

PHILIP ROSENTHAL

40° 55.080' N, 73° 48.414' W, 2020
Enamel on panel, 24 X 32 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

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The Reckoning

My father and myself

*Death ends a life, but it does not end
a relationship, which struggles on
in the survivor's mind toward some
resolution, which it may never find.*

—Robert Anderson, *I Never Sang for My Father*

In the fall of 1988, my sister, Maggie, called me to tell me my father was dying. He had, the doctors explained, perhaps three days to live.

“If you want to see him, you need to come now,” she said.

At the time, I was thirty-seven years old, living in Atlanta, and working as an editor at Emory University. Maggie was living in rural central Pennsylvania, close to where my father had settled some years earlier to be nearby. Our mother had passed away in 1961 and, together with a brother we rarely saw, we were my father’s only family. Racing to his deathbed would require booking a flight to Philadelphia, a four-hour drive in a rental car, and several days away from the office.

Given the last-minute nature of the trip, making the travel arrangements would be stressful and expensive. But the calculus of my decision was more complicated than mere money or logistics. I had not spoken to my father in eight years, since an angry phone call in which we had both attempted to inflict as much damage as possible upon one another, as if we were playing the lightning round on a television game show called *Spite*. In the years since, I had changed jobs and moved, and I had forbidden both siblings to tell my father where I worked or to give him my new telephone number or address.

“Not even the state,” I had told them in 1980. “I don’t want him to find me through directory assistance.”

In the months prior to my father’s final illness, a therapist I saw periodically for my bouts of depression asked if I thought being incommunicado with my aging father for so long was the best way to approach the situation.

“Our relationships with our parents are complicated and often fraught,” she said. “But there might come a time when you’ll regret not having spoken to your father when you had the opportunity to do so.”

I understood exactly what she was saying: the time for resolution, if not genuine reconciliation, would be upon me sooner rather than later, given my father’s age and generally poor health. Her words brought to mind the epigraph I first encountered in 1970 in the film version of Robert Anderson’s Broadway play. *I Never Sang for My Father* limns the relationship between a forty-year-old writer and his cantankerous eighty-year-old father, whom he has tried, unsuccessfully, to love. Even as a college sophomore, I was so moved by those words that I memorized them in the

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darkened movie theater and pinned them to the corkboard in my Penn State dorm room. Whether I would take them to heart some eighteen years later as my father lay dying was less clear.

* * *

It should come as no surprise that my father was an alcoholic, angry and mean-spirited, careless enough to drive drunk, fortunate enough not to have killed himself or anyone else in the accidents that destroyed several of our cars. While my mother was alive, she shooed us to our bedrooms when their arguments began, where from behind closed doors we listened as their verbal battle reached a fever pitch. Inevitably, he took potshots at her with any crockery close to hand, and when frangible objects took wing she evacuated us to the homes of nearby friends for the night. Eventually, she learned to drive so she could bundle us into the car and take refuge at a motel or boarding house in one of the older towns that ringed

our development of neat suburban tract homes. On one occasion, we returned home to find that in a fit of drunken rage, my father had hurled my goldfish bowl out into the snow, smashing it and consigning my pets, Antony and Cleopatra, to an icy grave.

Until my mother died from complications of childhood rheumatic fever at the age of forty-eight, she managed to provide a veneer of normalcy to a life frequently upended by my father's bouts with the bottle. We celebrated birthdays and holidays like any other family. We vacationed at the Jersey Shore for a week every summer. My mother gardened and hosted canasta games for neighborhood friends, and my brother and sister were enrolled in scouting programs. At Christmas, we hung our stockings on the mantel, lined our front windows with alternating red and green lights, and decorated our tree with my grandmother's handblown ornaments from Eastern Europe in the shapes of exotic birds.

I was ten when my mother died in October 1961, after nearly a year in the hospital. She had been released the day before, and I assumed that meant she was "all better" and that normal life would resume. That night, she passed away in my sister's bed while Maggie slept on a cot nearby. I found her there in the morning when, full of joy at her return, I went in to wake her. When I could not rouse her, I woke my brother, who woke my father. As he stood over her, backlit against a rain-spattered window, shielding us from the sight of her body, my inchoate grief was overshadowed by the realization that I had been left alone in his care. I may as well have been orphaned.

My father's drinking may not have gotten worse after her death, but there was no longer anyone to act as an intermediary between us. Most of the time, he sequestered himself in his bedroom, emerging only for beer and bathroom breaks, exhaling smoke like a dragon as he emerged from his lair. He kept the curtains drawn, providing him a cave-like refuge that smelled faintly of sweat and stale cigarette smoke, the walls tacky with a decade of nicotine, the sky-blue paint soured to a sickly gray. Occasionally he gathered the three of us kids around the dining room table for seemingly endless boozy ramblings from which we could not escape until he passed out and we slinked away to do our homework and sleep behind locked doors.

Some months after my mother's death, my father lost his job as a foreman at U.S. Steel when he went to work drunk and refused to go home when confronted by a security guard at the entrance to the plant. After that, his jobs were measured in weeks or months, not years. Money was scarce. In midwinter, heating oil was not delivered and we took cold showers. Telephone service was interrupted and restored. What money there was often went to drink instead of food.

On a rainy night in the fall of 1963, I was home alone when my father returned drunk. Something happened—I no longer remember what—and I was terrified to find myself alone in the house with him. At some point I was so fearful that, dressed only in my pajamas, I climbed through a bedroom window and ran about a mile through my darkened neighborhood to the home of the Carrolls, family friends who had done their best to look out for us in the two years since my mother's passing. Arriving there, soaked to the skin, I banged on the front door until their lights came on and Mrs. Carroll answered the door.

I stayed with the Carrolls for several days and then moved in with another family, the Allens, who agreed to look after me until the situation with my father could be addressed. Mr. Allen was stationed at the Willow Grove Naval Air Station, and I went to school with his two sons. Shortly thereafter, I pricked my left index finger while pinning on a campaign button for a candidate in our seventh-grade class elections. My finger became grossly infected, swelling to twice its normal diameter and requiring medical attention at the Navy base. The attending physician told Mrs. Allen my immune system was so compromised by malnutrition that, had no one intervened, a more serious injury or illness might have resulted in an infection that could well have proven fatal. What he said was, "Two more weeks and he'd have been dead."

Six months later, when Mr. Allen was transferred to Los Alamitos Naval Air Station in California, my father was still drinking and the Allens offered to take me with them. They petitioned for custody but were denied, and I became a ward of the court. I was remanded to the tender mercies of Catholic Charities and placed in a short-term group foster home until the school year ended. It was the kind of place where the operators stinted on food for the foster kids while living high on the hog themselves. After

three months of Kool-Aid and fried bologna sandwiches, I moved to a rather more luxe situation: a split-level home closer to the city with a black Coupe de Ville in the driveway and a country club across the street. My brother and sister thought I had landed in clover, but the emotional cruelty I found there was even more damaging than at the group home. After nine months subjugated to a status below even the French poodle and Siamese cat, I was returned to my father. As I packed for my departure, the woman I had come to think of as Cruella de Vil said to me: "Well, Andrew, you've been with us for nine months, but your clothes still have the Beierle stink in them." I am not sure what her intention was, but she succeeded in engendering an existential loathing for myself, my name, and the man who gave it to me, which would not be eradicated for some twenty-five years.

It's hard to say if things actually got better with my father when I returned home or if I just developed better coping skills. One summer when things got bad, I moved out of the house to stay with friends, and when I was old enough, I got a job to earn money for food, clothes, and other essentials. What I never understood was why the threat of having a child removed from his home did not make my father snap to attention. Ultimately, I was away from home for eighteen months, from October 1963 to March 1965. Today, if neighbors threatened to take my dog away until I resolved some issue with his care, I would immediately take the necessary action rather than spend even one night apart from him.

* * *

The incident that precipitated my final estrangement from my father took place in the summer of 1980. He had called me at my apartment in Providence, Rhode Island, where I worked as a medical and science writer in the Brown University news bureau. Calls from him were exceedingly rare. Calls from him *sober* were practically nonexistent. This was not one of them.

"I've asked you not to call me when you've been drinking," I said as soon as I realized he was drunk. I knew from the old days that the conversation would be entirely one-sided and would stretch on ad infinitum.

"The problem is that you don't listen to your father," he said. "You never did."

On the contrary, I told him, I had spent many hours of my childhood and adolescence listening to his drunken, often maudlin meanderings.

“I’ll be happy to listen to you when you haven’t been drinking.”

That was the tenor of our conversation for a minute or so, a sort of forensic foreplay before the main event. I still deferred to him enough that I was reluctant to hang up on him, but I wasn’t about to engage with him. I grew increasingly impatient until we reached a stalemate.

“That’s the problem with kids—they don’t listen to their parents,” he said, pausing to take a draught of beer. “I never wanted kids, you know. I was tricked into it.”

I did not respond to this revelation. It was too ambiguous a complaint to be considered a bombshell, and for pure shock value it could not rival the time, when I was much younger and more impressionable, that he explained my origins. Sitting in his red leather chair, a beer in one hand, a cigarette in the other, he had patted his crotch and told me, sotto voce, “This is where you came from, right here, after a Christmas party.” I was young enough that I had only a rudimentary understanding of procreation, and to this day I don’t know if he was trying to impress me with his potency or to shame me by linking my origin to an organ I associated at that time exclusively with the removal of liquid waste. In any case it was clear to me that he was saying I was the result of an unplanned pregnancy—an accident, if you will. After that, *nothing* he said could shock me—or so I thought.

“Kids make things hard,” he said. “You’ll see when you have kids of your own.”

“That’s not something I’ll have to worry about, Dad. I’m not going to have kids.”

“Oh? So, what are you—queer?”

“Since you asked, yes. Yes, I am.”

He paused a beat or two—in contretemps as in comedy, timing is everything—and then he asked about the details of my sexual preferences in the crudest of terms, in language more suited to a prison or a whorehouse—a question, friends would later say, that revealed a surprisingly astute knowledge of the mechanics of gay sex.

All I could do was drop the f-bomb and hang up.

A week later, he called again. He was not entirely sober, but at least he was brief and to the point.

“I’m calling to tell you three things,” he said with no preface. “You need to start listening to your father, you need to start going to church, and I’ve called Brown University to tell them that you’re queer.”

I wasn’t worried. I had been out professionally my entire life. In 1977, when Anita Bryant was on her high horse, I proposed a five-part series on gay life to my editor at the *Orlando Sentinel*, not exactly a bastion of liberalism. I got the green light and, among other topics, the series gave voice to a gay schoolteacher and the mother of a gay son. I was rather amused to imagine the confusion on the part of the operator at the Brown switchboard who had taken his call—if indeed he had made it. I wasn’t certain he even knew where Brown University was.

“I’ve got news for you, Dad,” I parried. “They already know—and they don’t care.”

Those were the last words I ever spoke to him.

* * *

Beierle men do not deal well with stress. My brother, Art, the eldest child in our family and my father’s namesake, shared with him an interest in things electronic and mechanical, like radios and cars. The magazine *Popular Electronics* was one of those that made it to our mailbox monthly and they both enjoyed it. He also shared my father’s short fuse.

Working in the storage room in our carport, Art had built a radio from a RadioShack kit, painstakingly soldering its component parts onto printed circuit board templates. Each installation had to be perfect for the radio, when finished, to work. When Art completed the project one summer night, he proudly brought it into the house to show my father. Maybe the radio didn’t work or the reception was staticky. Maybe a tuning knob was askew or the radio’s cabinet was cracked or loose or otherwise imperfect. Whatever was wrong—if anything—the finished product must not have met with my father’s approval and his critique must have been witheringly dismissive. My brother returned to the workroom and took a claw hammer to the radio, smashing it to smithereens within minutes of having completed it.

Even as a child, before I had fully developed a pattern of complex emotional responses, I was prone to temper tantrums—tsunamis of tears, my arms flailing, my face

red. Sometimes I could hardly breathe. When I was four or five, my godparents were visiting us from New York City with their son, George, at that time probably in his early teens and experiencing a growth spurt. I adored George, and when the time came for them to make the two-hour drive home, I refused to let them go—although it was only George whom I wanted to stay. I was inconsolable. To placate me, the adults concocted a fairy tale about how my godparents were just going to take a short drive around the neighborhood to look for a house.

I’ve had numerous meltdowns as an adult, occasionally accompanied by Pyrex pyrotechnics like my father’s. When I was in my early twenties, a man I was dating invited another man back to his apartment, without asking me, while we were on a date to celebrate our one-month anniversary. When we got back to his place, the two of them quickly retired to the bedroom. I went to the refrigerator, removed the bottle of celebratory champagne I had brought, and threw it against the dining room wall, not once but three times until it shattered, like a failed ship christening, leaving three deep half-moon indentations in the drywall. Another time I kicked a boyfriend out of my car on a rural road during an argument, peppering him with a rooster tail of gravel as I sped away.

My first inkling that something other than loutish men might be responsible for my anger and sadness came a few years later. After a typically brutal Providence winter, the trees along Waterman Street on the Brown campus had issued their first delicate white buds. A voice inside my head was saying, *How beautiful are these flowers? How great is it that spring is finally here? . . . Then why the hell do I feel so hopelessly sad?* But I did not yet know precisely what was wrong or what to do about it.

It was another episode of sudden, uncontrolled, and almost inexplicable anger—this time not with a man but in the workplace—that ultimately caused me to seek counseling. I was having what should have been a run-of-the-mill conversation with a staff member—a give-and-take over some minor editorial decision we disagreed upon—when I suddenly slammed a small potted shamrock against the wall of my office, sending an explosion of wet potting soil over an array of editorial awards. I immediately realized I had crossed a line, both personally and professionally, and I sought the help of a therapist, who gave me a diagnosis of

depression and later facilitated a group for adult children of alcoholics in which I had several epiphanies.

Outside of a few general parameters, I don’t know how depression manifests itself in other people. I share with them the broadest symptoms, of course—sadness, lack of energy, irritability, hopelessness. But it is not just that I am unhappy or anxious; it is that I see my depressed self in juxtaposition to the normal, healthy world. I’m constantly aware of the chasm that separates the two, the membrane in between, infuriatingly transparent yet impenetrable. I feel as if I am in a soundproof room like the ones in vintage record shops in which you could sample a vinyl album before buying it. Through a thick plate-glass window, you can see other shoppers perusing records but you can’t hear them, nor they you, no matter the volume at which you are playing a record. When I am depressed, I can *see* the normal world but feel separate from it, and no matter how loudly I scream, no one can hear me, no one can help me. Which is why, I suppose, I had to throw champagne bottles and potted plants. Screaming simply wasn’t enough.

* * *

In a box, in a closet, in my Santa Cruz loft apartment, is a photograph of my father and myself. Taken in June of 1968, it depicts me on the very day I began my journey toward adulthood, toward self-sufficiency, toward, if you will, becoming *me*. Based largely on the recommendation of my high school journalism teacher, I had won a scholarship to the Blair Summer School for Journalism from the *Trenton Times* newspaper. My brother, who took the picture, was about to drive me to a prestigious six-week precollege journalism program on the campus of a private school in northwestern New Jersey, ninety minutes northeast of my home in suburban Philadelphia, and my father was coming along for the ride.

The experience that lay ahead of me would confirm both an interest in and a talent for writing and would set me on a trajectory toward a journalism scholarship to Penn State and my first job in journalism at a Florida metropolitan daily. For that reason, the photo is particularly significant. It is a harbinger of the life to come, a life that ultimately included thirty years in communications at two national research universities and the publication of two novels. And yet it is not hung on a wall in my home. It is

not in a frame on my desk alongside a photo of my mother with my sister and myself as children. It has remained hidden, largely forgotten, because while it elicits pride, it also summons a sense of dread.

My father and I stand side by side in the photo. I am sixteen going on seventeen; he is fifty-one. I am leaning ever so slightly toward him so that we are almost shoulder to shoulder, and we are exactly the same height. I was taken aback when I first saw that photo among the others I had taken that summer at BSSJ, jolted by the features we shared. Apart from the impact of age and gravity on my father's visage, our features are nearly identical: rounded Germanic faces; the size, shape, and symmetry of our noses and mouths. My youthful face has a more pronounced hormonal sheen to it than his, and his arms and hands are considerably larger and thicker than my own, but the similarities are unmistakable—especially in our eyes. The photo is like a bizarre permutation of the portrait of Dorian Gray; it shows, simultaneously, both who I was and who I would become.

Now, some fifty-two years later, I am significantly older than my father was when that photo was taken. In fact, I am within two years of his age at his death at seventy-one. My apple cheeks have turned to applesauce, my slender frame is now nearly as well padded as his. The similarities that so shocked me in 1968 have become familiar features. Each morning when I shave, it is his bloodshot basset-hound eyes I see in the mirror.

Being reminded of our physical resemblance makes tangible the fact of our relationship. Having inherited roughly half my DNA from him, and developing into an adult without knowing my mother and understanding her contribution to my genetic makeup, has made me fear, all of my life, that I would *become* him. To paraphrase Dorothy Parker, beauty is only skin deep, but DNA goes clean to the bone.

For most of my life I have tried to distance myself from my father—in fact, to deny him. He represented a one-dimensional archetype of a certain kind of masculinity, remote and opaque. He worked in factories and dressed in heavy gabardine work clothes, dark blue or green uniforms, and steel-toed shoes, carrying his hard hat and thermos filled with coffee when he left for the day. It was a far cry from the type of life and career I saw for myself, a difference

so stark that I wondered if—perhaps even hoped—I had been switched with his real son at birth.

I imagine he also was aware of our differences and the widening gulf between us. He must have been intimidated by the ivy-covered Romanesque academic buildings at Blair Academy when he dropped me off that day in 1968. Two years later, he surely was surprised to receive a telegram notifying me that I was one of fifty American students selected to tour Europe for three weeks as a Wrangler Young Ambassador. (Concerned he might belittle me if I lost, I never mentioned the fact I was a finalist.) The day I left for college, which I financed myself with scholarships and loans, he looked at what I was taking with me and called me “the rich little poor boy.” None of this gave us common ground on which to relate to one another.

The Beierles do not have a family tree. In however many centuries as we have existed, we have not accumulated wealth or fortune or renown. Until the arrival of the internet, I thought we must be the only Beierles on the planet. I have no aunts or uncles, no cousins, neither niece nor nephew. I only met one grandparent, my mother's mother. I didn't even know the name of my father's mother until some six months ago, when I briefly dabbled in some online genealogical research before reaching a dead end in the late 1800s. We are the equivalent of what Wikipedia would call a “stub.”

This matters for a number of reasons. I was so young when my mother died, the only memories I have of her come from photographs. She is represented in my life as an absence. There was never anyone to tell me stories about her as a child or young adult. Without blood relatives, the only *sui generis* knowledge I have comes from the relatives I can count on one hand—whittled down now to one finger: my sister. What could an aunt or uncle have told me that might have helped me understand my father? What traits might I have observed in other relatives that might have reassured me about my own destiny?

* * *

By now it should be clear that I did not fly to Pennsylvania in the fall of 1988 to seek reconciliation with my father. I told Maggie I would make the trip, but only if she needed me to be there for emotional support.

“I'll come for you,” I told her, “but not for him.”

Maggie said she was fine with my choice, even though it left her alone to make some harrowing decisions. What I now know of those days makes me wish I had been by her side.

When my brother was battling end-stage colon cancer in 2014, he kept Maggie and me at arm's length, telling us his treatment regimen precluded the possibility of visits. It was only when he entered hospice that he relented. I went unhesitatingly to his side, even though our relationship had been troubled. In many ways I saw him as another version of my father. He disappeared from view for years at a time and once lived in Atlanta for six months without letting me know he was there. In 1984, after a vacation with Maggie on the North Carolina coast, he and I spent twelve hours in a car together returning to Atlanta. We spoke precisely a dozen words to each other—nearly half of which were “yes” or “no”—and upon arriving home I went to bed furious. It was as if we were strangers, thrown together at random on a bus.

“People die the way they live,” a friend told me before I flew to Florida to see Art for the last time. “If you didn't communicate well during his lifetime, don't expect things to be different at his bedside. But it will make him feel better to know you came to see him.”

And that is indeed how it unfolded. We didn't talk about his illness. We didn't talk about the past. For a couple of hours, we watched the movie *Pearl Harbor* on television, as if we were both in perfect health and would see each other many times in the future.

Would it have been any different with my father?

Looking back, the most significant turning point in my relationship with my father was not the moment I decided not to seek reconciliation with him on his deathbed in 1988, but rather how I had responded to his final phone call eight years earlier. Angry and hurt, I was unable to muster the humanity I needed to respond to him with the same compassion I showed to anonymous callers on the suicide hotline I had helped establish in Providence. Instead, still dealing with the damage inflicted upon me as a child and adolescent, I shut down, repeating the familiar pattern of behavior that punishes the tormented as cruelly as it does the tormenter. The sins of the father are visited upon the son.

It troubles me to think that my father might have

suffered from depression as deep as mine and that drinking was his way of self-medicating. I would not wish those thoughts or feelings on anyone. And I had several advantages over him by dint of maturing during the Age of Aquarius, not the dead center of the Depression: an evolving understanding of the disease, new treatment modalities and medications, the removal of stigma from those who sought counseling. But that does not make me love him, even three decades later. It does not even make me *want* to love him. The damage was just too great. My one consolation is that I have not passed it down to a son of my own.

I've never allowed myself to have regrets. That's pointless self-torture. Looking back, I can see that I could have made different choices, but I think in most cases I acted responsibly and in good faith with the knowledge and experience I had at the time. Reviewing or revisiting a decision is one thing, but regretting it is entirely another. Thirty-two years have passed. I have changed, but I have not changed my mind. Sometimes survival is its own act of contrition. This might be one of those times.

In the end, the question is not whether I can ever learn to love and forgive my father. That time has passed. The question, in what time I have left, is whether I can learn to love and forgive myself.

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