing-is-sacred silliness. While the German characters on *Hogan's Heroes* were clearly German—rule-abiding, respectful of authority—they all had universal comic weaknesses. There was the fat and lazy Sergeant Schultz, whose refrain was "I hear nothing, I see nothing, I know nothing." There was General Burkhalter, a Helmut Kohl type who terrorized his underlings but could be bribed with superior food and wine; and Major Hochstetter, who wielded the power of the SS but was always afraid of becoming its victim. Best of all, there was Colonel Klink, played by Werner Klemperer, the son of Otto Klemperer. Klink was a kind of German everyman, obedient and anxious, helplessly ensnared in the military bureaucracy while secretly envying the freedoms of his Allied prisoners. Because of *Hogan's Heroes*, I grew up thinking of Germans not as faceless evildoers but as human beings. If you're very literal-minded, you can castigate American commercial