

HEE JIN LEE

Green Meditation, 2013
acrylic and mixed pens, 24 x 30 in



courtesy: the artist

ROBERT NIZZA

Finding John Irving

My boss Romuald, before he got too sick to continue his work, was priest, monk, and cellarer at a Benedictine monastery on the California coast. The monastery was an all-male community of about thirty seekers ranging in age from about twenty-five to eighty-five. It paid its bills by renting rooms, selling fruit-cakes, and collecting donations. My first assignment on the maintenance crew was to help rebuild Romuald's cabin which had been damaged by fire. My last Romuald assignment was self-assigned, and came about two years later.

After spending a year at the Esalen Institute, I fell in love with the Big Sur land. I wanted to take time to put that year in perspective, to hold onto the slippery gems I had discovered there. Since city life and immersion in media culture would probably cause me to forget my discoveries, I wanted to try to capture them on paper. So I went to the monastery to write.

From time to time, during the eight-month process of renovating the cabin, I would ask Romuald how he thought the work was going. He was always pleased. When I asked if there was anything we could improve upon, he could never think of anything. This was curious to me: most people have ideas about the color of the paint, the type of flooring, or the tint of the varnish they would prefer. Not Romuald. Romuald had wanted to be a monk since he was eight years old.

He was a stocky, friendly man, but our relationship did not advance beyond salutations and small talk. Maybe it was because I was not a monk. So I was on the periphery of his monastic community. When we finally connected, it was through an unexpected source—a shared love of John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Romuald's face would light up when recalling the book's nativity scene. At first I felt uneasy talking about Irving's novels with a monk, given their amputationally bizarre and sexual content. Didn't monks walk on water?

Irving's novels had helped Romuald acclimatize to New England when he had been a monk in New Hampshire. He would take visitors on tours of the Phillips Exeter Academy, where Irving's first editions are on display. He read *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and other Irving novels five or six times.

I had been drawn to *A Prayer for Owen Meany* because of its miraculous ending and its spiritual themes of reli-