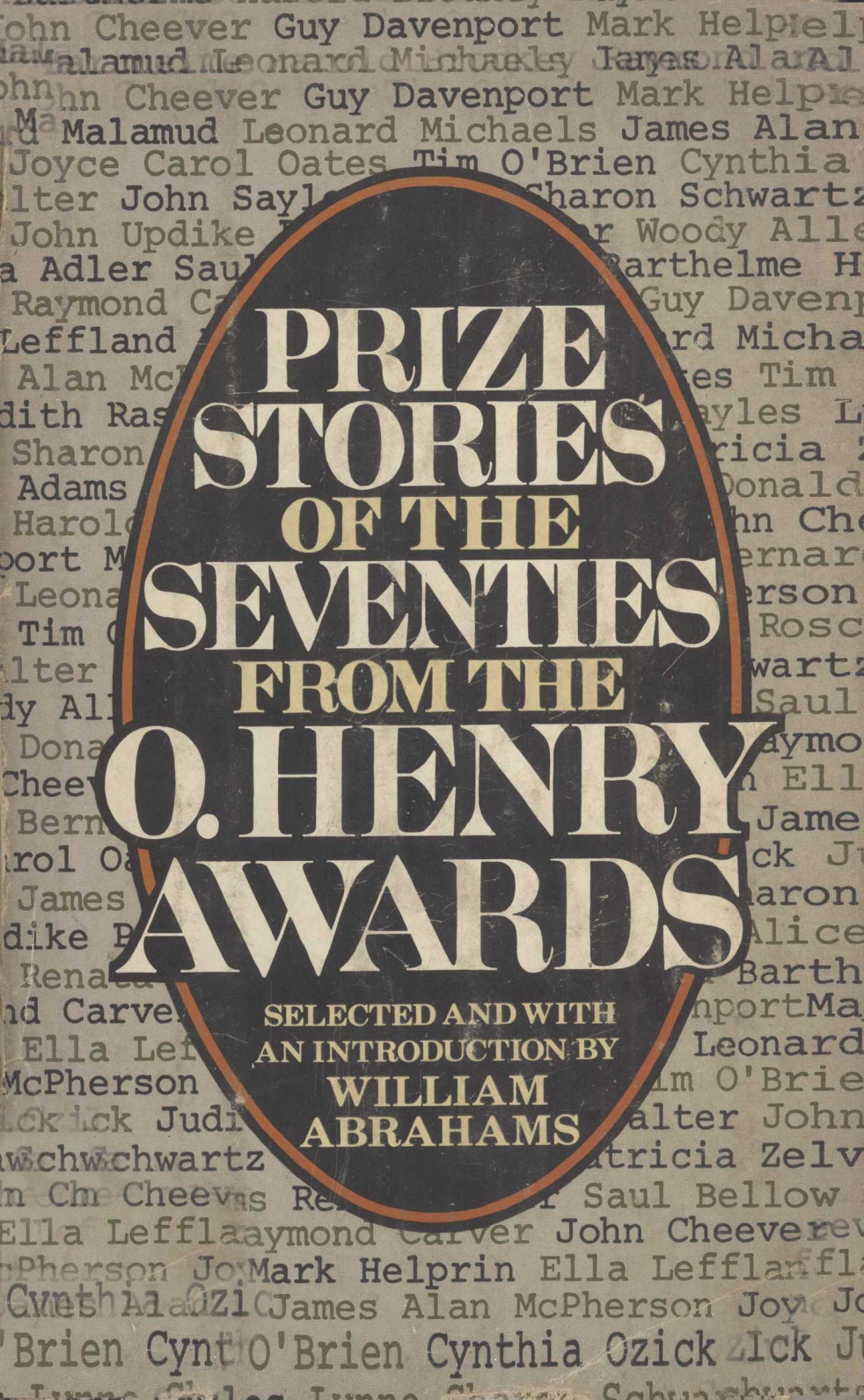
PRIZE STORIES OF THE SEVENTIES FROM THE O. HENRY AWARDS
SELECTED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

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INTRODUCTION

From the 1970s come these twenty-three stories: all are the work of American writers, all were first published in magazines, and subsequently, having been chosen for O. Henry Awards, were included in an appropriate volume in the ongoing annual series of *Prize Stories*. The ten volumes that span the 1970s include a grand total of 187 stories, winnowed out from the approximately ten thousand eligible for consideration. Given these rather awesome statistics, I must emphasize at the outset that the twenty-three stories collected here are not offered as a further refining or pruning into a kind of "best of the best"—actually, it would not have been difficult to conpile an alternative and equally impressive table of contents from among the 165 other O. Henry Award stories of the decade that for one reason or another have been reluctantly passed over.

But having begun on this note of caution, I don't hesitate to add that these twenty-three seem to me splendid exemplars of the quality and variety of the story in the 1970s. They repudiate altogether the notion—widely held in the previous decade—of the story as an endangered or outmoded species. The notion, it may be remembered, was fostered by practitioners of what was then known as the new journalism, and grew out of a palpable misconception: that the private "story" ought to mirror or illustrate in a quick, fictionalized way the public event or background contemporary with it. Surfaces accurately caught; details shrewdly observed; an event pinpointed; characters notated, so to speak, at a level of gossip—all this made for a high-colored, swinging reportage. It did not make for the life (or the view of life) that is the concern of the artist.

I think it fair to say that for most Americans there were two public political events of consuming importance in the 1970s. The first was the continuing, seemingly interminable war in Vietnam, its extension into Cambodia, along with public violence and protest at home, and its bleak, bitter, abrasive conclusion. The second was the criminal activity summed up in the word "Watergate," which led to the resignation (under threat of impeachment) of

the President of the United States, and the imprisonment of a number of his aides and colleagues. Neither of these public events —the shame and scandal they have come to represent, the psychic wound they inflicted upon us all, the debasement of the language they encouraged at the time (a premature fulfillment of Orwell's grimmest forebodings in 1984) and have encouraged since in the self-serving confessional "writings" of the ex-convicts—neither of these public events was dealt with in any extensive, overt way in the American short story. And indeed, since the journalists, new and old, along with the news-gathering and disseminating media, fulfilled the obligation for detail and more detail, there seemed nothing further required. Art could hardly better (or worsen) on a public level, the actual event; or imagine something more frightful than what we were shown on TV news broadcasts. (This truth would seem to be borne out by the frustrating experience of serious film makers attempting to come to terms with Vietnam.)

Not to treat a subject explicitly, however, is not the same as to ignore it, and writers don't live in a vacuum. The spirit of the age, the *zeitgeist*, is in their work—with the exception, possibly, of the rare fantast or historical fictionist who escapes into another age altogether. And the vast, generalized consequences of Vietnam and Watergate—the ever-widening gulf between public and private experience, between the language of politicians and the language of artists (not to say merely decent private individuals)—have formed a dominant theme, consciously or subliminally, in so many stories that it is a distinguishing characteristic of the literature of the 1970s. Again and again, however various the styles in which it is given form, we recognize it: alienation from others, a deep uncertainty in and of the self (who am I?), a tormenting awareness of alternatives, a distrust of accepted pieties. This is the emotional and psychological climate of the 1970s in which, unexpectedly, art thrived, perhaps because writers, turning to the privacy of individual experience for their subject, managed not to be bogged down in stereotypes of gloom and doom; perhaps because, unexpectedly again, comedy has been rediscovered as a means of expressing (and surviving) some of the bleaker truths about human experience.

This opposition between "private life" and "public event" has itself been made the subject of an odd, ironic, and memorable quasi-story—the author himself prefers to think of it as an "as-

semblage"—that I have included here: Guy Davenport's "The Richard Nixon Freischütz Rag." In it, Davenport introduces us, in a masterly set of juxtapositions, to Richard Nixon in China, on the occasion of his historic state visit; to Leonardo da Vinci in Florence, inventing the bicycle and beguiling a youthful admirer; to Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, as young women in love, in the fields below Assisi; and then, back to Mao's China again and public fatuity.

> On the Great Ten Thousand Li Wall, begun in the wars of the Spring and Autumn to keep the Mongols who had been camping nearer and nearer the Yan border from riding in hordes on their przhevalskis into the cobbled streets and ginger gardens of the Middle Flower Kingdom, Richard Nixon said:
> —I think you would have to conclude that this is a great wall.

Davenport remarks of his characters that they have "the instinct to forage," and Nixon, rather like a donkey, foraging in China, has his heehaw, setpiece interjections:

> —That's got to be a good poem, Richard Nixon said.
> —Poem by Chairman Mao, Comrade Tang offered.
> —He wrote that? Richard Nixon asked. Made it up?
> —At hard pass over Mountain Lu, Marshal Yeh said. Long March. February 1935.
> —My! but that's interesting, Richard Nixon said. Really, really interesting.

And in his final appearance—after the lyric outpouring that makes the private episode between Gertrude and Alice so magical —we hear the world's free-shooter (or the free world's shooter) in public with Chairman Mao:

> —The world is watching us, Richard Nixon said.
> —You mean Taiwan, Chairman Mao said.
> —No, Richard Nixon said, beaming, the world out there, the whole world. They are watching their TV sets.

Chairman Mao grinned and leaned back in his comfortable armchair.
—Ah so, he said, the world.

Of such is the world of public events, so essentially remote from us, as far as China, awaiting the patient scrutiny of journalists and scholars. But there is another world we are all familiar with, where the lives of invented men, women, and children, our lives, in all their complexity and ordinariness and (borrowing a phrase of Harold Brodkey's) "an accidental glory," are brought close to us. That world is in these stories, "events" to be welcomed and returned to.

—William Abrahams

PRIZE STORIES OF THE SEVENTIES

ROBINSON CRUSOE LIEBOWITZ

LEONARD MICHAELS

LEONARD MICHAELS' first book, *Going Places*, was nominated for a National Book Award, and his stories have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Paris Review*, *Esquire*, and elsewhere. This story, "Robinson Crusoe Liebowitz," appears in different form in his second book, *I Would Have Saved Them if I Could.*

Mandell asked if she had ever been celebrated.

She said, "Celebrated?"

"I mean your body, has your body ever been celebrated?" Then, as if to refine the question: "I mean like has your body like been celebrated?"

"My body has never been celebrated."

She laughed politely. A laugh qualified by her sense of Liebowitz in the bedroom. She was polite to both of them and good to neither. Certainly not to Liebowitz who, after all, wanted Mandell out of the apartment. But did she care what he wanted? He was her past, a whimsical recrudescence, trapped in her bedroom. He had waited in there for an hour. He could wait another hour. As far as she knew he had cigarettes. But, in that hour, says Liebowitz, his bladder had become a cantaloupe. He strained against the window. The more he strained the more he felt his need.

"I mean really celebrated," said Mandell, as if she had answered nothing.

Perhaps, somehow, she urged him to go on; perhaps she wanted Liebowitz to hear Mandell's lovemaking. Liebowitz says her motives were irrelevant to him. His last cigarette was smoked. He wanted to hear nothing. He wanted to piss. He drew the point of

a nail file down the sides of the window, trailing a thin peel, a tiny scream in the paint. Again he strained. The window wouldn't budge. And again. Nothing doing. At that moment, says Liebowitz, he noticed wall-to-wall carpeting. Why did he notice? Because he couldn't piss on it. "Amazing," he says, "how we perceive the world. Stand on a mountain and you think it's remarkable that you can't jump off." In our firm Liebowitz is considered brilliant. He should have done better in life. But there is no justice. He continues:

"My body," said Mandell, "has been celebrated."

Had that been his point all along? Liebowitz wondered why he hadn't been more direct, ripping off his shirt, flashing tits in her face: "Let's celebrate!" She was going to marry a feeb, but that wasn't his business. He had to piss, he had no other business.

"I mean, you know, like my body, like, has been celebrated," said Mandell, again refining his idea. It was impossible for Liebowitz, despite his pain, not to listen—the sniveling syntax, the whining diction—Liebowitz says he tasted every word, and, in that hour, while he increasingly had to piss, he came to know Mandell, through the wall, palpably and spiritually to know him: "Some smell reached me, some look, even something about the way he combed his hair. . . . I'd never seen him, but I knew he had bad blood."

As for Joyce, a shoe, on its side, in the middle of the carpet—scuffed, bent, softened by the weight of her uncelebrated body—suffused the bedroom with her presence. He could see the walking foot, the strong, well-shaped ankle, peasant hips, elegant neck, and fleshy, boneless, Semitic face. A warm, receptive face until she spoke. Then she had personality. It made her seem taller, more robust. She was robust, heavy bones, big head, with dense yellow-brown hair, and her voice was a flying bird of personality. Years had passed. Seeing the hair again, and Joyce still fallow beneath it, saddened Liebowitz. But here was Mandell. There'd be time for them.

"Has it been five years?" asked Liebowitz, figuring seven. "You sound wonderful." She said he sounded "good." He regretted "wonderful," but noticed no other reserve in her voice, and, just as he remembered, she seemed to love telephone, to come at him much the thing, no later than yesterday.

"The thing," says Liebowitz, quoting one of his favorite au-

thors, "is the thing that implies the greatest number of other things." If Liebowitz had finished his dissertation he'd have a Ph.D. He had too much to say, he says. Years ago his candidacy lapsed.

When his other phone rang he didn't reach for it, thus letting her understand how complete was his attention. She understood. She went on about some restaurant, insisting let's eat there. He didn't consider not. She had said, almost immediately, she was getting married to Hyam T. Mandell, "a professor."

Did Liebowitz feel jealousy? He didn't ask professor of what or where does he teach. Perhaps he felt jealousy, but, listening to her and nodding his compliments at the wall, he listened, he thinks, less to what she said than to how she spoke in echoes. Not of former times, but, approximately these things, in approximately the same way, he felt, had been said in grand rooms, by wonderful people. She brought him the authority of echoes, just the thing; and she delivered herself too, a hundred thirty-five pounds of shank and dazzle. Even in her questions: "Have you seen . . . ?" "Have you heard . . . ?" About plays, movies, restaurants, Jacqueline Kennedy; nothing about his wife, child, job, or spirits. Was she indifferent? embarrassed? a little hostile? In any case he liked her impetuosity. She poked, checked his senses. He liked her, Joyce Wolf, on the telephone; and he remembered that waiters and cabbies liked her, that she could make fast personal jokes with policemen and bellhops, that she tipped big, that a hundred nobodies knew her name, her style. Always *en passant*, very much here and not here at all. He liked her tremendously, he felt revived; not reliving a memory of younger days, but right now, on the phone, living a particular moment among them. For the first time, as it were, that he didn't have to live it. She has magic, he thought, art. She called him back to herself. Despite his grip on the phone, knees under the desk, feet on the floor, he was like a man slipping from a height, deliciously. He would meet her uptown in forty minutes. Did he once live this way? Liebowitz shakes his head. He smirks. He used to be crazy, he thinks.

On his desk lay a manuscript that had to be proofread, and a contract he had to work on; there was also an appointment with an author . . . but, in the toilet with electric razor and toothbrush, Liebowitz was purging his face and shortly thereafter he walked into a Hungarian restaurant on the East Side. She arrived

twenty minutes later in a black, sleeveless dress; very smart. He felt flattered. He took her hands. She squeezed his hands. He kissed her cheek, he said, "Joyce." The hair, the stretch of white smile, the hips . . . he remembered, he looked, looked and said, "It was good of you, so good of you to call me." And he looked into his head. She was there too. Joyce. Joyce Wolf who got them to the front of lines, to seats when the show was sold out, to tables, to tables near windows, to parties. . . . Sold out you say? At the box office, in her name, two tickets were waiting. But Liebowitz remembers, once, for a ballet, she failed to do better than standing room. "I didn't really want to go. I certainly didn't want to stand," he says. "Neither did she. But the tickets were sold out. Thousands wanted to go." She scratched phone numbers till her fingernail bled. That evening they stood with pelvises against a velvet rope and hundreds stood on either side and behind them, jammed into a narrow aisle. The effluvia of a dozen alimentary canals hung about their heads. Blindfolded, required to guess, Liebowitz would have sworn they were in a delicatessen. Lights dimmed. There was a sudden, thrilling hush. Joyce whispered, "How in God's name can anyone live outside New York?" She nudged him and pointed at a figure seated in the audience. He looked, nodding his head to show appreciation for her excitement and her ability to recognize anyone in New York in almost total darkness. "See! See!" He nodded greedily, his soul pouring toward a glint of skull floating among a thousand skulls, and he begged, "Who? Who is it?" He felt on the verge of extraordinary illumination when a voice wailed into his back: "I can't see. All year I waited for this performance and I can't see. I can*not* see." Liebowitz twisted about and glanced down. A short lady, staring up at him, pleaded with her whole face. He twisted frontward and said, "Move a little, Joyce. Let her up against the rope." Joyce whispered, "This is the jungle, schmuck. Tell her to grow another head." He was impressed, says Liebowitz. During the ballet he stood with the velvet rope in his fists, the face between his shoulder blades. And now, going uptown in the cab, his mouth was so dry he couldn't smoke. After all these years, he was still impressed. Joyce got them tickets. She knew, she got what she wanted. Him, for example, virtually a bum in those days, but nice-looking, moody, a complement, he supposes, to her, though he doesn't really know why she cared for him. He was always miserable. "Per-