

# BROOKLYN RAIL

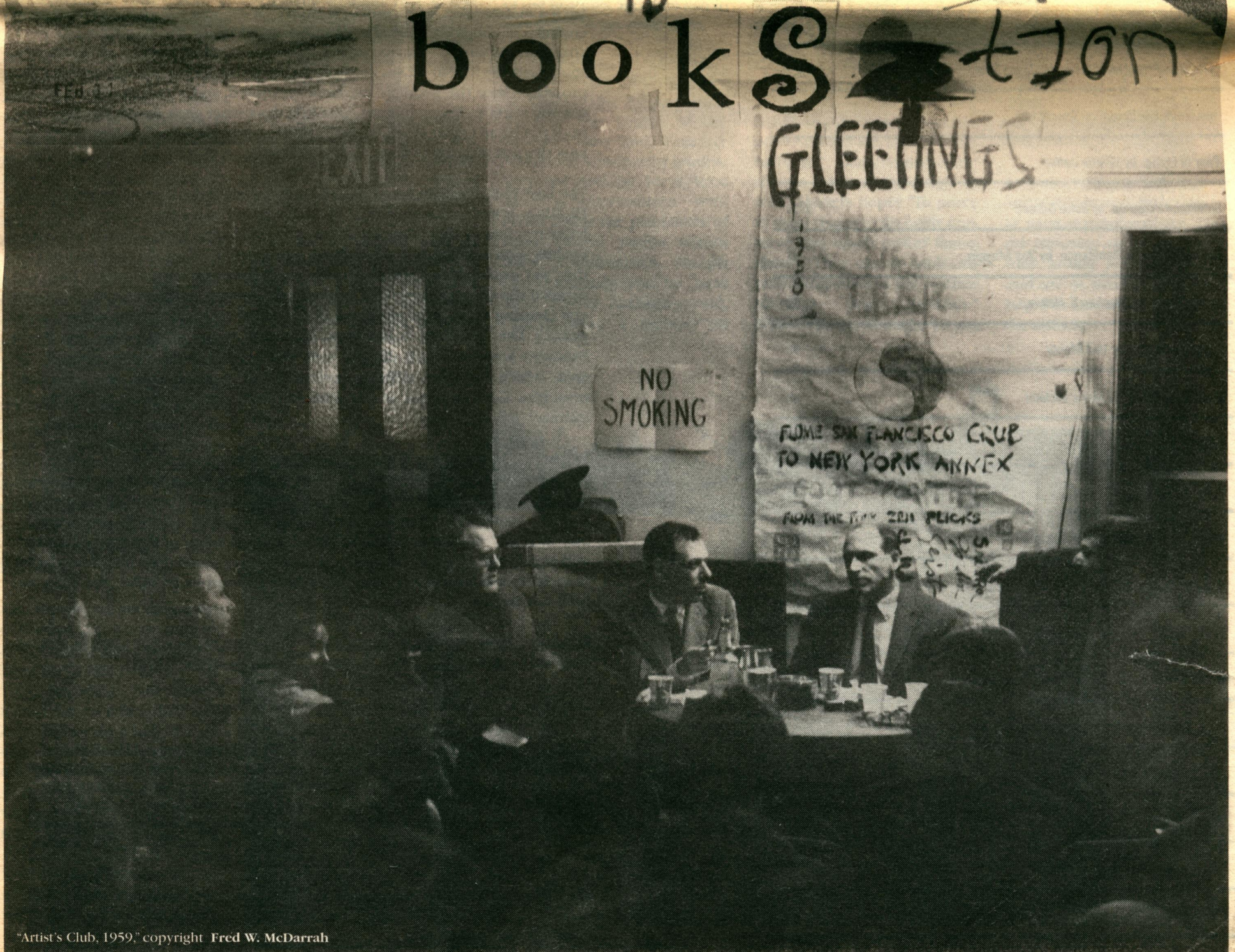
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"Artist's Club, 1959," copyright Fred W. McDarrah



# Losing Heart

essay by Stephen S. Howie

Lately, it has become an obsession in my family to figure out what is wrong with my father. There are long uncomfortable talks about what can be done. When he's out of earshot, Mom suggests ways I could try to pep him up, awkward arrangements that make me remember my father driving me to high school and the Dodge Dart stalling in the middle of an intersection. Away from my parents, my brother and I complain about my father's stubbornness or my mother's domination, the way she has to shape everything to her liking.

At night, my brother calls and we talk about the way "Dad is." These conversations repeat the symptoms we see, the latest evidence that Dad has changed. Behind this dialogue is the understanding that we need to find a way to get the old Dad back—the way he riled Mom with his mock, iron-fisted passion, the way he cocked his elbow out straight and held the basketball flat on his palm before every shot. The zany humor was gone, the excitement that used to accompany games of ping-pong, basketball on the driveway, that crazy banter that kept everything moving in color commentary. "Too short." Swish. "I mean I'll take it if you want to give it to me. Rebate, please."

In-between this action, my brothers and I grew up with the unspoken knowledge that someday our father could suddenly leave us, double over across the sidewalk in-between jump shots, fumbling desperately for a narrow glass bottle of nitroglycerin pills in his breast pocket. We knew that Dad had to be careful, not exert himself too much, watch his diet. We knew our Dad had heart disease.

I was only nine when he had the first heart attack, the one that almost killed him. He told me later that it felt like an iron vice twisting down on his insides. He said the pain doubled him over, but Mom told me later that Dad debated driving himself to the emergency room before he finally gave in and called an ambulance.

After Dad recovered from open-heart surgery, my brother left for college, and my father and I started jogging together. It was perhaps our greatest connection, being involved in a physical project with a clearly defined goal—to run from the beginning to the end. Practicing, I remember my father's steady pace, the way he opened and closed his thick right hand with every other step. We would gear up for 10-K races, dry toast for breakfast, a new T-shirt for every race.

During the early 1980s, 10K races were held almost every weekend in one of the small towns scattered across Southern Illinois. The Great Levy Road Race in Cairo included a mile-long jog through damp sand on the banks of the Mississippi. I remember my running shoes sinking into the banks, a terrifying loss of momentum, like running in a dream. In the Carbondale Firefighters 10K, we jogged along the flat roads at the edge of my hometown, past the long brick building where I would later go to high school. In the Superman Road Race in Metropolis, a square-jawed Superman in a Chevrolet convertible led us out from under the Superman Road Race banner, a perfect cowlick plastered onto his white forehead. I ran out with the sprinters only to find myself walking down a winding road at mile four. Dad passed me in his unwavering pace, slow and steady; he would go until the end.

The race T-shirts we brought home were bright green, orange, and yellow, more like warning signs for cars than anything to wear in public. That never stopped my father. He had a whole closet full of them. After I quit jogging, I used to borrow T-shirts and pause at the dazzle of all those colors hanging neatly next to each other. Running your fingers along them was like choosing crayons.

Dad was afraid that when he stopped jogging, he would die. I heard stories about how he was forming tiny new blood vessels that ventured around the clots in his arteries. I imagined colorful red and blue vines worming their way through the soil of my father's wide frame. The more he jogged, the more tiny vines would web their way to the other side, detours in red and blue and pink and yellow. Someday, I imagined, he would have as many of those tiny veins as he had T-shirts, a rainbow of achievements averting the blockage, keeping my father alive and well.

Ten years later, Dad went in for a routine check-up and was rushed to a hospital in Springfield, Illinois, for open-heart surgery. At the hospital, they showed us an animated video describing the operation, red arrows moving faster and faster through an ever-narrowing tunnel. A talking heart with arms and legs described what would happen to my father and how he would feel afterwards. When the video ended, a nurse came in and took my father away.

The next day, Mom and I walked quietly into a compact room where a busy

nurse was changing the towels, monitoring tubes and the machines arranged in a semi-circle on either side of the bed. My father was in the middle of this, a white mountain under a white sheet, pasty skin and colorless lips, air tubes from his nostrils pumping a small black accordion up and down, a separate tube coming out from under the sheet. He whispered to my mother that he had to go to the bathroom.

"It just feels like that, Dr. Howie," the nurse bellowed. "You don't really have to go." She turned to my mother, told her he was fighting the breathing machine. Mom told Dad to relax, that everything would be fine. We pulled up chairs on either side of the bed and each took one of his hands and for the first time in my life, I saw tears drip from my father's eyes. No eyelashes to well up in, they just dropped down like tiny, clear pebbles from the outside corners. And I thought it was the end, the last desperate image of my father tamed, his body wrenched open, his strength removed. I let my head fall into his palm because I had never realized it could happen this way, that the life in him could be removed while the shape of him remained.

Twelve years have passed since his triple bypass, 22 years since his first heart attack. A defibrillator is implanted like a pack of playing cards under his skin just below the collarbone. "He'll never die of heart failure," the doctors say, "at least we know that much."

But, with his heart protected, it seems my father's will has given way. He has receded from the surface, withdrawn from the simple frame work within which we were all so used to seeing him. My brothers and I debate the psychological implications of dad's illness. It's the effect of years of repressing his feelings, we decide. He needs a therapist, someone to talk to in a place where his slow-rising thoughts will not be filled in by my mother, where his sentences will be his alone to complete.

When we suggest the idea to mom, she replies, "It's not like John's not going to re-live his childhood."

It's hard to piece together a clear picture of my father's childhood, to make sense of the contradictions and changes. As a teenager, he boxed and then went into the ministry as if in repentance. In my uncle's photo album, there is a picture of Dad fighting in the Golden Gloves Championship. The caption reads, "Harvey going down for a TKO after being smashed with a solid right of John Howie in the background." My father stands, gloves poised, mouth open, head forward, ready to continue. Above the photo is the letterhead from a church in Jackson, Mississippi, announcing that John Howie will be speaking at an evening worship on the topic "Christ Above All." Between the clips, his mother has written in a cryptic scrawl, "John's interests are varied."

By the time Dad was preaching and boxing on the weekends, his own father, Virgil Rufus Howie, had been dead for six years. If you relied solely on family stories about my grandfather, you might never realize that he'd suffered through a debilitating battle with Parkinson's disease. Howie legends instead focus on his strength of character, his integrity, how he once hurtled a

courtroom table and socked an opposing attorney in the jaw for calling him a liar. Dad and his older brothers used to do one-handed push-ups and hold chin-up competitions while Virgil cheered from his wheelchair on the porch.

After his father's death, Dad built up his muscles as if in defiance of death and decay. He converted the one-car garage in the backyard into a gym. He lifted weights for hours a day until he could bench press well over his weight, do deep knee bends with 150 pounds on either side of a 45-pound bar. I have seen pictures of him from this time, a shirtless man-child, flexing his muscles and squinting into the Mississippi sun. His frame is wide and solid, rising from stomach to shoulders in a perfect "V". His arms are cocked tight to show off a pair of bulging biceps. Between them, the eyes are dark and unafraid; the smile is fresh and cocky. Come and get me, it says, this is what I am.

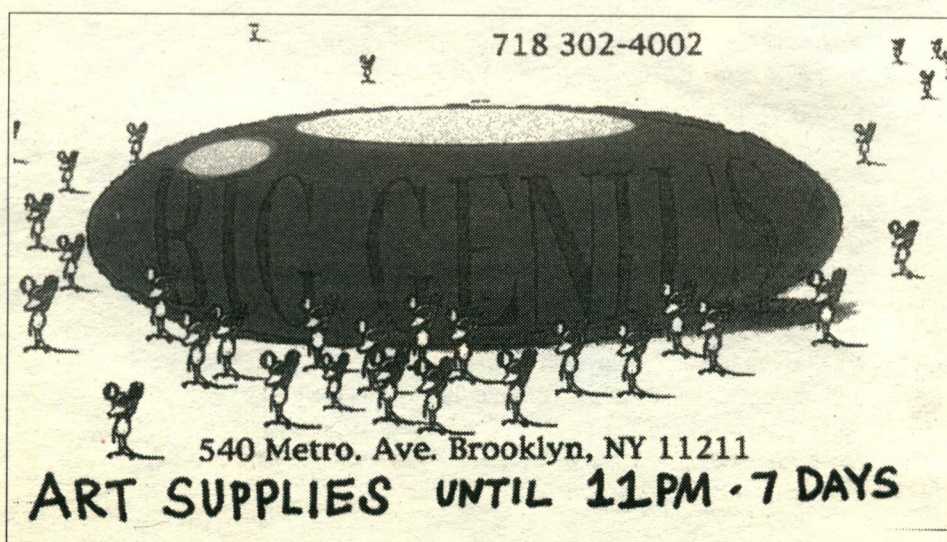
Although a part of my father's vitality has been lost, there is something essential that remains, something that has taken me years to recognize. Although my father has retreated, his brash determination occasionally shows itself in a form I can appreciate.

Recently, my father and I fished together in Maine, down the street from my parents' summer cottage, under a bridge spanning the Bagaduce River that caused the water to narrow and shoot through to one side or the other, depending on the tide. It was late afternoon, and the first fish we'd caught, a striped bass, worked it way off my hook and flopped down into the rocks.

"Get it, dad!" I yelled, too scared to reach down and grab the glimmering body that was sucking noiselessly at the abundant air. He made his way down the rocks, grabbed the fish between two thick fingers, not lifting it by the mouth, but holding it in place by the tail. The fish writhed back and forth, wrenched free from the rocks, leaving a trail of scales and blood, and dove into a crack between two boulders. Dad held on, his fingertips a ghostly white, fiercely gripping the silver tail. He had it, barely, but the look on his face told me he would not let it go, not for anything.

Afterwards, back in the car, he showed me where he had cut his knuckles on the rock. I stared at him and he stared back. In his wide-open eyes, I saw again the determination that had been so central to his life. His mouth, closed, did not move. He showed me his hands again, drew a line with his finger across where the rock had cut the skin off his knuckles. I followed the path carefully, traced its course through my memory. He turned his hand at an angle so I could see the blood that was rising between the white lines. Neither of us spoke. Behind our idling car, the river rushed silently underneath the bridge. The tide had shifted and the same ice-cold water that had come inland for a while now began to flow slowly back toward the sea.

Stephen S. Howie is a nonfiction writer living in the woods of Maine. His first book, *The Bluffton Charge: One Preacher's Struggle for Civil Rights* was released last spring by Mammoth Books to favorable reviews. He is currently co-authoring a book with Sasha Chermayeff about Andy Warhol's longtime agent, Frederick W. Hughes.



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