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# SEMI-FREE ASSOCIATIONS INSPIRED BY SLEEPLESSNESS

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William Girdi

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I nearly had a nervous collapse during the weeks leading up to my son's birth—including a mysterious click in my neck that began three months before his arrival and continues to this day—but once he slid out into the summered city of Boston, I felt relieved, blessed that the awful anticipation was over. Why nearly a nervous collapse?

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I can best explain why by invoking do-gooder John Stuart Mill. He wrote himself into a real conundrum trying to reconcile individual liberties with the greatest common good. How can one defend total individual freedom while simultaneously calling for a utilitarianism that would benefit the bulk of humankind? The two cannot exist in anything even remotely akin to harmony. I mean to say that I was worried about losing sleep.

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Fewer than eight hours of sleep a night and I am a worthless drone with fluish symptoms and an anxious heart. Studies have shown that humans who sleep less than eight hours each night have more car accidents than those who sleep eight hours or more. And the studies show much worse than that. William Styron wrote in a memoir that exhaustion combined with sleeplessness is a rare kind of torture, and I've never forgotten those words. As a child, I was fed misinformation by certain adults. My maternal grandfather, an expert fisherman but only a middling human, once told me that he heaped piles of salt onto his dinner each evening because salt cools hot food. (He fell dead of a heart attack in his late fifties.) Someone else told me sleep equals health and lack of sleep leads to disease. Why else the term "beauty sleep"? One gets to be both healthy and beautiful by sleeping as much as possible. In my twenties, living alone in a townhouse my mother owned, often depressed beyond description, I spent entire weekends asleep, especially if the weather had turned foul. I'd wake, roll over, read Goethe or Bellow for an hour, roll over the other way, and sleep again. Some people get a cold or minor influenza and continue with their lives despite the sickness. When I get

a cold or influenza the world ends. Sleep scholars will tell you that most of us spend half of our lives asleep. For some, that is horrifying. For me, it is not nearly enough.

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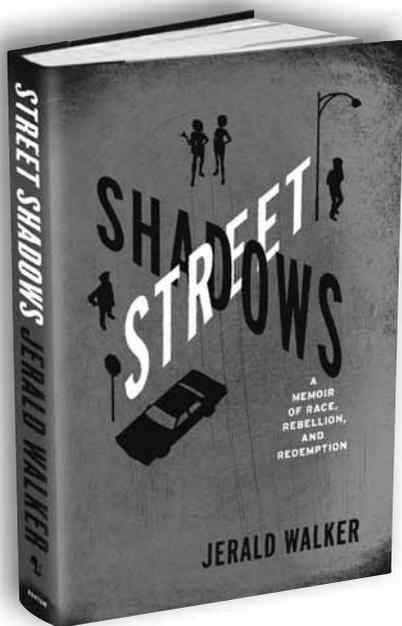
My son: Ethan Jacob Girdi, born seven pounds zero ounces, nineteen inches long, on July 13, 2009, at Beth Israel Medical Center in Boston. He shares a birthday with Julius Caesar, John Clare, and Isaac Babel. Not good; none of them met auspicious ends. Historical happenings on July 13: in 1793, Jean Paul Marat got himself stabbed in his bathtub by a country gal not fond of revolutions; in 1934, Babe Ruth hit home run 700 against a beguiled Detroit; in 1939, Frank Sinatra recorded his first record; in 1945, geniuses detonated the first atom bomb in New Mexico. That's a mixed bag.

The birthing staff at Beth Israel: Nurse Linda and Nurse Sara, seraphs the both of them; Doctor Yum—Doctor Yummy—the preternaturally beautiful doctor on call (because our own preternaturally beautiful doctor was in Greece on a date (Ethan arrived two weeks early); and one other nurse who entered stage left rather late in the act. These angels didn't need sleep. The hardest part for me: staying up all night. We got to the hospital at midnight, and Ethan didn't decide to show himself until nine in the morning. The phrase "up all night" had never made any sense to me because, although many people claim it on a regular basis (especially students), I myself had never before stayed up literally all night and was terrified of the prospect (which might testify to my somewhat monastic preferences). Witnessing a sunrise, I believed, would turn me into Nosferatu at the end of Murnau's famous film: the light, the

"A POWERFUL READ."

—Nikki Giovanni

# A Memoir of RACE, REBELLION, and REDEMPTION



Jerald Walker, a young boy growing up in a Chicago housing project, once had a promising future, but by age fourteen descended into the "thug life." Then came the blast of gunfire that led to his finding himself again.



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burning, the death. Remember some words by Sir Thomas Browne: "We term sleep a death, and yet it is waking that kills us, and destroys those spirits that are the house of life."

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But so far my life as a new father has much in common with my old life. My best friend, a Boston story writer, married an Irish Catholic woman from Connecticut with two siblings, an older and younger brother, neither of whom

for dark drama, I bet he would have made the perfect playwright or novelist if Goethe hadn't cornered that market and ruined the writing dreams of countless German aspirants. (English writers were never as fearful of Shakespeare as German writers were of Goethe, and so Milton and Wordsworth had the nerve to get into the writing racket and thrive.) Perennially bleak Schopenhauer, he who lived like a widower and slept poorly, always hapless in romance—he mostly hated women because he couldn't meet

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MY MATERNAL GRANDFATHER, AN EXPERT FISHERMAN BUT ONLY A MIDLING HUMAN, ONCE TOLD ME THAT HE HEAPED PILES OF SALT ONTO HIS DINNER EACH EVENING BECAUSE SALT COOLS HOT FOOD.

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she adored, and so now the diaper work and up-all-night obligations get split down the middle. Furthermore, his bride aspires to be a *novelist* of all things. His hair has gone grayer, and all those short stories canistered in his cranium stay in his cranium. I, on the other hand, married an Asian woman born in Taiwan who has an identical twin and three other siblings—two of them younger, adored brothers she tended to daily—and although she's an artist with an aptitude that astonishes me—Katie crafted the mobiles above Ethan's crib; they rotate and revolve with a perfection that would have impressed Johannes Kepler himself—all she ever wanted to be was a *mother*. The difference between brides is greater than that between Schopenhauer and Saint Francis, and so my life as a new father has much in common with my old life. But still: I am in the room when Ethan wakes at night. He wants me awake, too. We are a triumvirate, after all. I have made this. I get no stay-asleep pass.

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Schopenhauer fathered an illegitimate child he wanted no part of. I imagine him beholding his newborn with the exasperation of a plumber facing down a flood with a monkey wrench. The child perished early. Schopenhauer never married—he thought marriage a chimerical, detestable arrangement, even though he knew that love should be at the center of our lives—and lived in Frankfurt with poodles that probably despised him. Judging by his flair

any—knew that the quest for happiness was a laughable waste of time, utterly beside the point. Americans are not fond of him. New fathers speak of the happiness a child brings, but what I feel—and have felt since Ethan arrived—has more in common with quietude than joy—which, of course, scrambles the mind, since my homunculus wails with a force to rival white squalls and fusses day and night for no discernable reason. "Life is something that should not have been," Schopenhauer wrote, and when I hold my son I say to him, "I invented you," because we make life in order to approach godliness.

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The poets all agree. Larkin: "Life is first boredom, then fear." Petrarch: "Living is pain, so heavy and so long." Those who steadfastly refuse to push offspring into the world enjoy logic that usually sounds something like this: "Earth is an overpopulated insane asylum; people are wretched and cruel. Look at what we've done: to the whales, to the trees, to each other at Antietam and the Somme. Hannibal slaughtered 70,000 Roman soldiers at Cannae in roughly six hours. Do the math: 70,000 in six hours. I am not selfish enough to bring a child into such intolerable darkness; besides, once the oil runs out civilization will be gripped by apocalypse." I sympathize with this logic and welcome it as an attractive alternative to the Christian/Republican go-forth-and-multiply tomfoolery filling up our nation with knuck-

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leheads or the Eastern Islamic imperative to secure victory by outnumbering the infidels. Ethan is here because Katie wanted him here, because she is exceedingly maternal and talented with children. (It does not really take two: it takes one nine months and a strong will—Schopenhauer’s Will to Life—and the other barely nine minutes and no will at all.)

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I resisted the reality of Ethan’s imminent arrival because I can be typically, painfully male. However, I never fretted over bringing him into a world of blood and scum, or of possibly losing him to the violence rampant in nature and society—even though I lost my father to the violence of a motor vehicle and my mother to violence she unleashed upon herself. When one is dealt a few personal tragedies in life one need not necessarily be fearful of more, since statistically one can be ravaged by only so many calamities: my father’s fatal motorcycle

others could have been recorded on the inside of a matchbook. She abandoned him and us, my siblings and me, after twelve years of a marriage I cannot come close to comprehending.

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WITNESSING A SUNRISE, I BELIEVED, WOULD TURN ME INTO NOSFERATU AT THE END OF MURNAU’S FAMOUS FILM: THE LIGHT, THE BURNING, THE DEATH.

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I witnessed them as a pair for the first decade of my life but, of course, cannot recall witnessing very much. My mental images of them are cracked and blurred sepia shots curled at the edges. Their being together is as alien to me as opposable thumbs are to orangutans. The separation delivered emotional mayhem to my father and, psychiatrists have insisted, melancholia to me.

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Katie was nervous that those melancholic

makes a touchdown. My father attempted to squeeze me into several different sports—baseball, wrestling, track—but all I wanted was to draw, delve into encyclopedias, and chase after

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I am conflicted over the prospect of raising Ethan in the city. Wordsworth recommended a life in nature, and I myself grew up surrounded by plenty of trees, parks, and streams, riding bicycles on small-town roads and raking colossal mounds of leaves in autumn. Too much concrete and macadam might not be beneficial to a boy’s development. On the other hand, children raised in a city, such as Boston or New York or Chicago, often grow to be shrewd and incisive adults, wise to the crooked ways of the world. Does being exposed to a wealth of different cultures, languages, libraries, bookstores, theaters, and museums make smarter, better people? If so, then I and countless others who grew up without that exposure are scalawags with cerebral deficiencies. And are the suburbs

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HE SHARES A BIRTHDAY WITH JULIUS CAESAR, JOHN CLARE, AND ISAAC BABEL. NOT GOOD; NONE OF THEM MET AUSPICIOUS ENDS.

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crash and my mother’s suicide, eight years later, have emboldened me to feel that Zeus might be done using me for target practice. No: I was fearful of Ethan’s arrival because I was fearful of losing sleep and turning into a zombie—and of having to see him one day as a pimpled teenager in lust with a stunning lass who might not return his affections. This, for some of us, is next door to hell.

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My parents were small-town fools. They married after high school because in the mid-1970s fools still believed that romance begun in high school had the potential to stretch into forever. Neither knew the first thing about how to sustain a compatible, loving marriage. My father married my mother because she was beautiful: always an atrocious idea. My mother agreed to marry my father because he was a hard-working athlete with eyes a laser-beam blue, and she had nothing else to do: also not a great idea. Neither had traveled very much or often, neither had ever heard of Freud or the unconscious, and their erotic knowledge of

strands of my DNA would twirl their way into Ethan, but this possibility bothered me not at all. As Nietzsche insisted, a little melancholy goes a long way in an artist and lover, which is precisely what I shall groom him to become. (Nietzsche

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“LIFE IS SOMETHING THAT SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN,” SCHOPENHAUER WROTE, AND WHEN I HOLD MY SON I SAY TO HIM, “I INVENTED YOU,” BECAUSE WE MAKE LIFE IN ORDER TO APPROACH GODLINESS.

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wished misery upon every one of his associates because he believed without irony that pain makes better people, that one reaches fulfillment only by passing through the razored teeth of agony.) Ethan might resist such grooming and wish to become an athlete or mathematician. I suppose he will want me to attend Red Sox games with him since we live directly down the road from Fenway Park and abide in a city where baseball contaminates like Spaniards in Mesoamerica—I call his wanting this “the Red Sox inevitability”—and that’s fine: I’ll bring a book and pretend to feel glee when someone

and countrysides really safer than the cities? All of civilization is a danger zone. If metropolitan madness does not maim you, then a stray tractor in a wheat field might.

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I wrote that my current and pre-fatherhood lives have much in common, but that was a mockery of the truth. I’ve never yearned to be an unshowered and bereted Bohemian who admires Camus or perhaps Che Guevara—my life has always been conveniently bourgeois: fast-food and highways, shopping malls and

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barbecues in backyards, all of them in my home state of New Jersey. (Go to any mall in Jersey the day after Thanksgiving—in Paramus, say—and prepare to witness a mayhem you thought possible only in the Congo or perhaps on an island reserved for lunatic lepers: highways to and fro designed with chaos in mind, armored SUVs parked scornfully on grassy inclines, unholy droves of consumers hell-bent on buying shit they do not need, angry and oblivious, all set to murder for a parking spot. . .) But look at me now, decidedly un-Bohemian: a bride, a baby, a mortgage, a puppy dog, an Audi wagon with a “Baby On Board” sign stuck to the back window, a full-time university job with health coverage and a dental plan for all three of us. A few years ago: a studio apartment in Boston for less than a grand a month, various dark ladies visiting frequently, no Audi wagon to pay insurance on or worry about suffering

zealots what Descartes called “the holy music of the self,” which can be translated roughly as: I know what I know is true because my mind and body say so). Ethan was eight weeks old at this time, one month shy of the inoculations that would prevent him from incurring the hell of militant microbes. Our doctor told us thus:

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**HANNIBAL SLAUGHTERED 70,000 ROMAN SOLDIERS AT CANNAE IN ROUGHLY SIX HOURS. DO THE MATH: 70,000 IN SIX HOURS.**

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if he runs a fever that reaches 100.4 degrees, he must, by law, be admitted to the hospital for a spinal tap, a catheter in his urethra, an IV in his arm for fluids, and then three days of observation. This law is the same in New Jersey as it is in Massachusetts. Why such a battery of medical molestation? Spinal meningitis. Apparently, if an infant runs a fever to 100.4

people had my deposit, et cetera. (Show me a tax-paying American whose life is not in some way dictated by his automobile.) And besides: I was concerned but not worried because I knew that Ethan did not have spinal meningitis, that the fever would not prove serious. Whatever bacteria had discovered him would soon go

on their way. But still: sitting at the desk of my Audi salesman at nine that morning, I learned that the doctors at Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, New Jersey, had indeed given my infant boy a spinal tap, a catheter in his urethra, and an IV in his arm, and this despite the fact that his fever had begun to drop by the time the medical personnel got their latexed mitts upon his flesh.

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**MY FATHER MARRIED MY MOTHER BECAUSE SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL:  
ALWAYS AN ATROCIOUS IDEA.**

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dents or other harassment, a list of anxieties considerably shorter, and a bank account considerably stouter. Right now Ethan’s car seat and stroller—a stroller with better shocks than my Audi, an eight-hundred dollar technical marvel that Katie insisted we needed for Ethan’s “safety”—are parked in my library because in our condo we have no place else to put them: the only person in Boston who has a garage is the mayor.

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Our pediatrician: a young gent just out of med school, frequently tired—the sleeplessness sticks out everywhere on him—competent but slow to laugh. His warning to us: do not take Ethan home to Jersey to see our families until he reaches three months and is inoculated against common pestilences. Our reaction to his warning: ignore it, which sounds like “ignorant.” Katie and Ethan took an Amtrak train to Jersey while I remained in Boston to buy the new Audi and catch up on sleep (the experts and other people in-the-know insist that it is not possible to catch up on sleep, that once sleep is lost, it cannot be found; but I will debate this with them to the bloody end, because I have in common with religious

degrees or higher there is a moderate chance that he has meningitis. (When I was a teenager I suffered a month-long bout of viral meningitis, a non-lethal and altogether different beast, although unpleasant in the extreme. I was in bed for thirty days, unable to stand because of vertigo. Is this the place in my life where the fear of illnesses began? And how soon after was I told that sleep can cure disease?)

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The outcome of our hubris? Three or four days into Katie’s New Jersey sojourn with Ethan, my phone rang at the unholy hour of three in the morning. Of course I knew what this meant. Katie’s twin was on the line telling

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**AS NIETZSCHE INSISTED, A LITTLE MELANCHOLY GOES A LONG WAY  
IN AN ARTIST AND LOVER, WHICH IS PRECISELY WHAT I SHALL GROOM  
HIM TO BECOME.**

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me that Katie and her parents had whisked Ethan to the emergency room because he had a fever that ran, alas, to 100.4 degrees. Our new Audi was set to be retrieved by me in six hours, and so leaving on the spot in our old Audi was not a possibility, because the car

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Seneca has some useless lessons to impart about anger. He believed that we become angry only when we are optimistic about human behavior, when we fail to recognize that humankind and the civilization it bent into being are odious and unfair carnivals in which innocents get slaughtered. Seneca recommends seeing people for the bastards they are and always leaning toward the pessimistic side of the pub. Don’t be surprised by misfortune and you will not become angry. Expect misery and perhaps bloodshed and when they materialize before you, as they inevitably do, you will congratulate yourself for prescience and good sense and thus be saved from fury. The Audi salesman looked askance at me across his desk as I, on my cell phone, harangued Katie and then a doctor for using my newborn as a

dartboard. The heat that day was outrageous, and as I walked in the sun in front of the dealership’s vast windows (after they asked me to take the call outside), I sermonized to the doctor in tones one might dub strident. “I’m coming there,” I said. “I’m coming there to get

my boy.” And I left the dealership in my new Audi, returned home to retrieve our puppy dog, and then lit out for the four-hour drive to northern New Jersey. What would Seneca have said to me? “You failed to realize that you yourself are a bastard, and so the only person you should be angry at is you. And your new Audi.”

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When I entered his hospital room I took Ethan into my arms and I said, as you know I did, “Do you have a smile for Daddy?” And naturally he smiled, his first, Katie informed me, since his fever ordeal. Of course he smiles in his sleep, and so I was of no more

how the Spartans, if they deemed a baby unfit, would fling it from a cliff: all babies look unfit, and that’s what pulls us to them.

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In the supremely dull first half of Sartre’s autobiography, *The Words*, he writes: “There is no good father, that’s the rule. Don’t lay the blame on men but on the bond of paternity which is rotten. To beget children, nothing better; to *have* them, what iniquity!” And this from a man with no children. To paraphrase one of Sartre’s male protagonists in *The Age of Reason*: children are detestable because all of their senses are mouths. First they observe you and then they consume you. Thank

I was able to marry and have a child with some semblance of sanity. Throughout my adolescence my father slept only five or six hours each night. I do not understand this.

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A female acquaintance in our building, a divorcée and writer, has no interest in embracing our son or swooning over him, and I’ve become mightily disdainful of her self-obsessed and writerly ways, which no doubt hint at a handful of emotional disturbances. (I’m in the habit of telling my students that the only criterion they need to judge someone is how that person treats babies and animals. Nothing else that person does is a more accurate or telling indication of her character.) I will not dwell on how I have obtained scientific data that Ethan is the cutest baby in both Americas and Greenland combined, how strangers on sidewalks and in supermarkets contemplate kidnapping, how the emotions that arise in me when I behold him match what Edison must have felt when that first bulb began to glow. I will not speak of diapers and breast milk, of lessons and surprises. I invented him, yes, and I hope it is not too saccharine of me to say that he has invented me as well— “the Child is father of the Man”—that he has given me the best, worthiest work on earth. Coleridge’s ancient mariner was right: “Oh Sleep! it is a gentle thing, / Beloved from pole to pole.” But there are gentler, more beloved things now. I will lose more sleep. I better. There is much to do. ❧

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IF METROPOLITAN MADNESS DOES NOT MAIM YOU, THEN A STRAY TRACTOR IN A WHEAT FIELD MIGHT.

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significance to him than the nebulous dreams twirling in his six-week-old gray matter. The mommy-baby love affair, on the other hand, has commenced; they gaze at one another with a gravitation that would startle Newton. I mostly just pay the bills. His arm with the IV was wrapped from wrist to shoulder to keep the tube in, and this infuriated me, but instead of stomping up and down the hospital corridors in search of someone to chastise, I embraced my boy and let him calm me, quiet me with his magical breath. Evolution is beyond extraordinary, how we are diffused, primed to melt in the presence of babies to ensure their survival. I never understood

heavens Sartre didn’t reproduce—Beauvoir begged him; he held his ground. D. W. Winnicott wrote that we will all have to resign ourselves to “good enough mothering”: we parents, even the best of us, are so flawed as to be laughably, woefully inadequate and, of course, incapable of not poisoning our offspring. So the question then becomes not how can I prevent myself from contaminating Ethan, but how can I contaminate him least? (Katie, I’m convinced, shall do no contaminating. She is too pristine in her motherly role.) My mother and father launched me into adulthood with so many issues heaped upon my shoulders that it’s a minor miracle

