

*'17 Memoirs Contest Third Place Winner – The Writers' Workshop of Asheville*  
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## **NEVERSINK**

By Andrew Weinstein, Brooklyn, NY



No artist knew better than Gordon Matta-Clark that a house is more than a pile of brick and wood, lathing strip and plaster; in it he recognized a nexus of ideals and values, a manifestation of morals and beliefs in the American way. The great Deconstructionist of a sculptor, the an-architect, the *un*-designer, Matta-Clark took a chain saw and cut houses into pieces.

As an art and architectural historian, I could never. By nature I protect and preserve. But I understood Matta-Clark's desire. Deep down, I wished I could destroy. It was a twist of an exhilaration waiting to happen, though for reasons so different from Matta-Clark's. Ghosts inhabit old rooms. In the frame of a familiar doorway I see people from long ago, including my younger self. I see Ruth years ago and my father hearty and hale. Even as I cherished the connection to that past, it hurt. How wonderful to rid yourself of memories of a past whose loss only pains you. But for me this wasn't possible.

I lived a life overwhelmed by the sediments of time. More keenly than ever I watched the proverbial sand through the hourglass. Here were our children, the only children Ruth and I would ever have, given our age, and already the stages of their early months were through. They developed so quickly. Up in their high chairs, both Maya and Ari insistently pushed cups and bowls to the floor, and when we shouted simple words like no and stop they turned

momentarily sullen. They shrieked and made gurgling sounds and smacked their lips. They smiled and clapped to the rhythms of age-old nursery rhymes and children's songs, the all-time greatest hits: "Itsy Bitsy Spider," "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," "Row Your Boat," "Jack and Jill," "Pop Goes the Weasel," "This Little Piggy," "This Old Man," maybe the only cultural products that transcend style and achieve a kind of timelessness, maybe through their proximity to the eternity of the womb. Why do we all so dutifully repeat them? Do they conjure the comfort and security of our own early childhoods? Of a home as an inner sanctum seemingly fortified against the ravages of time? For all that Ari and Maya gained from week to week I lamented the loss of what was over. How misguided, my historian's charge to dwell in the past. But it was in me. It was who I was. I yearned for the constancy of a home that wouldn't change. I wanted to live within old walls I could restore and protect, as if time stood still.

In the breaks between classes and at night after the children fell asleep, I searched online for upstate properties. I knew what I wanted: a piece of the past I could make new again. Like an addict I returned to the screen. Only there did a calmness come over me. At realtors' sites I scrolled down listings in Phoenicia, Fleischmann's and Big Indian till the ones we could afford, clicking on links to pages sprinkled with euphemisms like cute and cozy and diamond in the rough and handyman special, and thumbnail photos that resolved into glimpses of the Catskills lives we could lead. I emailed links to Ruth and to my dad: This one could work for us; Here's one with a guestroom and a view; Five minutes from Panther Mountain! Like a hunter checking his traps, I returned every day to the websites saved in my favorites, and found new listings with pictures of front porches and vast fields and mountain vistas and streamside cabins. I always called up the ones I liked best, the mother/daughter cottages on a brook where

the realtor had written Bring Your Toolkit! and the Weekend Getaway! trailer on the hillside with the valley view, always a little anxious to click the link in case I'd discover somebody else had snatched up that property and extinguished that dream.

On the phone with my dad the talk now turned to real estate. Whoever would have thought that a topic so mundane could bring vivacity to an ailing old man and serenity to a deeply distracted younger one? He took an interest in the search and I knew it was good for him. Ruth, too, looked over my shoulder with curiosity at the listings on my screen. Time devoted to the quest was calm time, purposeful and resolute as a blueprint to salvation.

Walking home the eighteen blocks from a night class I hardly noticed the cabs and streetlights, homeless men with duffle bags and diners laughing behind glass, because the spiritual part of me was already upstairs in pajamas wandering the Catskills online. It was a kind of madness. The Catskills promised everything I had lost. The Catskills comforted me with the prospect of a resolution. I was there in my head when I lumbered into the lobby on my way home from work and saw our neighbor Marci near the mailboxes, in no particular hurry to go anywhere, arms at her sides, looking a little dejected, like Watteau's *Gilles* in socks. As soon as she saw me, she shot me a grin I didn't understand.



"Lock yourself out?" I asked.

"Boo's loose again." There he was, her mostly black cat, cautiously poking his furry face from behind the plastic ficus tree next to the elevator to Marci's wing of the building.

"He's a rascal, aren't you, Boo?" Boo pulled his face out of sight.

"You know I'm spending less time than ever talking with Ruth when I get home and

it’s all your fault.” It was coy of me. This steered the conversation where I wanted to take it. “Because of watching you load your Jeep on Saturday mornings. Now all I can think about is the Catskills. Soon as I get home I’m on the computer searching for places upstate.”

At first she thought I meant renting. For a long back-and-forth she remained confused. Then her incomprehension morphed into a kind of amazement you see on TV game show contestants: her jaw dropped and she clapped her hands. Then she grinned. “Hey, you know I’m a realtor up there.”

It turned out she moonlit there on weekends away from her job as a psychotherapist in the city. She told me the name of the firm, but it didn’t register. Marci, an upstate realtor! In the meantime Boo had emerged. He slalomed back and forth between Marci’s knees, his black tail curling like a weed in a current. She said, “It’s just too amazing up there. You hear about Bethel Woods? I swear it’s the next Tanglewood. Things are booming. Talk about an amazing investment!” Marci had bought *another* house—as a realtor she got first dibs on listings—then “flipped” it two months later and made a mess of money. Turns out she might end up being a landlord soon—imagine that, she said with a laugh, looking around the lobby of our tenement as if this were the very building she might take title to. In Liberty, she said, with ten apartments, is that amazing or what, with only 5% down.

For me those moments were all ebullience, as though after nearly twenty years we had just discovered a relative in common. She detailed adventures with apartment buildings and farmhouses and foreclosure auctions. I nodded and I smiled, and a great wave of contentedness washed over me. Bathed in good feeling, I stopped paying attention to the particulars she shared. I got the gist. Marci was an upstate realtor. What else mattered? Till now a house in the mountains had been scarcely more than a fantasy, just thumbnail photos online. Suddenly the

scattered pieces of my jigsaw puzzle of a Catskill dream seemed instantly to assemble. Now I could settle into the trust of a friend and neighbor to guide me. Already three times at our door she had propped plastic shopping bags distended with second-hand board books for the babies. Marci would take care of us. It was almost like being a kid again.

I rattled off the names of towns I had searched online.

"That's all Ulster County and I think Greene County," she said.

Okay, if she said so. Thinking of the wilderness of the Catskill Park in terms of counties made it seem rather more tame than I liked.

"Why not Sullivan County?" she asked.

"Is that the Park, too?"

"What park?"

She had never heard of it! The proving grounds of my childhood, and not a zip of recognition. I mentioned the hiking adventures I'd shared with my dad and hinted at what they had meant to me. "So for me it's Park or bust," I said. "Whatever we buy has got to be in the Park."

Marci looked dejected again. I didn't know why. Maybe my preference for a country house so different from hers had hurt her feelings. So often people crave validation for the choices they've made.

I said, "Really anything you show us in Ulster and Greene Counties we'd love to see."

"Can't help you there." She tried hard to sound cavalier. Then she shrugged and forced a smile, picked up the cat and backed away. "I'm only licensed to sell in Sullivan County," she said, laughing in an unfunny way and retreating into the elevator. She disappeared behind the closing door, and rose with Boo and the ratcheting gears and pulleys of the antique elevator.

Was this just about her losing a commission? We didn't know each other well enough for psychodynamics. What a shame it couldn't work. How perfect it might have been.

For a while I kept on searching online, visiting my favorites, checking the traps. New properties appeared and old ones vanished, and still I did nothing. My dad asked how's the search going? Ruth made exasperated faces as I hunched in front of the screen. Those evening hours began to feel like a colossal waste of time, an excuse to stay up drinking vodka. At long last, as spring arrived, I called for appointments.

The brokers we met, mostly weather-beaten old men, had straw hats and bolos and body odor. They looked like they had tried their hands at many vocations and faced more than their share of failures and disappointments. They took us in their beat-up cars to decrepit old houses on busy roads, where we trudged with babies strapped to our chests through tiny rooms with smelly carpets, and plastic paneling stamped like wood grain and low ceilings dropped even lower with acoustic tiles, and particle-board book cases with shelves that sagged under store-brand cans of corn and melamine dishes, and worn linoleum floors, and closets with curtains instead of doors. We drove down gravel roads through forests of hemlocks in rows so regimented they must have been abandoned tree farms or projects of the Civilian Conservation Corps, only to reach some primitive hunting lodge with horseshoes and deer skulls nailed over doorways and flat-roofed sheds that reeked of rotten blood. Alongside some brook or seasonal mountain view, we followed our agents into the sealed interiors of sunbaked trailers stuffy with the fumes of plastic and glue. I insisted on seeing other listings too, dirt cheap handyman specials that looked like values from the thumbnails online, but when we pulled up in the driveway or along the road one or another realtor talked us out of it, thank God. Here were home-repair challenges beyond anything my dad had done or I dared to try. This house stood

on a rotten sill plate, that one's laid-stone foundation had slumped into the flow of a subterranean stream, another's roof had decayed beyond repair. Contractor specials, one realtor called them. Whole days disappeared into the past with nothing to show for ourselves but a few print-outs and the photographs and measurements Ruth and I had made to remember places we could just as soon forget.

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A flywheel spun nervousness inside me. With a pile of papers to grade, my mind drifted. I fought the urge to buck up and do something, anything. I scrubbed and wiped windowsills and floors. My only riveted moments were back with the listings. Ruth agreed a place in the country could be nice, and a good resource for the children. But a bigger apartment was what we really needed, she said. The kids screamed and fussed. The "tide" in the apartment was rising: we had removed all dangers and breakables within a foot of the floor. Soon they would be walking and the tide would rise again. Ruth said, Couldn't I spend my time online searching for a bigger apartment? Fights erupted, and I pushed away their messiness with vodka. For as long as the buzz lasted, it gave a good blur to our problems. But sometimes I said stupid things, and there was silence to pay for it. Nine months since my dad's stroke, his progress had turned glacial. He walked only with the cane and only with small, mincing steps. Climbing the stairs, he held the bannister like a life line with his good arm. It was hard to imagine him navigating even the easiest forest trail. I struggled against currents that pulled me far from shore. I wanted to host him. I wanted us all to flourish. I wanted an ark of a home to weather the storms, not a tiny rental apartment some landlord could evict us from.

Online I started searching farther north without knowing it. The towns I discovered, with better values and evocative names -- Andes, Bovina, and Delhi -- lay north of the wilderness

preserve. I thought I had discovered the Promised Land. Here were listings at the top of our budget so neat and right they might have posed for a Currier and Ives print: horse-drawn sleighs, candles in windows, cornbread warm from the hearth. The region lacked the wildness of the Park but possessed another beauty, of grand valleys and grand fields. Grand described it, an old-fashioned word so redolent of the nineteenth century that a contrail in the sky felt like an alien invasion.

"Sounds promising," said my dad on the phone. "Three plus hours seems far, though."

Google Maps put one destination at 3 hours 6 minutes. Far, yes, but I had answers for him, a machine-gun rattle of defense about the trip feeling shorter the more we drove it, four-day weekends and whole summers up there.

"I admire your determination. Is Ruth excited too?"

"You bet," I lied. "Space, the final frontier. We're both of us willing to go pretty far for it." I sounded like a caricature of myself, not wanting to worry him. It was nice, too, bantering about a future that included him strong and sound. "We'll be able to host you in style," I said.

He laughed. "I'll start packing my bag."

On a warm March day Ruth, the babies and I made our way upstate to meet a gruff old man about my father's age, with a brawny build gone slack and cheeks scarred by acne. He didn't talk much. Mostly we trailed behind his old Chevrolet, following on roads so primitive I worried our rental car might not make it past deep ruts and mud and over a little stream we had to ford. From Marci I had gathered that brokers tend to be chatty people who turn a meeting into a social event. Not John Smith. Something like a cataract came between him and the things we did. He moved stiffly and his shoulders stooped the way my father's had before the stroke. After several hours and properties and gallons of gas, an unexpected guilt settled over me for having

dragged this poor man away from his home on a fruitless odyssey.

To see John's final property we drove behind him for a long time, down into the top right corner of Marci's territory, Sullivan County. We took a forest road high above the Neversink Reservoir, one of the three huge artificial lakes that supply fresh water to New York City about 75 miles southeast. This was undeveloped land the city owned with a feeling of wilderness I hadn't experienced since backpacking with my dad, a rare hemlock forest strewn with boulders clutched tight to the hillside by big old roots, as though to keep them from tumbling, and the damp sweet odor of moss and mulch that you have to pay a florist for in the city. There was quiet, too, no cars except for the whirr of our own, and the breathy pant-like puff each time we passed so close by a tree trunk that you tucked your elbow in from the windowsill. From far below, flickering through the trees, came the sparkle of sunlight on water. Ahead of us, John turned onto an inconspicuous road and we followed him up a gently sloping hill to a lone farmhouse at the end. He was studying the paperwork on his clipboard by the time we joined him, Ruth and I each with a blessedly sleeping baby harnessed to our chests.

"You should like this one, Andrew," he said. "This one was built in 1838."

I wanted him to go on, but he had nothing more to tell us, in contrast to the way he had about the other properties. We'd driven so far south we were out of his usual range. Ruth looked beat. The three of us stood silently on the dirt driveway next to the cars. Here was an ancient house, almost as old as the settlement of the Catskills themselves, and nobody but me seemed to care. The day had dragged on too long. I felt responsible, like the host of a failing party. I started talking, as if that could improve the mood, rambling about the English and the Dutch, the Mohicans and the Munsees and the Lenni Lenape, and how nobody much before 1838 had lived here in numbers because they couldn't farm with all the rocks. I looked at Ruth and John. Those

little tidbits hadn't whet their appetites, so I dished up more. It was all I could think to say. Shouldn't it be possible to share my excitement? Standing here in this quiet, tucked-away place was like visiting a land that time forgot. The people who built this house were pioneers, probably here to make money in the hemlock business, to strip off the bark and boil it down to tan leather. No, that didn't make sense, I said: we were too far up from town in the valley where the tannery would have been, and anyway the stone walls must have meant cows. Probably this had been a dairy farm. John turned to me with a smile and something between surprise and alarm. Finally he said, "You a teacher?"

Nodding, I left it at that and so did he.

In silence except for the crackle of straw underfoot we trudged across a meadow filled with last year's nettles and goldenrod, picking our way over rock slabs and collapsed stone walls. Without students, I didn't feel like a teacher. Nothing I said could bring this place alive for them. I let it go. Seeing the timeless skyline of the mountains, standing on the hillside where that first farming family had worked and played, I shared a connection with them that I didn't with John or Ruth. The mountain breeze through the branches of the barren trees made me think of their whispers, their appeals to be remembered. Why just now did I feel more in common with those strangers from another time than I did with my own wife? Why was I instantly comforted thinking of Thomas Cole? Would he really have been a kindred spirit just because in 1825 he blazed our path from the city, from our very neighborhood in fact, up to the Catskills? With his brushes and easel he came to celebrate God's sublime hand over the wilderness. I came in search of a refuge to escape time. Looking at Matthew Brady's famous photograph of Cole, I had always felt his intelligence and compassion. He wrote the way I might have about the hemlock devastation: "The ravages of the axe are daily increasing . . . oftentimes with a wantonness and

barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation." Because of that decimation, the mountains in front of us now were mostly gray/purple/brown with leafless deciduous trees. Cole had witnessed the savagery of greed on a scale as stunning, almost, as the brutality of time. He died in 1848. Some thirty years later, the virgin forest he loved had vanished, too, and with it the tanning industry. Even the town once known for its tannery deep in the valley has disappeared, somewhere at the bottom of the reservoir, a place called Neversink. It's a transliteration of an Indian name, but it resonates with the kind of hubris punished by the Greek gods.

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Finally I had found a house that spoke to me, but Ruth couldn't hear a murmur from it. Where I beheld an architectural fossil she saw a dump. The low ceilings that enchanted me depressed her. The primitive plank doors cinched together with backward Z's struck her as paltry, and the staircases they hid, where I saw generations of children racing up and down the worn treads, made her claustrophobic. That was nothing that skylights couldn't solve, I said. She'd see the house differently restored, I knew it. She'd appreciate the charm of this ancient place. Who cared that the kitchen cabinets were glopped up with paint and that their plywood doors didn't close right -- all that would go, I said, waving my arms, go like barnacles scraped from an old hull. She countered with rational assessments of the cost to refresh the plumbing and wiring, replace the windows with custom Thermopane ones, replaster the walls and rebuild the sagging floors. But what about that view, I said, three ribbons of mountains from winter purple to blue to gray, a view to drive two hours for, a view that made you stand straighter and taller and breathe deeply of that mountain air? She said it doesn't do that for me. Back and forth it went on like this, the two of us like opponents in a ring until her knock-out blow. You've made up your mind,



she said, it's your dad's money anyway.

One day in the lobby Marci broached the awkward silence between us. How's the search going, she asked. The question knocked me hard. I was so discouraged, I deflated like a blow-up toy. I sank back against a wall because standing up straight suddenly exhausted me. I said, how good can it be going, searching, searching, and then finally falling in love with a place your wife despises? A place, mind you, which is everything she wants but because it's in the rough, which is the only way we can afford the damned thing, she can't see the possibilities? Which means it's futile, a waste of time, we'll never find anything. I finished my diatribe. I felt finished. Marci looked at me hard. Her face so perfectly fused curiosity and consternation she could have been a scientist peering for the first time through a telescope at some alien world. Finally she laughed. I really have to show you some listings, she said, and just like that we were friends again.

From then on, Marci was our hope, so sanguine. Every few days she emailed us a fresh crop of listings or stopped by late, after we had managed to get the children to sleep. By month eleven that was a major act, the centerpiece of every evening: lying down in the dark between the two toddlers so they wouldn't fight over dolls or get silly on the full-size mattress that Ruth and I had surrendered and put on the floor after retreating to the sofa bed in the living room. We tried cooing them lullabies, or listened to bossa nova or Gianmaria Testa or Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young in the ambient city light through a paper shade over the big window. Then the children became quiet but not quite still, and I myself began to drift, resisting the desire to relax and slip away. So often I woke with a start to find myself between two and three in the morning, or because Ruth cracked open the bedroom door when Marci stopped by and I heard her voice in the hall, still filled with the energy of the subway and the street, and I shook off the drowsiness as best I could, like a wet dog, but still very much with a dampened brain.

Marci settled onto our sleep sofa with her laptop computer, and Ruth and I, at Marci's sides, sank into her warm flanks. We coached her to click on this or that open window. What appeared but ranch houses behind manicured lawns, split-levels on cul-de-sacs and trim little Tudors on corner lots in towns, all the types I knew from my New Jersey childhood in a suburb known for its banks, churches and liquor stores. Who wanted to drive two hours for the very thing you fled when you were eighteen? Marci showed us plenty of farmhouses too, but humble ones like we had already trudged through, with peeling paint and boxy little rooms on busy roads, all stain and rain on even sunny days, houses that made me think of long-ago Catskills childhoods of freckled girls spent pining over pictures in glamour magazines for a better life somewhere, anywhere else.

Trolling through listings on my own one day, I found Neversink. There it was, the little house up on the hill, except that now another company represented it at a substantially lower price, low enough to leave us money to renovate. I asked Ruth what she thought.

"Obviously you love it."

"But you still hate it."

"I guess the view is okay."

"So you're not against it."

"You've been talking about it for months. How can I stop you?"

In my bones I felt she would come around. Someday she would recognize the charms of that old house. What I imagined for Neversink was just so tangible how could I be wrong?

"So make an offer," Marci coached. "But low, low. Either they take it or they don't."

On a lark I figured a number that would leave us plenty of cash for renovation. Marci scolded me for feeling embarrassed how low. "Let *them* decide what's too low. Worst comes to

worst, they say no and you offer higher."

Three days later it was Marci again. "Guess what? They accepted our offer." She laughed. "Of course you always wonder if maybe we offered too much. But I don't think so. For the size I think it's a pretty good deal." She had to go. She left me standing with the dead phone alongside our window over Bleecker Street. An idling truck far below sent vibrations like shivers that rattled the glass. Somehow I fixed on the way Marci had described it as "our" offer. It touched me that she felt part of our team. The relationship would serve us well in the search, I thought – and instantly scolded myself for being so conniving. Then, just as quickly, like a short circuit: No, the search is finished. Little by little, fragments of the new understanding reassembled into a fresh reality. All the open tabs on my computer could go, the favorites I had saved, the printouts, the photos. The nighttime conferences were over. An unexpected listlessness settled over me. Just like that, the hours I had filled would be vacant. What would I do with my nights? The task was done. I had my homestead. We had Neversink.