

change almost overnight. At the same time, the gradual emergence of universal suffrage and the steady rise of incomes in a freewheeling market society emboldened the common folk to question authority of all kinds. Nationalism, which Lukacs is correct to call the most durable force in modern politics, fit the needs of people who no longer trusted the verities peddled by monarchs and bishops but who still longed for a transcendent community. By dramatizing the ideals of his beloved country, a Lincoln (and, later, an FDR and a Churchill) could persuade ordinary people to make sacrifices they wouldn't make for hereditary authorities with transnational connections.

In the United States, reformers and radicals held a near-monopoly on the language of populism from the age of Jefferson through the heyday of the New Deal, but inevitably, plain-speaking conservatives took it up too. Resolving to oppose liberal ideas and policies, they adapt-

ed the rhetorical dualism of their opponents: scorn for a self-appointed elite, and undiluted praise for the virtuous masses and their glorious republic. Activists on the Right substituted middle Americans for heroic strikers and tax-eating bureaucrats for greedy plutocrats, but the technique of mobilizing the grass roots was the same.

*Democracy and Populism* is an entertaining, occasionally instructive polemic by a scholar who has learned a great deal in his long career. But for all his erudition, Lukacs fails to heed the famous sentiment expressed by Churchill, one of his few political heroes: Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.

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## ARTS & LETTERS

### *SONGS FROM THE BLACK CHAIR:*

#### *A Memoir of Mental Illness.*

By Charles Barber. Univ. of Nebraska Press. 202 pp. \$22

Tobias Wolff, author of the autobiographical *This Boy's Life*, selects the memoirs published in the University of Nebraska Press's American Lives series, and what a beautiful choice he's made in this modest, bittersweet story of three boys' lives that didn't turn out as expected.

Three best friends grow up in a New England college town in the 1970s. Together they enact the ritual rebellions of adolescence: drinking, driving too fast, smoking pot, playing nasty music. The brilliant one, Nick, from a working-class Italian background, gets straight A's and goes to the local college on a full scholarship. Henry, the classic WASP underachiever, is a shoo-in to join Nick at the college, where both his parents teach. Fellow faculty brat Charles, the author of this memoir, goes off to his father's alma mater, Harvard.

Fast-forward two decades: Nick lives in his parents' basement and works as an aide with people who are mentally retarded. Charles, who dropped out of Harvard after suffering a full-blown episode of obsessive-compulsive disorder, now does intake interviews at the Bellevue Men's Shelter in New York City. And Henry is dead. He, too, dropped out of college, briefly worked as a busboy, then committed suicide at his parents' summer cottage, after a drunken weekend there with Charles and Nick. A few years later, Henry's mother replicated his suicide almost exactly.

Barber's title isn't phony symbolism. It refers to *Songs from the Big Chair*, the recording that Henry put into the tape player of his truck before letting the exhaust fumes take him out. It also refers to the black chair next to Barber's desk at Bellevue, where the crazies sit and tell their stories, singing the atonal notes of their lives. Barber is supposed to check off all comers by category: SPMI (seriously and persistently mentally ill), MICA (mentally ill chemical abuser), Axis II (per-

sonality disordered), and so on. But the list means nothing, he quickly sees, so he creates his own: "The Travelers and the Wanderers, Guided by Voices, Vietnam Vets, Waylaid Tourists, . . . 'No English' and No Papers, . . . Manic in America, . . . The Truly Weird, for Whom We Can Find No Category That Fits." Barber forms a special attachment to one of his clients, a brilliant Czech émigré, but one day the man jumps into the East River and never comes out.

Barber, who's now an associate at Yale Medical School's Program for Recovery and Community Health, is too reflective to offer any pat answers, but he does come to understand that life's sensitive souls need help in every form, whether pharmaceutical, therapeutic, or familial, to get them through dark nights. Beyond that, who knows why some people make it and some don't?

"You have to decide whether you are going to breathe or not," Barber writes. He remembers an atypical conversation with his ordinarily reserved mother, soon after he'd dropped out of Harvard. "My mother and I were talking, in our roundabout way, about the difficulties that people have in the world. . . . 'Look, living is hard,' my mother said. 'Breathing is hard. Just listen to the music.'"

Barber decided to breathe. He listened. He wrote a fine book about it, too.

—A. J. LOFTIN

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**SPECIAL EFFECTS:**

***An Oral History.***

By Pascal Pinteau. Translated from French by Laurel Hirsch. Abrams. 566 pp. \$37.50

The rarest of all special effects in a Hollywood movie these days is a good script. But though oral intelligence is in short supply on the screen, there's an abundance of technological intelligence, sights to distract you from the dialogue, sounds to drown it out. If you've ever left a theater—or theme park or Céline Dion show (see p. 21)—wondering "How'd they do that?" here's the book for you. Pinteau interviewed more than three dozen special-effects wizards, who shared with him the secrets of the illusions they've worked over the years. Be warned, though.

After lots of the explanations, you're likely to have a follow-up question: "Huh?"

Pinteau honors the antic genius of individuals who've been largely anonymous to the public, though they've shaped our dreams and nightmares, and that recognition is overdue. How many otherwise awful movies have been redeemed by a good explosion? Or a wayward asteroid? Or an oversized reptile? Or a gaggle of flesh-eating ghouls? As you might expect of a journalist and screenwriter who's done special-effects work himself, Pinteau takes a spacious view of the subject, exploring not just "film and manipulated reality," but animation "from paintbrush to pixel," the art of makeup, TV illusions, and theme parks. (The last no longer feature pop-out skeletons in a down-scale haunted house. Visitors to these stupendous sites are now prey to fire and flood and the false hope of extras in a disaster movie, or they're pinned by twice the force of gravity while blasting off in a space shuttle—and they expect nothing less.)

But to call this book an "oral history" is misleading on two counts: the oral part and the history part. The featured interviews have no consistent pattern, and, in any case, they're by no means the whole of the book. They're dropped at random into Pinteau's own narrative, which suffers from a kind of journalistic ADD and is much too jumpy to qualify as disciplined history. (From the early special effect of an eight-legged horse in a Paleolithic Spanish cave painting, it's a two-page gallop to the 19th century.) What's more—or, rather, less—the book has only a skeletal table of contents, which makes no mention of the interviews, and it has no index at all. The publisher of this oral history must be headquartered in Babel.

Why, then, is *Special Effects* such a guilty pleasure? For the pictures, of course: 1,136 of them—982 in full color—and twice that many would not have been excessive. Without turning a page, you're hooked by the photo on the laminated front cover: a mechanized head of the current governor of California, looking green and ravaged, with half his steely skull exposed. (A good day terminating, or a bad day in Sacramento?) Recall your favorite screen illusion, and you're like-