

MANDELSTAM, MYSELF INCLUDED

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FORWARD

Like all of her visual and verbal art, Mary Susannah Robbins is full of surprises. I have never met Susannah in person, though we have spent many hours together on the telephone. During these conversations, which span more than a decade, I knew her as an extraordinarily engaged antiwar activist, writer, and editor who was making powerful and unique contributions to the contemporary movement to rescue us from the black hole of endless wars. One cannot talk for long with Susannah without sensing the profound compassion that drives her passion for peace. As a contributor to a couple of her splendid books--*Against the Vietnam War: Writings by Activists* and *Peace Not Terror: Leaders of the Antiwar Movement Speak Out Against Foreign Policy Post 9/11*--I was at first skeptical about the prospects of her actually getting publishers and an audience for these two volumes amid the deafening drumbeats of war that continually thunder across our mass media. But her profound humanistic faith and dedication enabled her to make these books into material forces that have allowed many readers to hear a very different kind of music and to see possible ways out of war's cesspools and quicksands.

In our conversations about these books, only bit by bit did I get hints that Susannah—always modest and unassuming—was also a poet and visual artist with many highly recognized creative achievements. This present volume gives all of us an opportunity to range through some of the dimensions of her creative imagination.

The prose sketches and stories are a swirling kaleidoscope of memory and fantasy, in which the most concrete and telling details of everyday experience swirl around a quest for the meaning of individual and social life. As she put it in the closing words of the sketch titled “Flavor”:

“I have to go back to reality now,” Emil had said after lunch. I had felt surprised and disappointed, knowing that all he was going back to was a cluttered apartment.

He had smiled at me. “You have to distinguish between significance and reality,” he said kindly.

Could I?

Although most of these stories are very personal, they are also essentially political, for, as Susannah says, “Everything I have ever done has been political.” What she means by political always comes back to the personal, because what she calls “home” is central to her quest. In these stories one can sense the profound loss and devastation inflicted on individuals, our nation, and the world by those unending wars we have been forced to wage by those who have stolen our country. This is summed up in a beautiful one-line paragraph that isn’t even a sentence: “This country that used to be our home.”

“Home” takes on a deeper poignancy and richness in *Lance, A Vietnam Vet: A Love Story*, her collection of poems about her love for a homeless vet who finds his home with her until he leaves her with a loveless home. But though her loss is profound, the poems preserve her love and her experience with this man who embodies so much of what she is trying to tell us.

Perhaps Susannah sums up this book—and all her other achievements—most succinctly in these words: “If I have done anything in my life it has been to preserve the world and its experiences.”

H. Bruce Franklin

Newark, NJ

May 2010

INTRODUCTION

I have been lucky to know a lot of people with very high principles who were peace activists. Among them were academics, artists, and writers, and veterans. Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Staughton Lynd, Dave Dellinger. H. Bruce Franklin. Einstein, Meyer Schapiro, David Reisman, Richard Wilbur, and Stephen Sandy have been among my acquaintances and influences. They have inspired my life and formed my beliefs.

In the Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth has a section titled “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man”. I was born in Randolph, Vermont on eighty acres of farmland and wild pasture and we had the place for many years. I grew up there and in New York City. Nature is very important in my life and should be in every child’s life. Living in the country makes one feel free and develops one’s soul in ways that are not possible in an urban setting. I was very lucky in this way also.

In 1966, when I was a student at Harvard, I went on a trip to Vietnam with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). That trip changed my life. It is described in detail in the chapter “Hanoi” in my memoir, *Earth, Air, Fire and Water: A Memoir of the Sixties and Beyond*. There was a bombing raid and I got separated from my group. As a result I met Ho Chi Minh. That meeting is described in this book.

In 2003 I flew to Iraq and saw an ambulance blowing up. This inspired me to do my collection of essays, *Peace Not Terror*.

I majored in English Literature at Harvard and received my Ph.D. in English Literature from Boston College. I had wanted to be a poet since I was six years old. I took a Freshman Seminar with Stephen Sandy that encouraged me to keep writing. In the 1980, my writing expanded to short stories. Also in the 1980s, I studied art in the Boston area and had 30 shows. I have etchings in The Fogg Museum, The Smith College Museum of Art, five etchings and a plate in The Loeb Art Center at Vassar, works in the estates of Meyer Schapiro and Victor Weisskopf, and works in private collections all over the world.

My mother was an artist and an editor. She studied at the Art Students League and worked at Dodd, Mead and Farrar and Rinehart. She later did botanical drawing at The Harvard Herbarium.

My father was a world famous mathematician. He wrote, with Harold Courant, a book titled *What Is Mathematics?*, higher mathematics for non-mathematicians, which was praised by Einstein and is still a classic today. His politics were left wing in the 1930s. He went down to Harlan County to help the striking miners. He became somewhat disaffected after the Soviet Union turned into a totalitarian regime. He got Jewish dissident mathematicians out of the Soviet Union. He started a firm, Statistica, with his lawyer, for which he traveled around testifying in academic anti-discrimination cases.

My mother's politics were liberal. We went as a family to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak in Boston and I went twice to marches in Washington during the Vietnam War. In 1999 I published *Against the Vietnam War: Writings By Activists*, a collection of essays by Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Staughton Lynd, Dave Dellinger, H. Bruce Franklin, David Cortright, David Harris, Joan Baez, Carl Oglesby, and others, including veterans. *Peace Not Terror* includes essays by many of the same writers. My memoir, *Earth, Air, Fire, and Water: A Memoir of the Sixties and Beyond*, describes my upbringing in New York, Chapel Hill, and Vermont and the people my parents knew: Einstein, Aldous Huxley, Meyer Schapiro, Woody Guthrie, Carl Sandburg, Alfred Stieglitz, Alan Lomax, David Reisman.

It also describes the influence on me of several writers, including Richard Wilbur, and my relationships with Howard Zinn, Staughton Lynd, Carl Oglesby and H. Bruce Franklin when I was editing *Against the Vietnam War* and *Peace Not Terror*.

When I taught at Vassar College, from 1973 to 1976, I wrote *Amelie*, a book of feminist poetry, and also a lot of poetry inspired by the beautiful campus which an arboretum with plants from all over the world. After I left Vassar I wrote *Lance, A Vietnam Vet: A Love Story*, about the man I knew who was to become the inspiration for most of my political writing. He was in the Army in Vietnam and returned to join Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

I was a street singer for a number of years, singing and playing the guitar, and my memoir includes the libretto to a musical, "You'll Never Be the Same!"

My summers in Vermont where I was born, my life at the Putney School where I attended boarding school, and my mother's love of nature have informed my life and have made me extremely interested in the environmental movement.

My book of poems, *Eclipse of the Moon*, is forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press at the end of 2010.

I am a peace activist and continue to work toward a world without war.

I run my own editorial service and have edited books published by Simon & Schuster, Houghton Mifflin, and Knopf.

Mandelstam, Myself Included and *Lance, A Vietnam Vet: A Love Story* are books about people I was very close to and loved extremely much. We were caught in wild and complicated circumstances, and it only by dint of great effort that I have separated one person from another.

The Vietnam War still looms large in American history and society. It colors everything. The wars in Iraq and Vietnam show that we have not learned the lessons of Vietnam. The militarization of our society can only lead to more violence at home and abroad.

The veterans returning from Iraq are forming Iraq Veterans against the War just as the returning veterans from Vietnam formed Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Students for a Democratic Society still exists on campuses across the country. Antiwar movements continue to push for an end to war even as the tensions in the Middle East and Southeast Asia escalate. Human survival and the survival of the planet are at stake.

CHAPTER 1

THE CHUDNOVSKYS

My father and I knock on the blue door. The Chudnovskys are staying in Latvi Zahde's mother's old apartment – the spatial equivalent of mercy – the mama and papa had been beaten by the KGB before their escape. There is much unlocking – this is New York, near Columbia. Mama, her skin white and smooth as though with illness but plump with health and anxiety and rotten food, opens her eyes wide and at my father's, "Dis ist meine kinde," takes my hand in her strong white hands and kisses me with great force on both cheeks. The father is ill, but better – I speak no German or Yiddish, and my year of college Russian only slowly returns. But the brothers are equal to the situation. Grisha, in bed. Myasthenia gravis permits a lot of talk. David, the American-seeming elder, pumps me with questions, and Grisha's eyes alive with laughter and pity, and weakness. In an hour I find out all I have wanted to know about things in Russia; they are worse than I knew. But talking of Pushkin, Brodsky, Babel, the room is content, filled to oblivion with the incense of praise. I hear of the horrors, but they were only pain – we're here.

We joke. "I myself have a strong prejudice against German Jews," says my father. "And I have inherited it," I say. "Ah well," my father says, "let us leave anti-Semitism to the goyim." We applaud with our souls, weak with relief – for all of us, some things are through. We caress the distinctions as though they were the made to last – the distinctions that make up our composite pain, every day, here we sit and discuss them – as though they no longer exist, as though soon we will be carried off to heaven, and none will be the wiser. But the effort is much – tired, I remember myself. My mother is also present in the

room, an arm of strength and a tongue of fire, for today is her birthday, and she guards my strength and gnashes her teeth over Grisha's weakness. But she comes too soon.

It is too warm for April, and as we walk, David and my father and I, down the wide winding light streets, I ask, "How is it to be suddenly here?" "The greatest pleasure," he says, his jacket blown back from his heavy body by the wind, "is to see people like your father, and many Jews." "Oh yes," sighs my father. "I'm an antisemite myself." "So far," David says, "I am more pro-semitic than anti-semitic." "I'm neutral," I said, "but I want them around." "Oh, YES."

"Grisha looks like a character from Dostoevski," says my father to David, "The Possessed." I agree. Later I tell him that I have an old life of Dostoevski with woodcuts, and Grisha looks like the visions of Christ.

And if all distinctions could be shrugged off, as easily as we shrug them off this afternoon – the result would be a rose window, manifesting in itself all distinctions. My father says, "I can only see the Chudnovskys every few days – it makes me too sad. Not they, but what they mean – they're the lucky ones." And we are the lucky ones – where we are, only within is there pain – outside, through the window, the afternoon calls softly.

CHAPTER 2

IN VIETNAM WITH AN SDS GROUP IN 1966

We were introduced to Ho Chi Minh. He sat very still in brilliant sunlight in a jungle. Thin, with white and black hair, bare torso and black pants, cross-legged. With red and black beetles moving along the fronds of the trees, it seemed a hallowed place. Someone called it "the glade".

He said he had a terrible headache, myalgia. I offered him a Bufferin from a little tin I had with me. I said, "Take two."

He refused them. He said, "I'd rather have mushrooms." He said a medic was coming to bring him some bean soup that would revive him.

Somehow I got separated from the group. It was night. A bomb burst in front of me. I had crawled up a sandy bluff and peered through some bushes and trees, over the edge. I saw a white ambulance marked with a red cross be hit by a bomb. It exploded in yellow flames. My forehead and eyebrows got singed. I ran down a red hanging rope ladder that was attached to the top of the bluff. Someone called, "Are you all right?" A railroad track moved along the sand. I followed the track. It was wooden and mouldy.

A train roared off to my right out of a roundhouse in a hill, along another track.

The bomb burst in front of me. I could hear a piece of the shell land to my right.

I went straight up in the air.

I felt myself come down on my left knee.

"Are you all right?" a man called again.

He reached out his arm to me. "You should never have gotten separated from the group." He drew me over. People were eating bowls of rice and fish in circle.

Bomb fragments had gotten into the skin of my stomach.

We ate and then we walked over the gray wet sand to the plane.

Two tanks had rolled in at an angle behind me. The sand was pink, many colored. They shot screaming flame into the air. "Howitzers," someone said. The tanks had shot a yellow plane. It exploded and men parachuted down, landed. "The loss was ours," a voice said.

A sort of crater appeared in the sand.

Someone said, "I wish this terrible war were over. I wish they would stop bombing. Death to the invaders!"

I saw yellow flames coming in many directions I was terrified. My skirt and blouse were burned black. Someone said. "You should have used flame retardant on your clothes. You got caught in the crossfire."

Our plane was hit by a shell on the way home. I thought I just didn't care.

When I got back to Cambridge it was raining. I went to my mother's apartment and wept and wept and wept.

"You should have told me you were going," she said.

She set the alarm and I took a nap. It was Sunday afternoon. Then I got up and went back to Radcliffe.

"Don't tell anybody," the SDS people had said. I didn't tell anyone but my parents and my closest friend for a long time.

CHAPTER 3

THE CAMP

Dawn broke. The western coast of the Philippines caught the light first in its mountains. The light swept gradually downward. Kim Ti Ngoan awoke, stretched, and remembered. Did she remember, or was she moving toward something, something bright and alive, beyond the tunnel of darkness that was the camp? "We'd Rather Die," the sign on the building behind her read. But, she wondered, hadn't they died? "We will never go back alive," they all said.

Never go back to Saigon. There was no Saigon any more. Only Ho Chi Min City, and death. Ahead was the dream of America. They had been promised America. And now they were told they couldn't go on, they must go back. There was nothing to go back to. "We'd Rather Die."

Then what was that bright reality she was moving toward? "I want to go home," she thought. But she had no home any more. No family, no country. And yet, she could almost reach that brightness. If she waited, it would come. It was a place in her, she thought, sitting up and looking at the choppy ocean. A way of being that she had not known since 1975. It was reality.

Her friends and neighbors were beginning to stir. Voices murmured. People moved about, getting water, greeting one another. It was reality, that vision. But where was it? Not ahead of her, in America, and not behind her, in Saigon, Ho Chi Min City. And yet she could almost reach it. "We'd Rather Die." Two men had set themselves on fire and burned to death when they were told that they had to go to Ho Chi Min City. They thought that if they went to Ho Chi Min City, they would be killed as spies. That the government would think that they had spent all this time being trained as spies by the CIA. Ho Chi Min City was Death. Then what was that bright reality? She was going toward it, it was moving closer. She could almost reach it. Something she had known, that would come back. What would come back? Kim shifted position irritably, trying to figure it out. Her family was dead. They couldn't come back. Saigon was gone. The dream of America was gone. What was left? If she stayed in the camp long enough, she thought she might reach that place, that bright reality. It was getting closer.

And then Ta Thi Ba came running through the camp. He was shouting. "They are going to make us leave!" he screamed. He threw himself on the ground. People began weeping. Where would they go? Kim wondered. She had been moving forward. And now to be forced back. Not back. To some new world, or death, and there would be an immeasurable distance between her and the past and what she was trying to reach. To a cold place, a different place, and she would never go home again. The time in the camp had been like the birth canal, she thought, with reality at the end of it. Now to go back across the sea would be to be cut off from the vision that had nourished her. She would be disconnected from her world. "We'd Rather Die." What should she do?

Ho Chi Min City loomed on the far shore, remote, icy, beautiful, dazzling.

CHAPTER 4

MANDELSTAM, MYSELF INCLUDED

"The trick is, not to think what might happen." Well, I'll tell you, that's a loaded gun. I can't go back into anything – a poem, a relationship, a mood, a stage. What might happen as a result of living in the present is a perpetual future. In fact, the future seems to have been inserted between the past and the present, and the superego between the id and the ego. I'll never go back.

Annie's gallery didn't accept my prints, and Zack says it's because, even though Annie carries 1930s realism, "all her current stuff is very optimistic – beaches and things – very pretty." "Oh," I said, "well, I lacerate myself all the time to make my pictures less pretty. I mean, I thought they were pretty. I thought you had to be exploding with angst to get into a gallery." But what Annie's saying is, reality is only in the past; the present is a dream of the future, unless you stick the future between the past and the present, and then you're nowhere. Well, I'll go along with that, except that, damn it, when I paint I try to

get back to the reality of the past, the reality that's covered up by the fluffy, dimwitted present. Poetry used to be a way of making things come together. And it's not just a question of making things come together or apart: it's a question of getting everything in. And if you make things come together, do you have to leave something out? Does it have to be positive?

Mandelstam has an evocative, elusive style that alludes to things that aren't there; what's important in poetry is what's left out.

Silence of the brute-dark soul:

Sad and good silence

Like young dolphins

Sounding the grey gulfs, the world

That's how I feel. Everything suggests what's left out. If it weren't for Mandelstam, there would be nothing there. I think that in order to sort of make up a sense of time, you have to assign certain feelings to certain portions of your life, and then say, "the past is red, the future is green, the present is yellow," but you're always arbitrarily inventing time, apportioning events and feelings to areas which you then arbitrarily cut off from one another. Because it's not time – that's like an archeological dig, and comes in layers, strata – it's what's known as "the psyche," which is in its turn another invention to distinguish something in this great unknown future we're living in, to say, "well, that's that," when of course it isn't at all. I told Barnaby that to me painting is about what's simple and writing is about what's complex, and in particular that writing concerns itself with issues of time, past, present, future, and the coalescence of all three, while painting simply says, "This is." You can then assign temporal values to painting if you choose or have to-- but I like that simple, "This is." When Hopkins says, "This is me, for this I came", – well, I used to think that I knew what that meant, but now I think it can be two things – and maybe all the best of everything can be these two things – I think it can be joy, exaltation, total rightness -- but I think it can also be a simple "this is," just being, or, if you will, hanging on. There's a lot to just hanging on that people haven't explored – hanging on without making something of anything – so that, as it happens, it makes itself – you can feel your flesh making itself, in the same way that I think a good picture makes itself. Painting is very much about flesh – flesh and clay and paint are one, if you ask me. And what's writing? The other side of things – the lightning in the flesh, godhead, if you will. But painting's very human, the image has a human soul, as imagistic poetry proves, too. And sometimes the question seems to be, "Do we want a human soul, or do we want to make something of ourselves?" What about people saying, "You'll never amount to anything?" Well, there's a whole school of writing and painting that's about what that amounts to. What does being human amount to? The littlest thing, a stone, amounts to more than we're capable of laying our hands on.

CHAPTER 5

THE GREATEST DISASTER IN HISTORY

He was walking around the room on his cast, going thump, drag, thump. He paused every now and then and took a swig from the bottle of wine he gripped in his right hand. It was very expensive wine for a very sorry occasion, he thought. Lu was curled up on the built-in sofa. She looked too angry to be asleep. Poor thing, he thought. No place to go. This is no place to go. Procul Harum was playing on the very expensive stereo. There was nothing else left in the room except a case of records and a pile of blankets.

"To life!" he said loudly, raising the glass. She curled into a ball and then flung herself into a sitting position and held out her hand for the glass he offered her. "The river next," he said, slurring slightly. "It's the greatest disaster in the history of the world." She lay down again. He took the top blanket from the pile and spread it over her. She closed her eyes, "Nap," she said, "no." "Don't." He held up the bottle. "Drink to life," he said loudly. "To life. It goes on." "Where will we be when we go out that door?" she asked. She was a little drunk now. "Not together," he said, "You'll leave first. We won't go together. Not now. It's the end." "The end of a perfect nightmare," she said, half sobbing. He wanted to get down on his knees to her, but there was the cast. He sat down beside her and touched her shoulder. "Never you mind, Lu," he said. "It was rotten. It was all my fault, Lu. Never you mind." Procul Harum began singing "A Whiter Shade of Pale". All his depression lifted. He raised his head to the bare wall. "Isn't it wonderful?" he said.

CHAPTER 6

SOMETHING ABOUT THE LIGHT

For fifteen years after he died she had it out with him, night after night, between affairs. When she was alone in bed she talked to him, and cried, and knew she loved him only, and was glad. Sometimes she repeated the furious things he had said when he had blamed her for everything. She would scream about him in her mind, and this seemed to settle all scores, and to make things square with her.

She thought of him kneeling with his head in her lap.

She thought of the time he had been sitting at the kitchen table and had put down his fork and put his head down on the kitchen table and said, "Marry me," and it had been too late.

It was too late for anything but her, she knew, and yet she felt that they could be reconciled.

One day she cried until she shrieked. After that it was better. It had stuck in her craw.

She thought of that afternoon in the Metropolitan, when they had been standing in front of Rembrandt's "Woman Cutting her Nails", and he had said, "Why is it so beautiful?" and she had said, from a place where no one could touch her, "It's because he's painting something so ordinary."

"No," he said, "it's something about the light."

Now she painted and painted and she could only get color, not light.

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