

## HEE JIN LEE

*Green Meditation*, 2013  
acrylic and mixed pens, 24 x 30 in



courtesy: the artist

## ROBERT NIZZA

### Finding John Irving

**M**y boss Romuald, before he got too sick to continue his work, was priest, monk, and cellarer at a Benedictine monastery on the California coast. The monastery was an all-male community of about thirty seekers ranging in age from about twenty-five to eighty-five. It paid its bills by renting rooms, selling fruit-cakes, and collecting donations. My first assignment on the maintenance crew was to help rebuild Romuald's cabin which had been damaged by fire. My last Romuald assignment was self-assigned, and came about two years later.

After spending a year at the Esalen Institute, I fell in love with the Big Sur land. I wanted to take time to put that year in perspective, to hold onto the slippery gems I had discovered there. Since city life and immersion in media culture would probably cause me to forget my discoveries, I wanted to try to capture them on paper. So I went to the monastery to write.

From time to time, during the eight-month process of renovating the cabin, I would ask Romuald how he thought the work was going. He was always pleased. When I asked if there was anything we could improve upon, he could never think of anything. This was curious to me: most people have ideas about the color of the paint, the type of flooring, or the tint of the varnish they would prefer. Not Romuald. Romuald had wanted to be a monk since he was eight years old.

He was a stocky, friendly man, but our relationship did not advance beyond salutations and small talk. Maybe it was because I was not a monk. So I was on the periphery of his monastic community. When we finally connected, it was through an unexpected source—a shared love of John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Romuald's face would light up when recalling the book's nativity scene. At first I felt uneasy talking about Irving's novels with a monk, given their amputationally bizarre and sexual content. Didn't monks walk on water?

Irving's novels had helped Romuald acclimatize to New England when he had been a monk in New Hampshire. He would take visitors on tours of the Phillips Exeter Academy, where Irving's first editions are on display. He read *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and other Irving novels five or six times.

I had been drawn to *A Prayer for Owen Meany* because of its miraculous ending and its spiritual themes of reli-

gious fate and faith. Irving’s books also helped me build rapport with my long-lost birth sister, who I hadn’t met until I was thirty-three and she was twenty-four. At that time she seemed painfully shy, understandably overwhelmed to meet me. I was in an emotional fog myself. But after a few years we grew closer through having discussions of *The World According to Garp* and *A Widow for One Year* as well as *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

But this is a story about Romuald. A monk with a body full of tumors.

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The renovation of the cabin turned out well. The master carpenter and I expanded the living space substantially, installing a large skylight, new flooring, a solar energy system, and new windows that allowed for miles and miles of ocean views. When Romuald moved back in when the work was complete, I noticed that he had few material belongings: shovels, rakes, and a pickaxe; assorted glasses and plates; a crucifix and some icons; and a twin mattress that lay on the floor—not even a box spring or frame. His only luxury was a portable CD player. Between the bookends on his old reconditioned desk sat about a dozen religious reference books. The other monks had exercise equipment, cushy chairs, and posters of Bruce Lee. I had never known someone to be so content with so few material things.

I didn’t go to Mass often, but when I did go, I found Romuald’s sermons refreshing and insightful. One day I asked him, “I noticed there aren’t many books in your cabin. Do you have any others somewhere else?”

“No, I don’t have any other books.”

“But a man of your education must have boxes of books somewhere!”

“No, I really don’t. While I was growing up, my family was poor, and I just became accustomed to checking books out at the library. I never bought books.”

“I have boxes of books that I can’t seem to get rid of. Do you have any advice on how to get rid of them? I have a lot of resistance to just selling them or giving them to charity.”

“Maybe you aren’t yet ready to give them away,” he said.

I’d never considered my “readiness” before. Romuald’s comment encouraged me to ask myself some deeper questions: Just what *was* I looking for beyond the world of material things? What was forcing me to cling to my books?

That it had been such a long process collecting them? What should be my process for dispensing with them? Romuald helped open my eyes to these questions.

Romuald was the type who would dig and weed in the rock-hard soil around his cabin for hours and hours, sweat dripping and eyeglasses fogging. He planted all kinds of little bushes—I remember a lot of rosemary and hydrangeas. He would paint his office himself instead of bothering the maintenance crew. Paint would fly everywhere as he gleefully smiled—drippings landing on his arms and face, eyeglasses, forehead, and in the thousands on the Pollack-esque drop cloth. The office would look great afterwards.

When one of his tumors started to impinge on his optic nerve, causing him to get double vision, he took to wearing eyeglasses with special prism lenses. When one eye started to drift, he soon sported an eye patch. He made pirate jokes.

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The holidays approached. The chemotherapy and radiation treatments took their toll, and this usually radiant and jovial man began to move more slowly and smile less frequently. How could I help? A gift? What do you give to a monk who has vowed obedience, poverty, and chastity? I felt that old barrier between us, that I was only on the periphery of his world. But then I remembered our discussions about the Irving novels. *How about giving him an autographed photo of the famous John Irving?* I couldn’t imagine him actually hanging the photo next to his crucifix or holy icons, but maybe he would tuck it somewhere. Perhaps he might smile and forget his illness for a few moments. I didn’t know. I just felt compelled to do something for him. That was the seed of my Finding John Irving Project. I made a to-do list.

I googled “John Irving,” expecting to find his agent or at least an editor. I imagined instantly finding his home address, e-mail, or phone number. I looked and looked, but couldn’t even find mention of an agent. *Okay, this is not going to be easy.* I drove sixty miles to a big-box bookstore and perused the “Acknowledgments” sections of Irving’s recent books. Still no mention of an agent. However, although his editor had retired a while back, I learned that an assistant had worked with him on at least two of his

books. Her name was Chloe Bland.

With my enthusiasm diminished, I nevertheless googled “Chloe Bland” and found an e-mail address. I had no idea where this person was—she could have been on any continent. *She’s not famous so maybe she’ll respond.* I sent her an e-mail briefly explaining the situation. She promptly replied that she was not the Chloe Bland who had assisted Irving. *So much for the Acknowledgments-section trick.* No agents, no editors, no assistants. No John Irving.

The last item on my to-do list was to draft a letter to the publicity department of Ballantine Books. *By the time the letter percolates through Ballantine, Romuald could be in bad shape.* I sent the letter anyway.

A day later I noticed an e-mail from Chloe Bland in my inbox. What could *she* want? Hadn’t she already written to me saying that she wasn’t Irving’s assistant? I opened the e-mail and—*voilà!*—she was THE Chloe Bland, Irving’s assistant! Here’s what had happened:

The OTHER Chloe Bland, the one who’d e-mailed me that she was not Irving’s assistant, had been having lunch at a restaurant in Brooklyn. The server had noticed the name on her credit card. The conversation might have gone something like this:

Server: “Hi! I know a woman with the same name as you.”

The OTHER Chloe Bland: “Wow! My name isn’t that common. But oddly enough, I received an e-mail recently from someone who thought I was John Irving’s assistant. Your friend isn’t John Irving’s assistant, is she?”

Server: “Yes! She lives nearby. But I haven’t seen her for about seven months now.”

The OTHER Chloe Bland: “What a small world! Could you give her my e-mail address so she could contact me? I could forward the e-mail to her. It sounds important—something about a monk with cancer.”

Server: “Like I said, I haven’t seen her in a long time, but I’d be happy to try.”

*That very day*, after many months of no contact,

*She informed me that Irving didn’t really like to sign photographs. However, she did have access to special copies of his books.*

THE Chloe Bland, the one who had assisted John Irving, strolled into the restaurant while her friend/server still happened to be working her shift.

\* \* \*

THE Chloe Bland sent me an emotional e-mail: “By a series of truly unbelievable coincidences, your e-mail made it to me yesterday,” and she recounted the restaurant story. She told me that she hadn’t worked for John Irving for five years, but that they were still friends. She would be seeing him in two weeks for a holiday party, and she “would love to help me out with my request.” She informed me that Irving didn’t really like to sign photographs. However, she did have access to special copies of his books—and would I like him to inscribe something nice for Romuald in a special-edition copy? And perhaps give me a token for my sister as well? I offered to help with expenses, but she declined. I sent her a brandy-dipped fruitcake.

These “truly unbelievable coincidences” seemed to go beyond serendipity and synchronicity. Stanislav Grof, one of the founders of transpersonal psychology, had said that synchronicity is the manifestation of the relationship between consciousness and matter. So the scientist in me got curious. The chain of events surrounding my Finding John Irving Project was as fantastic as any of Irving’s own plots. To make sense of it all, I decided to make a list of events, facts, and choices:

That shot-in-the-dark e-mail to some random Chloe Bland, based on a global internet search, lands in THE Chloe Bland’s neighborhood in Brooklyn, N.Y.

The two Chloe Blands eat at the same restaurant. (There are about 800 restaurants in Brooklyn, and about 4,200 in all of New York City. The population of Brooklyn is about 2,500,000. If Brooklyn were an independent city, it would be the fourth most populous in the United States.)

The OTHER Chloe Bland happens to sit at a table serviced by the friend of THE Chloe Bland. (The OTHER Chloe Bland could have easily dined at a table *not* serviced by the friend.)

The server notices the name on the credit card, and chooses to start a conversation with the OTHER Chloe Bland. (Servers in New York City tend to be far too busy to ever notice names on credit cards.)

The OTHER Chloe Bland offers to forward my e-mail to THE Chloe Bland.

THE Chloe Bland visits the restaurant *that very day*, for the first time in seven months, gets my e-mail address, and offers to help.

She hasn't seen Irving in five years, but will see him in two weeks.

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In my dictionary, the word “miracle” is defined as “an event inexplicable by the laws of nature and so held to be supernatural in origin or an act of God; a marvel.” Any engineers out there might say that “Just because you have a string of improbable events doesn't mean it's a miracle.” I won't argue. But these events impressed me: I marveled. The usual six degrees of separation between John Irving and I got compressed to four (the OTHER Chloe Bland, the waitress, THE Chloe Bland, and finally John Irving). It seems more probable for me to bump into John Irving on the street than to arrange these Chloe Bland events.

This string of coincidences caused me to actually *think* about the word “miracle.” Maybe there was something to that power of intention, that intention to give Romuald a gift. Maybe all the prayers said for Romuald by his fellow monks and community had influenced the events. Who knows? But when I think of these events now, I feel a certain lightness, a feeling of *Maybe there are vast worlds beyond my limited capacity to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell*. And maybe I can sometimes touch the magic of these worlds, and see how it touches others.

As promised, about two months after our initial con-

tact, Chloe Bland mailed me a signed copy of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. A few weeks later, John Irving himself mailed me a handwritten note apologizing for the “slow mailroom folks at Random House,” and enclosed signed photos for Romuald and my sister. Later, Chloe Bland told me that, at the time of the signing, Irving's thumb had been in a cast.

By that time, Romuald had vacated the cabin. He'd had to move back to the cloisters because his femurs could snap at any time as a result of the tumors. I felt dread in the pit of my stomach. I wanted this kindhearted, smart, devoted, hardworking, jovial man to spend his final days in the peace and tranquility of his board-and-batten red-wood cabin.

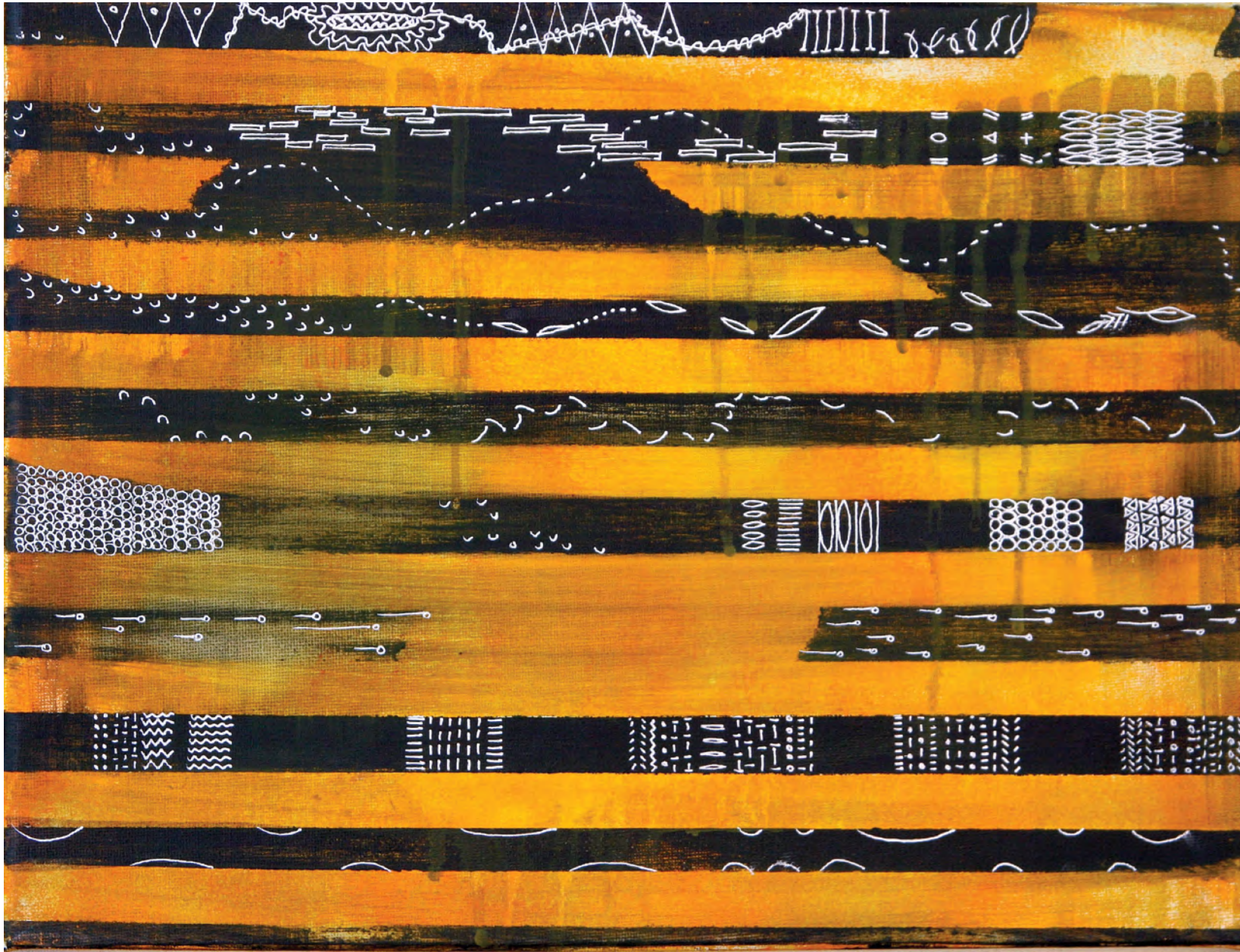
Romuald kept working. One day I had to pry him away for a surprise meeting in the monastery library. There, I presented him with the autographed book and photo, Irving's note, and THE Chloe Bland's e-mail. His energy lifted and he smiled broadly. *I'd gotten my smile. Perhaps he'd forgotten his illness for a few moments*. We posed for a few photos as Romuald, wearing his monk's habit, held the autographed book. He made jokes about these being his death photos.

*That very day* I received an e-mail from Chloe Bland asking if I had received the book.

After careers in science and business, **Robert Nizza** began exploring alternative ways of living at the Esalen Institute and the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, CA. He is currently working on a collection of essays about those dimensions found between the measurable and the immeasurable worlds. He works as a massage therapist in Berkeley, CA where he sometimes speaks Chinese and plays the piano. Feel free to contact him at [rnizza@gmail.com](mailto:rnizza@gmail.com).

# HEE JIN LEE

*Sunset Meditation, 2013*  
acrylic and mixed pens, 12 x 16 in



courtesy: the artist