



An Interview with Paul Lisicky

By Elizabeth McCracken

AT LAST, THIS CONSOLATION OF MIDDLE AGE: I HAVE NOW KNOWN PAUL LISICKY for more than half my life, longer than I didn't know him. Truthfully, it's always felt that way. We met in 1988, in Iowa City—I remember singing his name to the tune of the Hallelujah Chorus: Paaaul! Lisicky! Paul Lisicky! Paul Lisicky!—but we came to really know each other in Provincetown, in the early '90s, when we were both second-year Fellows at the Fine Arts Work Center.

A confession: I've found writing about Paul and his work much harder than I'd imagined. How to sum him up, either the human being or the work? Paul Lisicky: whenever I drop his name to someone who's met him, that person says, "Oh, I *love* Paul Lisicky," and I always answer, "Paul Lisicky is the most lovable person on earth." The work, too, defies summary. I merely press it into the hands of those who haven't read it, and kvell with those who have.

Some writers *are* their work—you admire the slantwise sense of humor, a confidential tone, a penetrating insight. Somehow, though, what I love about Paul is different from what I love about his work. There's some overlap: his admiration of strangeness, his ability to put into words what I might otherwise think of as ineffable. The love of animals, which borders on the religious. But Paul the person is open and kind, game and comforting, and, at the right time—it is the deepest part of our friendship—hilariously crass, a brilliant deployer of off-color remarks. His work, though, is full of a stubborn brilliance, or a brilliant stubbornness. He refuses to choose or reduce in his work: he does everything. His work is brilliant on the subject of beauty, and it's sometimes very, very funny, but it's ruthless when it needs to be. It forgives no more than it should. It whispers in the reader's ear: the world is strange and dangerous. In the world of his books there is always this question: you are under threat, which in itself can be a kind of gift—what are you going to do about it?

There is nobody I would rather talk about writing with.

ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN: What do you remember about your first trip to Provincetown?

PAUL LISICKY: I was pretty young, early twenties. My mother and I were in Boston to pick up my brother, who had just finished his first year at the New England Conservatory. The three of us took a side trip to Provincetown, just two days, and I loved it so much it probably made me a little nuts. Biking through the dunes, watching the tide go in and out. Looking at men, of course, but trying to do that without my mom noticing. I remember ordering a Dos Equis beer at the old Moors Restaurant and mispronouncing it, even though I already knew how to say it. (I called it Dos Ek-wiss. *Why?*) The waiter winced, and I felt the sting like a slap: he had a blond, brushy mustache. Over the course of this trip, my brother had a toothache, which had developed into a serious dental emergency. There was a dentist in Wellfleet. I remember saying in a very proper voice, "I'd be happy to stay behind in Provincetown, while you and Michael go to Wellfleet." My mother already knew me too well and possibly pictured me doing God-knows-what in a little room above the A-House. "Oh no you don't," she said, and so I spent several hours in a dark waiting room in Wellfleet, pretending to read *Popular Mechanics*.

EM: The Moors! I think our friendship was deepened when we discovered our mutual, deep, instinctive love of the Moors. Do you think you can explain why those old unchanged restaurants are so pleasing? To me it feels akin to memoir: walking into a place from the past that instantly conjures up a lot of feeling.

PL: I'm sure our attraction to the Moors had something to do with our mutual sense of it as being endangered. It conjured up a real sense of time and place, when going out to eat was an adventure. I remember it being dark, cabiny: lots of traps and ropes and wood and portholes. Low ceilings. Maybe it even smelled of mildew. I'm sure it must have been a little nasty, but it filled us with joy, right? Who cared about the food? It had layers and levels. Even in anxious times, people probably want to be disoriented, even if lightly—which is to say, they want to feel alive. They want to be in their bodies, not just hovering. Provincetown, at large, always does a pretty good job of doing that for us, even in its current much tidier, wealthier incarnation. I think a good memoir does that too.

EM: You have lived and written in Provincetown over many years in many different ways: as a Fellow; as a resident in funny apartments, and

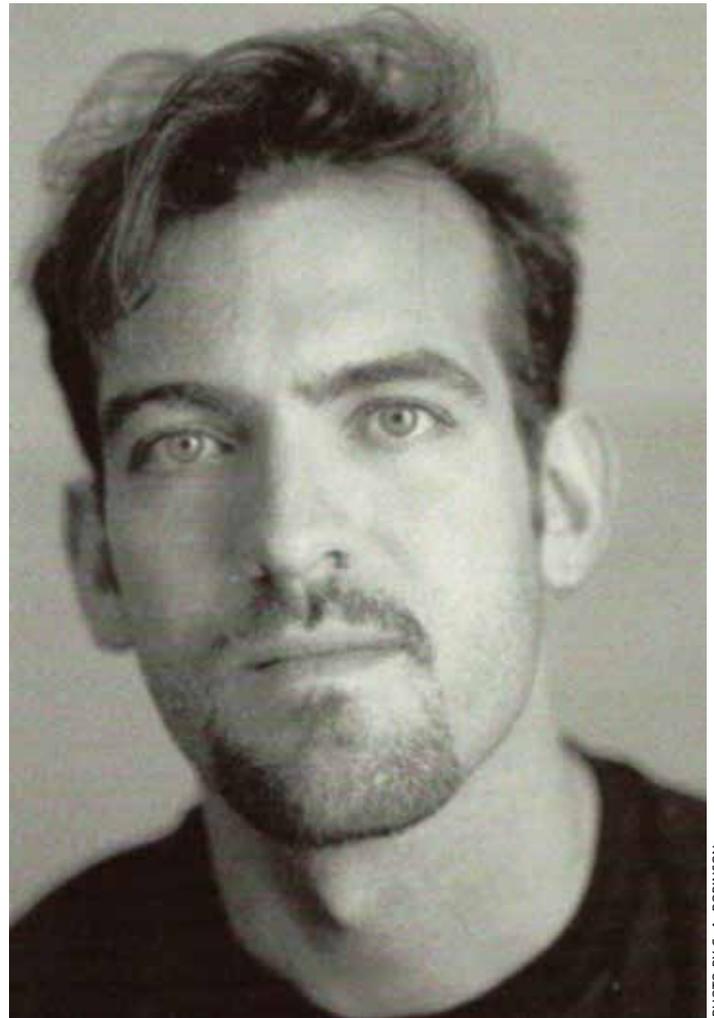
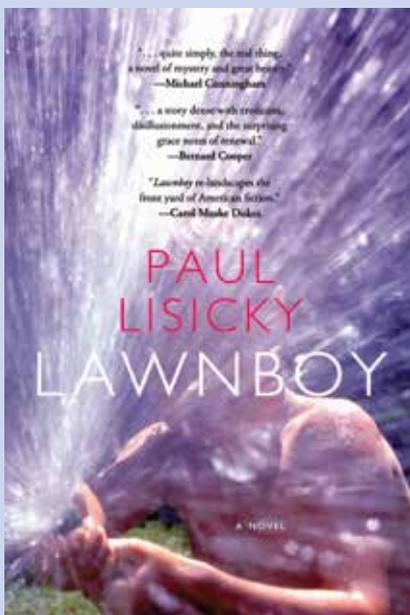


PHOTO BY C. A. ROBINSON

Paul at the Fine Arts Work Center, 1992

then a house; as a returning resident; and as a resident for the whole stretch of the summer. You and I recently spent a week at the Work Center, writing in our apartments, having a late lunch, and then going back to write. How has your process changed in your different stays in Provincetown? What does it bring to your writing now?



I lay there, trying to relax as his hands, strong and pressured, kneaded the muscles of my shoulders. I hadn't realized how tense I'd been. It felt terrific actually, although it hurt like a blowtorch, like he was writing his name onto my skin. Little utterances emanated from my mouth. After a while I moved into a space beyond thought. It only took minutes. I found myself floating, backstroking through a pool the size of space. Stars fizzled out, and I looked over my shoulder and saw a little earth turning in the darkness, silent. Even from this place I could see it diminishing. Even from this safe place I saw great forests burning down, towers crumbling, vast countries of people scrambling for food. I saw that there wasn't very much time.

— from *Lawnboy* (1998)

PL: Oh gosh, I love this question. I've had so many different lives in this town, and you know that better than anyone. It's funny: I wrote big portions of *Lawnboy* during my time as a Fellow and during my years in town afterward, but the real structure of that book came to me in Iowa City, when Mark and I spent a semester in Gerald Stern's house. I had a hard time focusing in Provincetown back in the '90s. There was so much life in the air that I didn't want to miss any of it. I wanted to be out on the street, I wanted to go to Kook, I wanted to go to the Love Shack, I wanted to hang out at Spiritus till two in the morning, etc., etc. I often felt agitated at my desk, with a feeling that I should shackle my left leg to my chair. That feeling subsided somewhat once I moved into 19 Pearl Street [where Lisicky lived with his now ex-husband, Mark Doty]. But honestly? It felt like the real writing happened elsewhere, in Houston, in Iowa City, on our visiting semesters. I'm not saying that Provincetown wasn't wonderful for my writing. In fact, I often think of my writing as written out of a Provincetown sensibility (does that sound pretentious?), but I needed to take it elsewhere in order to give it some room to breathe and grow.

I've been coming back to Provincetown pretty regularly since 2010, after about three years AWOL. I stay at Polly [Burnell]'s apartment or at FAWC, and the irony is I come back here to write now. I don't know if that's because the atmosphere in town's changed, or I've changed, but I don't have that "missing out" feeling anymore when I sit down to work. Provincetown doesn't feel as hormonal or as overloaded as it once did, but maybe that's because I've spent so many years in big cities. It was so wonderful writing this past September, knowing you were nearby, and passing that energy back and forth. It felt like we were taking care of each other, each other's work. And we were in sync with the town, with each other.

EM: Your forthcoming book, *Later*, is about Provincetown (among other things, as your work is always about many things). And I think of you as a writer obsessed with place. What made you write about Provincetown now?

PL: I'd wanted to write about Provincetown for twenty years, specifically about those first years when the two of us were here, when the town was a haven for people with HIV and AIDS. That simultaneous sense of utopia and dystopia—and the village born out of that contradiction. A safe place in which the (mostly) young are decimated by illness. So much feeling binding people together: solidarity and tenderness and gallows humor and boredom and helping one another out—almost



A caricature of Paul drawn on a cocktail napkin by Alison Bechdel, Washington, DC, 2012

automatically. The possibility of emergency at any time. How does that affect who and how you love? How do you get through the day if the future isn't guaranteed?

I can't say what initially possessed me to write about it now. Maybe it had something to do with the advent of PrEP, and the culture's unspoken desire to put the Epidemic in the long, long ago past. To make it unreal. To mythologize. I was at Yaddo in 2015, my father had just died, and rather than write about him, I started writing about Provincetown. I worked like a mad person for weeks, eight hours a day, but felt some anxiety about the project's relevance for a reader right now. I put it aside for some months. Fast-forward to the election of 2016, and suddenly the atmosphere of precariousness felt eerily real again. I went back to the book and opened it up some more. I've always been



FAWC group photo taken in the Province Lands, 1992: (from left) David Fludd, Robert Siegel, Matt Harle, Lee Boroson, Paul, Andrew Norton, Mindy Mills, Jane Fine, Joshua Clover, Janice Redman, Linda Matalon, Matt Klam, Joy Nolan, Itty Neuhaus, Lucy Greal, and Janet MacFadyen

PHOTO BY JOEL MEYEROWITZ



PHOTO BY GREY DEY

interested in how people get through days of great difficulty. Unexpectedly, it's turned out to be a book about hope, and constructing the kind of future we might want. But it's also about ghosts and animals and how the unseen shapes us too.

EM: I always think of you as a writer of both great specificity and very large ideas: everything you've just said, climate change, longing, home, etc. When I knew I would write about you, one of the things I thought about was how, in your work, you don't choose. You don't choose genre over genre; you don't choose idea over idea. You are both hilarious and devastating. I gave *The Narrow Door* to a student who's working on a memoir, and she said, What's it about? And I found I almost didn't want to answer, because I knew she would love it and I didn't want to reduce it. How do you know when divergent threads go together?

PL: Well, to me the dream is to make music out of language. And by music, I mean not a single melodic line, but harmony. Polyphony even. Multiple points in time, multiple notes, ringing together like chords. Sense escaping into pure sound. It's a doomed effort obviously when you're working with words alone, but I still want to approximate. Graphic novels are probably better suited to simultaneity because you can do so much with drawing. I'm thinking of a book like Richard McGuire's *Here*, which wants to capture the life of a single room over the span of countless years. Within a single panel, you might have four or more points in time talking to each other. The effect of that is thrilling.

My own more recent work also has its roots in a kind of multitiered poetry. Honestly, it starts on the simplest possible level—I write a section until I've said all I can say at the moment. I try to tune myself in to the primary image in that section, and that invariably signals the next image, and so on. So the hope is that all these sequences are permeating one another, inviting the reader to make and feel connections. I guess I never really know whether it's working or not when I'm doing it. Sometimes I write into that space where I'm wondering, man, this could possibly be *awful*. A total cringe-fest. But it's exciting to give yourself permission to be bad. That might just be where life begins. Once patterns start arising, I trust the work might have its own internal energy. This might just sound hopelessly abstract, too personal to parse. It doesn't make my work sound accessible, when that's one of my deepest desires for it. And I never use this kind of language to myself when I'm writing. The longer I write, the more I want to get back to someplace purely intuitive, which is to say a place that's a hell of a lot more complex than where I am when I'm *trying*.

EM: I'm so excited to hear you talk about music! I have never forgotten you telling me that sometimes you'll write a sentence of nonsense syllables, because you know what you want a sentence to sound like, but you're not yet sure of the words. I find that fascinatingly alien to the way I think about prose. Does all of the musicality come at the same time to you, the harmony of the threads, the melody of the sentences? And is it all in your head—do you read aloud when you work, or do you have perfect pitch internally?

PL: I remember saying that with the assumption you did it too! But that was once upon a time, and I'm afraid I've moved on from nonsense syllables, though I do read everything aloud as I write it. Over and over and over again, through many drafts. And the contour of a sentence means a lot to me, even if it's a relatively conversational sentence. Its breaths and stops. It builds and breaks. Sometime around *The Burning House*, my sentences started to get more austere, and I think a lot of that has to do with my interest in sound. Sentence as musical phrase. Plain speech as its own kind of music.

To be perfectly honest, a lot of that comes from my long admiration for *your* work and the exquisite phrasing of your first-person narrators.

(from top) Mark Doty and Paul, Provincetown, 2001; Dara Wier, Matthea Harvey, Paul, and Joy Williams, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2015; Suzanne Gardinier, Victoria Redel, Donna Masini, Rachel Eliza Griffiths, and Paul, New York City, 2017; Paul, Polly Burnell, and Jennie Livingston, 2016



PHOTO BY IRENE LIPTON

Paul

By Matthew Klam

PAUL AND I WERE FELLOWS IN FICTION AT THE FINE Arts Work Center in the winter of 1992–93 and were scheduled to read together on a dark and chilly Saturday night. Well before the reading, we met to create a promotional poster to be distributed around town, tacked to the bulletin board at the supermarket and stapled to telephone poles. After some deliberation we decided to include photographs of ourselves, and we discovered that we both had pictures of us with our mothers. About my photo all I can say is that it was taken at her birthday party and that I had chocolate icing all over my face. In the photo I'm staring at the camera, and my mother is looking at me with amusement. I guess this photo indicates that I'm a slob, a hedonist, and self-absorbed.

In Paul's photo, he is about the same age, maybe four years old, probably about three feet tall, very blond, with fine features. We can see that he's probably in love with his mother, and who wouldn't be? Paul's mother is a stylish mom of the sixties. She's quite capably waving at the camera, with the photographer positioned behind her, as she pilots a wooden speedboat across some body of water. Paul sits beside her, staring up at her white-framed cat's-eye sunglasses. She wears a

white blouse, the sleeves rolled up, a scarf on her head, and red lipstick. And on her lithe-looking tanned arm, the one that's waving, she wears a wedding ring, an engagement ring, and a small gold watch. Paul is observing her thoughtfully, with fascination and something else, a removed and slightly critical interest in her on what might be a more phenomenological level. In this way, Paul is observing all of us. His interest in her at this moment, his interest in others, in seeing into others, is a lovely indication of things to come, a foreshadowing of his calling, his need to express this love for us. ❏



Paul and his mother, Anne, Great Egg Harbor Bay, New Jersey

PHOTO BY ANTON LISICKY

I love how those characters have a life on the page, but a spoken-aloud life too: their words make shapes in the air. I just taught “Some Terpsichore” to my MFA students and as usual could not resist reading a long part of it aloud. And my students were so into it, so quiet with awe afterward, I almost looked out at them, and said, “Elizabeth? She’s mine.” But instead I behaved myself.

EM: Earlier you said something about your work being written out of a Provincetown sensibility. What does a Provincetown sensibility mean to you?

PL: When I first came to FAWC, I knew right away that the standards by which we valued work in grad school (say, publication by Knopf or Farrar, Straus and Giroux) didn’t count so much here. So many of my first friends in town—Polly Burnell and Richard Baker, James Esber and Jane Fine—were visual artists, and they were much more interested in the work itself rather than in the reception of the work. In truth, the greatest crime was to be “boring” and a lot of the well-received work at the time was thought to be repetitive, cheap. Coming into contact with

that kind of integrity changed me into my blood; it gave me a terrific sense of freedom and adventure. I know I’d have been a much different kind of writer, probably a lesser writer, if I hadn’t put in my time here.

As to a Provincetown sensibility? For me, it still means a kind of work that respects idiosyncrasy. It cares very little about the marketplace and it isn’t holding out a wet finger to the wind, even though it knows that art is always in flux. It isn’t afraid of color and vividness (what some would call beauty) because it knows those gestures are defying illness, hatred, and hurt. It’s wary of a faux-edginess, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t dark. It believes in play. It definitely cultivates humor, even wacky humor. It’s matter-of-fact about sex, as it believes that sex is central to who and what we are. Because its primary value is distinctiveness, it doesn’t care about competition, or trying to slay its rivals. Is love at its core? I’m still trying to get my head around that. ❏

*ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN is the author of two books of short stories, two novels, and one memoir. A new novel, *Bowlaway*, will be published by Ecco Press in 2019. She currently teaches at the University of Texas at Austin.*

Perhaps it has something to do with my father (his work ethic, his distrust of anything lazy or lax), but to my mind certain kinds of collaboration come too close to cheating. Performing should scare the shit out of you, turn you inside out, hang you upside down from your toes, take you within a hair's breath of your death. "The lights go down / and it's just you up there / getting them to feel like that," sings Joni, and that's exactly what I want. I tremble inside a splash of light, trying to stay on pitch. There's a burnt, electrical taste in my back fillings, and somewhere, deep in the darkness, a match flares; someone with a starved heart is calling out my name.

Then one voice, two, three—Kevin, Grace, Bernardine. What's going on? The three of them are harmonizing, working their way through the last verse, mulching, fertilizing the melody until it pops, bursts into a layered garden: irises, tulips staining each other with color, light. A breeze blows. The air scents. We're moving, alive, a wholeness. Throats are dusted with pollen. Tiny hairs tremble on the backs of our necks. And what would a single flower mean?

— from *Famous Builder* (2002)

The rising seas, the sinking lawn: none of that bothered me tonight. Laura's health and mind, shifting like water. Mister Greasy, Son of Unabomber. Far away. Yay. I walked from the bay. I could not see. But I might have been given a fresh brain, inspired and outwardly turned, and as soon as I spoke those words to the deep, I swear creatures started coming toward me. Squirrels, raccoons, deer, herons, catbirds, footfalls on fallen leaves. I was like someone out of a freaking folktale, who knew not death or the churned-up stomach but moved through the night with the lightest tread, changing it with the benevolence of his passing. Oh, I'm exaggerating for effect now, I'll admit it. Real contentment has none of that extremity or loopiness. No sign of endings, or the long black coat creeping out from behind a bush. What was I telling you? It was something like this: the world was made exactly for us and we'd never have to leave it.

— from *The Burning House* (2011)

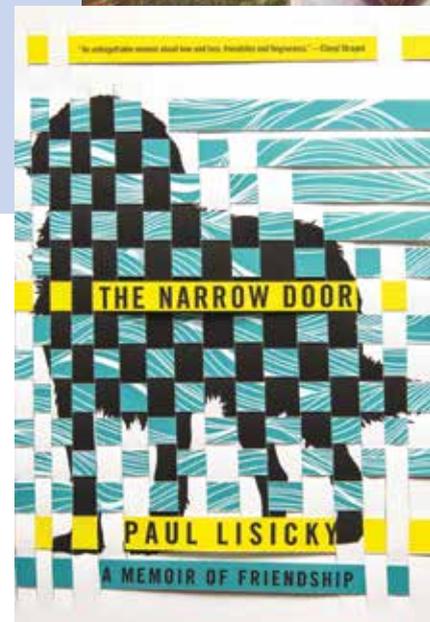
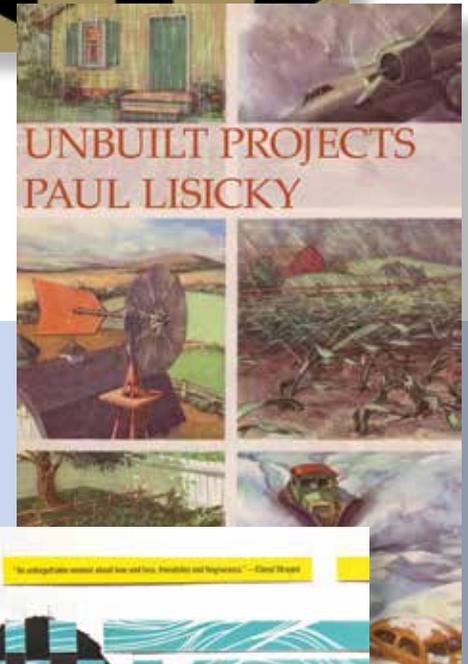
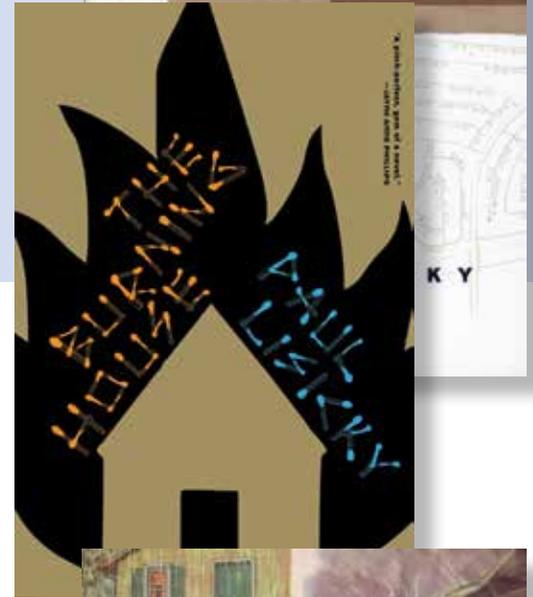
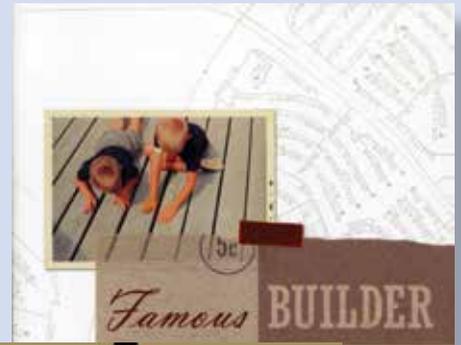
Yesterday I opened the door of the big blue cabinet. Varnishy, rich: the indescribable smell of our black and white cat, Portia, who'd hid in there in the last weeks of her life, on a shelf behind CDs. Could it still smell of her after all these years? Nine years. She'd died in there, at some point when we were out for an afternoon.

I went for a bike ride. To my right, a square of grass vibrated on someone's lawn: raw green, bleached out, almost too much to look at. A bunny froze on the edge of that square, waiting. I had a notion that my mother was relieved to get back the part of herself that could worry about me again. Then the bunny ran.

— from *Unbuilt Projects* (2012)

How tempting it is to do the alchemical now. To turn darkness into light, bread into flesh, tin into gold, wine into blood. It's what narrative wants of us, at least this part of the narrative. It wants to comfort, not that we should necessarily link comfort to weakness. Couldn't there be some rigor to comfort? I'd like to think story could give it that, to give the hurting in us strength and power. So we will not leave the page without reserving a pasture for darkness, inscrutability. If we don't acknowledge that pasture, if we don't respect the secret creatures that might be grazing there, those creatures may turn on us. They might loom and howl and bear down on us because they need to eat, as all creatures need to eat.

— from *The Narrow Door* (2016)



Paul

By Claire Vaye Watkins

PAUL LISICKY WAS A GIFT TO ME FROM MY HUSBAND, a lapsed Catholic whose new god is the sentence. Though my husband and I are both writers, reading aloud to each other has never been our custom. Yet Derek read me many sentences from Lisicky's *The Narrow Door: A Memoir of Friendship*. As I've said, this behavior was anomalous. I think the only other writers my husband has ever felt moved to read aloud have been thirteenth-century mystics. But if you know Paul Lisicky's work, you know this makes perfect sense. As I soon discovered, Lisicky is a visionary, at home among the seers.

If you don't yet know the Lisicky liturgy—*Famous Builder*, *The Burning House*, *Unbuilt Projects*, and his daring first, *Lawn-boy*—I envy you. Each book will break and rebuild you. *The Narrow Door* is immensely moving, and by “immensely moving” I mean to say inducing in this reviewer a crying jag so all-consuming and cleansing it might have been prayer. But *The Narrow Door* is also a stylistic tour de force. Lisicky threads together storytelling modes and materials a lesser writer would inevitably find irreconcilable, would hack into coleslaw and call it “braided.” I'm talking about myself here, as I've tried and failed to imitate Lisicky's prose many times.

How does he do it? I can't say for sure. An uncanny use of the present tense makes his narration both cool and urgent, Paul's narrator doppelgänger simultaneously ruminative with retrospection and afloat on the present moment. This temporal double-consciousness combines with a kind of fractal structure in a technique Paul describes as “queer time.” Indeed, it's as if he builds an intricate sculpture out of high Modernist technique and then somehow wires in a real, beating heart.

The Narrow Door is an arrestingly unique way of telling one of our oldest stories:

people go. This is an exceedingly rare sort of book, one that is genuinely avant-garde and, at the same time, as natural as gossip. It is a book about endings, the long good-byes we always knew were coming and yet could not imagine. Lisicky weaves love and grief in a completely new way—the warp is the human, the weft is everything beyond human control: storms, volcanoes, cancer. It is about the shimmering beauty we hope awaits on the other side. Also, Joni Mitchell.

Making it new is something hardly ever done, and in *The Narrow Door* Lisicky does it effortlessly, before our very eyes. Because I am a lucky duck, I have heard Paul read and speak several times, and then each time I've been changed by the experience. Paul is brilliant, warm, and supremely lucid about the art and craft of writing. Rumor has it he's even working on a book about Provincetown. So, read Paul Lisicky and receive visitation from your local oracle. ❏



Justin Torres, Claire Vaye Watkins, and Paul, Writing By Writers Conference, Tomales Bay, California, 2016

PHOTO BY PAMI HOUSTON

Paul

By Lisa Olstein

ONCE I SAT IN A DARKENED AUDITORIUM AS PAUL Lisicky stepped up to the microphone, opened his mouth, and a symphony came out. Perhaps not a symphony—I'm not sure that's precisely right, and in referring to someone with as much musical expertise as Paul, one should be precise—but without a doubt, he began to read from a piece of new work and a complex orchestration enveloped me. What I mean to say is that over the ensuing timeless-feeling duration (thirty minutes, forty?) I experienced the kind of transport—physical, emotional, intellectual—usually conjured by complex pieces of music exquisitely composed and passionately performed by a stage full of expert players. The room, its semi-comfortable seats, its people who I knew and didn't know, loved or didn't even like or might never even realize existed, disappeared. My life became the life of the work Paul shared, my consciousness was carried beyond myself and into myself; both were parts unknown now newly realized. It was about love and grief. A mother, a son, a childhood, the ocean, I think, sun and waves. It was about death, recent or maybe impending—isn't it always?

Think of an orchestra filling a resonant hall with its rise and fall, its developments and discoveries, its departures and returns; think of the range of tonalities brought to bear, vibrating in the air: the ones you hear crystal clear at the very top of your ear, the ones you absorb as a rumble in your lungs, those in-between, and beyond, too, the ones of which you can't even be consciously aware. These are what played across and through me, that is, through Paul, that is, through the work. Virtuoso? Yes, undeniably, and seemingly without fail. But in Paul's writing, this gift, no matter how pleasurable, is not the point. The point is the transport that ushers us in and out of time, that like live wires arcs glowing connections between past and present, thought and feeling, self and other, self and self. ❧

Readings at (from top) Powerhouse Arena in Brooklyn in the fall of 2017; Brattleboro Literary Festival, Brattleboro, Vermont, 2016; Fine Arts Work Center, 2016; Tin House Summer Writer's Workshop, Portland, Oregon, 2017

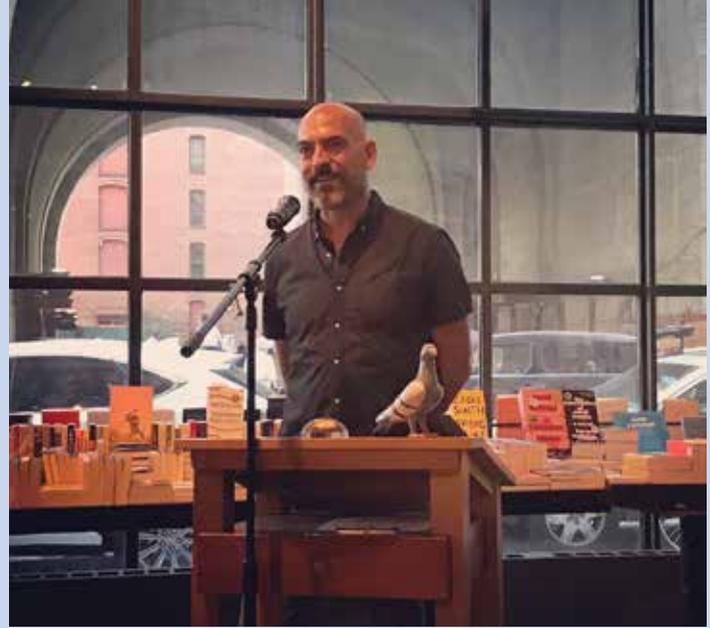


PHOTO BY KATIE DEVINE



PHOTO BY MICHAEL MAREN

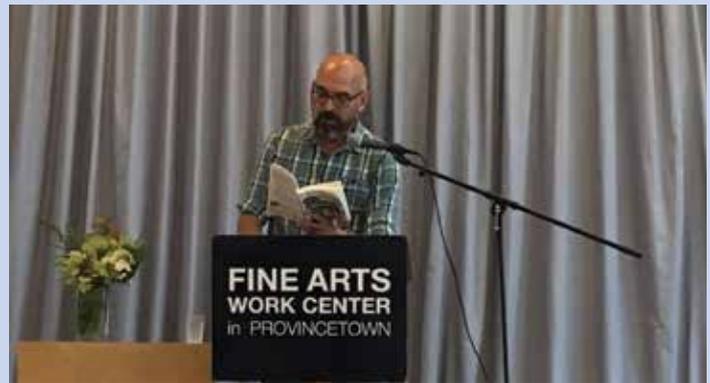


PHOTO BY PETER HOCKING

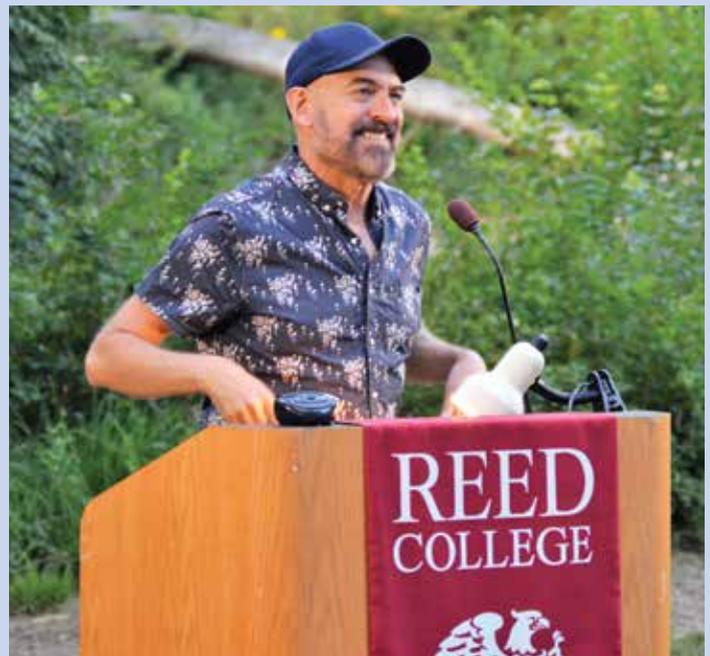


PHOTO BY RICHARD SCHEMMERER

Lisicky

By Carl Phillips

EVEN THOUGH HE DOESN'T LIVE THERE, or mostly doesn't, I'm never surprised when I see Paul approaching from around any given corner of Provincetown. I once encountered him and immediately thought of that phrase from "Lycidas," in which Milton describes a friend as the "Genius"—as in the presiding spirit—"of the shore." The spirit Paul brings with him has always been one of openness, kindness, compassion: joy, ultimately, which he pretty much radiates, seemingly all the time.

It took me some years to realize that four of Paul's five books include something of architecture in their titles: *Famous Builder*, *The Burning House*, *Unbuilt Projects*, and *The Narrow Door*. It's been noted that part of Paul's subject matter concerns the building of a self and, especially in his most recent book, the building (and losing) of friendships as part of that self. What that latter book also wrestles with—and I think this is more at the heart of what Paul is examining—is that, as much as we might want to think about things like selves and friendships as architectural, quantifiable, guaranteeable, those things finally aren't architectural at all; our impulse to make the abstract concrete, at best, discloses the futility of that impulse and, at worst, consigns us to eventual disappointment and loss.

So why do it at all?

Just last summer, Paul was talking to me about his daily habit of finding and tweeting news stories mostly related to animals—an alligator shows up in someone's pool, or a bear cub is seen wandering the halls of a motel, or the key deer population is slowly coming back. They're almost always funny or in some way encouraging stories. "I don't know if anyone else cares or really reads them, but I love sending them out there," Paul told me, with his characteristic smile. I went away thinking, maybe that's also how Paul thinks about joy,



Paul and Carl Phillips, Pepe's Wharf Restaurant, Provincetown, 2016

PHOTO BY KIMIKO HAHN

as something to throw into the world; maybe someone else catches it, and is briefly changed.

To insist on thinking of abstract things as concrete speaks to a desire to make a thing stay, to make it be more permanent, in the face of our own impermanence, and of the impermanence of friendships—friends die, friends evolve away from us sometimes, even as we ourselves evolve away from them. One way to see this kind of thinking is as a refusal to succumb to certain grim realities. Another way: as a form of hope, which implies faith, a belief somewhere that our efforts aren't useless. To me, it's a radical way of thinking, because of its resistance to truth or to what can sometimes feel inevitable and therefore true. What Paul seems to do is wield radical joy—not because he doesn't know about sorrow, but because he refuses to be conquered by it. And, in doing so, he invites us into the possibility of joy for ourselves, in the immediate communion with friends like Paul himself, and also later, alone, the joy still resonating, a bit like memory, but finally just like joy. Paul's radical joy, on the page and in the man, is a gift. I've long been instructed by it. I continue to be grateful for it. ❧

Paul Lisicky

from LATER

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This is an early section from my next memoir, which is set in Provincetown from 1991 to 1994. I'd just arrived as a writing Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center, and the AIDS epidemic was at its height in town. At that time Provincetown was a village of the young: who even lived past forty? Brevity was on every mind.

Circus

Is Provincetown farther from anywhere else on earth? Possibly it would be different if the last hour of your journey weren't built of two-lane roads, but probably not. Longing does that to a person. You're hungry, hopeful, too agitated to eat. Porosity does strange things to your perception. You feel like you've left your country. The Pilgrim Monument, straight out of Italy; the curve of the harbor, shining; the spray of boxy cottages along the bayfront. All the way up Route 6 you've been in New England, charming and astringent. And then you're tumbled into a fishing village in what could be France, Portugal, Venezuela, Chile.

I make the left turn onto Snail Road. I pull into the parking lot between two buildings, one long and relaxed, the other stubby. A barn with a blue circular plaque on the shingles. There isn't anyone around except for a young woman with hunched shoulders carrying pots and pans from her car to a doorway. I hang out in the car for a minute, head down, moistening my dry mouth. Why is my pulse racing? Maybe she will go away.

She does go away. I walk into the office. Friendly and tight handshakes—Michael? Robert? I tell myself I cannot forget their names and then I instantly forget their names. A key and a manila envelope are passed into my hand. I'm even more worn out than I've let myself know.

I want them to think they've made the right choice by bringing me here, but how? Maybe if I'm sweet enough, funny enough, they won't notice that I'm practically a fraud, that it takes me hours to put the simplest paragraph together, that I distract myself from my work as soon as the writing goes well, and I'm too flustered to sit down at my desk for more than twenty minutes at a time.

The hatchback opens. Out comes the suitcase and then a duffel bag. I trudge up the stairs, their thin carpeted treads. Running up and down, up and down. Somehow I manage to empty the hatchback in five minutes flat. I sit cross-legged on the floor of my long narrow space, the second floor of a Cape Cod house. One window to the north, one window to the south. Dormer in the living room. Strip of kitchen fixtures to one side. Narrow bedroom, single twin bed up against the wall. Only enough room to fully stand up within three feet of either side of the ceiling peak. A boxcar. A monk's space.

I lie on the bare mattress, fully dressed, look up at the ceiling. I feel something burning in me. Or is it just death grabbing at me, the voice of my mother pulling me down, down? Why has my father run away? I want something that isn't directly in front of me, which translates itself to desire. Desire is a condition I can take care of.

Though the night is quiet (crickets, some sitcom laughter from a wide-open window), I cannot be quiet with it. There is a town out there, there is the circus. And I have been dead too long.

Catwalk

Nights come early now. It is fall, and life is about to change for all living forms: animals, humans, plants, the water. Town seems less like a resort, at least the Ocean City I knew from my childhood, and more like a tiny metropolis. The harbor is hidden, a secret behind the walls

of stores on the water side of the street, and when I try to find it, it is sometimes difficult: the openings are narrow and few and are often smelly, weedy, industrial. Town was clearly designed before anyone had even thought of tourists anyway—and why would anyone visit a windy place where the streets fill with sand and storms spin up out of nowhere, boat ropes squeaking at the pier? Those who fished had probably seen enough of the water, and no one complained about walling off the view. What is a view anyway, but a look onto something you don't have?

Unlike the crowds in the great anonymous city, people in Provincetown don't disappear. People are larger here. Gestures, the cuts of jeans, shirt patterns. They appear to be chosen experimentally, expect to be remembered, recorded. The main street positioned like a catwalk, even when it's empty, even when people aren't looking up from benches or looking down from shop windows to see what all that noise is about.

I already sense it in my hands and feet: fall off your bicycle, have a public falling out with a friend, and it's passed around, talked about for years, until it concentrates into legend.

Wonky

How far has your life been from what matters, your body, your breathing, your posture, your silliness, your joy? You find yourself walking differently, maybe standing straighter. People look at you in a way they might not look at you in the town where you're from.

But your joy is cut through with anxiety because how will life as you knew it be possible away from this wonky spit of land, so far from the repression and punishments of adult life?

You've been given the first taste of an afterlife and you can't help but taste some metal in your mouth.

Let's Keep It a Mystery

From now on we'll call it Town, to take back all the associations you might already have of it, whether they be commercial, poetic, queer, a visual artist's capitol of light. Anything too sociological. Anything known. Let's keep it a mystery, even though we all want to own it, in our own ways, like nothing we've ever owned before. We want to tell people we know the best beach, the best dog-walking trail, the best spot to get away from others. Town as much an *idea* of community as a place attached to the Earth. Town embedding a notion of how to live with one another, even if it's falling short of its ideals, yes, failing on a daily level, and still going on.

Which gives us the feeling that Town moves on two tracks at once. The time of narrative—in which people want things and lose things—and lyric time, which has nothing to do with the clock. It floats, and it isn't quite attached to Town but it's part of the structure of Town—what draws people here whether they realize it or not. Clock time moves forward but lyric time moves off to the side and stalls there: lateral instead of linear. It is time as enacted in a painting or a poem or a song. It exists outside of human history, and has little to do with people. It was around before people and it will exist long after the people are gone.

More San Francisco than San Francisco

I keep walking until there's no more street left to walk, until the lights go off in the houses, and then even the houses empty out, and it's just the bay bisected by a thin breakwater, which must look like the arm of a sundial from above, during daylight.

It certainly isn't my first walk in town but it's an early walk. I don't yet know that sex is never really just sex here. In a small town where everyone is wary of bumping into *that* tryst in the A&P, I probably still have the hungry look of a tourist who's never going to be heard from again. Thus I am "talent," a designation that lasts all of a few days, and I'll only figure that out years later, when the benefits are too late to cash in.

He stands in front of the head shop, one of the beating hearts of town, which is bright with pink-and-green Day Glo, obscene bumper stickers in the front window, and possibly monster dildos hanging from hooks in the ceiling. He is tall, blond. I usually don't take to blonds, but he has a rangy goofy energy in the manner of a dog, not a real dog, but a cartoon dog like Scooby-Doo. He does not present as a gay guy, or even comport himself for other gay guys: no military haircut or goatee or bandana. His hair sticks up then falls down, as if he might comb it every three days, or whenever it occurs to him. His eyes are blue, unexpectedly kind. He is still a boy, though he might be twenty-eight. He has the look of someone who doesn't have a family, doesn't have a best friend, or any close friends really, just a lot of noisy people swirling around him feeding him any powders and pills he wants.

"Do you want to get high and have sex?" he asks.

And because I haven't touched anyone since God-knows-when, and because I'm possibly flattered to be singled out by anyone, I say yes to the cracked glee of this, the easiest yes I'll probably ever say about sex in my life.

We're on the bed of a second-floor bedroom of a violet Victorian with dragons and gryphons in the yard—more San Francisco than even San Francisco. It is very dark, and there isn't very much inside. No mementos or pictures of old boyfriends or siblings on the tall dresser. No shades or even a sheet over the windows. It is the room of someone who hasn't ever moved into his life, and probably never will. Why bother at this late hour?

He doesn't ask who I am or where I'm from, which is a relief. Not that I want to be a stranger. It's just that language would probably kill what we are about to do and I'm not sure I would ever want to do it with him again. I haven't banked up any emotion into this project, which is unusual, as I am not yet a professional in this department, and I won't be a professional for a good long time.

I am still watching him, watching myself from some safe distance, when he pulls out a condom. Even when you are three times higher than a kite you pull out a condom. He rolls it onto me, even if, in his case, he just appears to be taking me into his mouth. We are close to AIDS, so close it's almost inside before it's even inside. The *idea* of it: the air we breathe is drenched in it, and that's why it doesn't even occur to us to be bothered by the scent and feel of latex. In deadly times, who wouldn't be grateful for a wet suit?

Nights of Cabiria

On some nights the Moon in Town is the Moon from *The Tempest*, but with more sex and menace in it; it sweeps down on the rooftops and harbor. It tells you there is no other place to be. It tells you you were foolish to expect anything less of the world than this—why are you always putting up with less? The harbor is a cup that was made for this Moon. It holds and shimmers it, backlighting the shapes of the boats and the rocks of the breakwater. The light doesn't move in a straight line. The light concentrates, it shifts to the left and right like a river moving downstream. There is even an oily pool in the center of that light—water upon water. It is so strong it falls outside its corridor, leaves sparks that shock and dazzle the surface. Actually, rather than Shakespeare's Moon, it is a Fellini Moon, transferred from film stock to your everyday life.



PHOTO BY PAUL LISICKY



PHOTO BY LARRY GRABER



PHOTO BY JON VALLEY



PHOTO BY BILL TRACY

Paul and Petey at Polly Burnell's apartment, Provincetown, 2017; Patti Smith, Kathleen Graber, and Paul, National Book Awards ceremony, New York City, 2010; Paul and his editor, Fiona McCrae, Housing Works Books, New York City, 2016; Paul before a reading at the Perkins Center for the Arts, Collingswood, New Jersey, 2016

Paul

By Garth Greenwell

A BOOK TOUR IS A WEIRD WAY TO GET TO know a person, but I hardly knew Paul Lisicky when he agreed to do a handful of events with me in 2016. I knew his work, of course—his gorgeous memoir, *The Narrow Door*, had just come out—and we'd met in person once, over breakfast the year before at the AWP writers' conference. But really his reading with me as I promoted my first book was an act of pure generosity, an experienced writer lending a hand to an anxious—a terrified!—inexperienced one.

Somehow it felt easy to get to know Paul on tour; he was genuine in a way traveling authors often aren't, as if he could do without the armor most of the rest of us need. He was genuine after the readings, when we would go to a restaurant or bar to unwind, but also in the events themselves, where he spoke and answered questions with a kind of luminous vulnerability. I remember thinking that it was an ideal to strive for, a way of being in the world as a writer that let the work be a door opening in welcome, and not a shield.

The last of the four events we did together was in Iowa City, where I live. We read as part of the Mission Creek Festival, and a local gay couple, friends of friends, threw a party for us. It was the kindest gesture, and they went all out: the food was catered, the wine was excellent, there was even a local musician bowing a cello in the corner. But I knew almost no one there, and—though I type this cringing at my own ingratitude—it was more or less the last place I wanted to be on my only day home that month.

Paul took it all in stride, with his usual graciousness and charm. He had a way of making himself available to a roomful



Paul and Garth Greenwell at the Mission Creek Festival, Iowa City, Iowa, 2016

of strangers but also sticking close; I was grateful to him for not leaving me too much on my own. At one point, after maybe an hour or so, one of our hosts mentioned that they had put their two dogs in a bedroom upstairs. They were the sweetest dogs, the man said, but not the best behaved; they would have been leaping over everyone if they were out.

Paul and I shared a look, and then, after extorting permission, bolted up the stairs. It was as wonderful as we hoped: our host opened the door for us, apologizing in advance, and then we were assaulted by huge furry creatures unbelievably happy to see us. Dogs are the only kind of strangers I like, and Paul's instinct was the same as mine: we dropped to the floor and opened our arms and let them jump all over us.

It's one of my favorite memories of that year, and a moment that felt like the antidote for the terrible loneliness of a book tour: hearing Paul laugh as he was tackled by dogs, and feeling sure, as I still am, that he would be a friend for life. ❧

Lisicky

By Victoria Redel



Paul, New Bedford, Massachusetts, 2017



PHOTOS BY VICTORIA REDEL

AS I WRITE THIS I'M LOOKING AT A PHOTOGRAPH of Paul taking a photograph with his iPhone on a late winter drive we took to Provincetown. It's Paul in a perfect Paul world—an antique/junk shop, where he stands amidst the crowded swoop, perch, and dangle of metal birds and bugs, an aviary of someone's fantastical creation. Paul focuses with serious delight on the painted wings of one painted creature, part butterfly, part bird. What a bonanza for Paul—the natural world refracted through a stranger's particular imagination. So many odd spaces for his curious mind to consider—Who has crafted these? What spun this vision? And why did they wind up here? When we wander onward, we ignore settees and velvet armchairs in favor of a frayed wicker pram with porcelain dolls' body parts disconnected and bizarrely rearranged and then to a table strewn with maybe sixty red-and-white dice. And passing each tableau, of course, we spin the stories.

I love this photograph because it contains the pleasure of any day I spend with Paul, conversation ranging seamlessly from our current reading, to intricacies of feelings, to

hilarious stories, to light gossip, to music, to difficult writing choices—the braid of conversation slowed only when Paul says, “Look, look,” guiding me to notice the light brushing across a field's late winter

grasses, a red-tailed hawk cutting through the air to land on a high branch. And while this weave of serious delight is what I cherish about a friendship with Paul, it is more importantly what is so astonishing about the books he writes. “Look, look,” Paul's sentences say, look deeper, look with humility, with curiosity, with the possibility of being changed. For the gift of always being taken somewhere surprising in friendship and in art, I am beyond happy to be on this voyage with the ever-magical and full-of-world-wonder Paul Lisicky. ❧