

# Resentments of Things Past

LAURA KIPNIS

THE ART OF NOT LETTING GO.



A postcard Allen Kurzweil sent to his mother, detailing places he was bullied.

What's the use of getting over things? Wrongs have been perpetrated: assaults on your dignity, your self-image, your fragile well-being. And they've gotten away with it—they're reveling (no doubt prospering), smug in their galling impunity, probably laughing at you even now. Bullies, critics, snobs, the so-called friend who slept with your one true love in college and has now tried to friend you on Facebook as though it never happened. Shitty parents, lecherous mentors, crappy former spouses: It's a world of assholes out there. Fuck them all.

Consider the festering wound. Especially if you're a writer: Consider it as the raw material for your next book, for an entire oeuvre, even. Moving on may be better for your mental health and digestive tract—so say wusses and forgiveniks—but your wounds are *who you are*. Especially these days: We live in an injury culture. I don't mean to sound cynical, I'm just being practical. Besides, wallowing is one of life's great unacknowledged pleasures.

One person who didn't get over things was Leonardo da Vinci, at least according to Sigmund Freud, who wrote a memorable if notoriously flawed case study, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, based on his reading of the artist-inventor's voluminous notebooks. Leonardo obsessively recorded everything, from accounts of his dreams to his mother's funeral expenses, from which Freud distills some compelling advice for artists, should you be in the market for any.

Start by being born illegitimate. In Leonardo's case, this primal injury was compounded by his rich father's having abandoned his peasant mother, throwing her over for someone with a better lineage. He did more damage by reappearing when Leonardo was five and moving him into his household—so now the son loses his beloved mother. The stepmother had no children of her own; Leonardo was the imported stand-in. In response to these successive losses, young Leonardo became a brooder, Freud thinks, and—plagued by the uncertainty of his paternity—a devoted researcher, displacing

his parentage questions into lifelong intellectual pursuits.

But the early injuries took their toll—in fact, Leonardo sounds a lot like a modern neurotic: not finishing things, spending too much on clothes, sexually ambivalent. All of which factors into Freud's speculations about one of art history's enduring mysteries: What is Mona Lisa smiling about? And what gives the smile such a confusing effect, that “daemonic magic,” as one of his contemporaries put it? Leonardo himself was never free of the spell, Freud notes, reproducing versions of the same smile in every portrait from then on.

For Freud, it's axiomatic that what so powerfully fused Leonardo to Mona Lisa existed in his unconscious before it could be realized in paint. It was what her smile *reawakened* in him, not the physical properties of her lips or his technical skills: It was some dormant memory he couldn't free himself from. In fact, mouths had been one of Leonardo's long-standing themes: He'd been molding children's heads, along with laughing women's heads, out of clay since his youth. Was it something of his mother's smile Leonardo found in La Gioconda's lips? The mouth is an eroticized area to begin with—and of course it was Freud who insisted that nursing itself inspires erotic feelings in infants (the world has never forgiven him). With no husband around, did Caterina eroticize her relations with her son a bit too much? Then the son ends up with *two* mothers, more confusion—and a theme reprised in another of his enigmatic masterpieces, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*.

Unfortunately, in analyzing Leonardo's dream about a vulture pecking rather sexily at his mouth, Freud relied on a mistranslation; it was actually a different, less beaky sort of bird, to the delight of his detractors. But this doesn't diminish the power of childhood injuries as creative inspiration: The trick for centuries of artists and writers remains simply not getting over their trauma. Allen Kurzweil, a novelist and children's-book author, turns out to be a champion at exactly this skill, carefully nurturing a boyhood wound for a lifetime. *Whipping Boy: The Forty-Year Search for My Twelve-Year-Old Bully* (Harper, \$28) is his contribution to the genre.

It would be asinine to compare Kurzweil to Leonardo, but I'm curious about certain patterns that emerge when you hold one up against the other. Like Leonardo, Allen's youth was marked by loss and disruption. His father died when he was five; his mother sent him to a boarding school in the Swiss mountains for a year when he was ten. There, as the youngest, smallest pupil—and one of a handful of Jews—he was a natural target, attracting a bully with a name for the ages: Cesar Augustus. Cesar's nickname for Allen was “Nosey,” possibly an anti-Semitic slur. Rumored to be the son of Ferdinand Marcos's security chief (he wasn't), Cesar devised a series of creative tortures: forcing Allen to eat hot-sauce-soaked bread pellets; staging a cruel dorm-room performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and, as Pilate, doling out thirty-nine humiliating lashes to Allen, cast as Jesus, naturally. Worst of all, he commanded his loyal goon to steal Allen's watch—his dead father's Omega—and toss it into a snowbank; it was never found.

The lingering rage of that year never entirely dissipated: Two decades later, an impromptu visit to his old school triggered a panic attack. On the suggestion of his wife, Kurzweil decided to find out what had become of Cesar, and after a decade spent pursuing leads, he struck memoirist's gold. His childhood nemesis, he learned, had grown into a real-life criminal, fronting for a team of colorful swindlers who, posing as European royalty, had bilked hapless investors of a million dollars.

“All writers are stalkers,” Kurzweil announces while crisscrossing the country in pursuit of Cesar, sorting through thousands of legal documents and interviewing anyone with knowledge of the case, however tangential. He recognizes that his obsessive researches are just a kind of void-filler, but then what *are* we supposed to do with our voids?

And what poetic justice to learn that your childhood tormentor has been sent to the slammer, though a disappointingly luxurious one—Cesar had done his stint in California's cushy Club Fed. When Kurzweil finally contrives to meet his old foe face-to-face, it's something of a letdown: Cesar barely remembers Allen, or the bullying. And his story turns out to be irksomely complicated: Cesar, too, had lost his father at an early age; Cesar, too, was victimized at school. The tormentor had had his own tormentors. Adult life hasn't gone so swimmingly, either: a cocaine bust, rickety finances, and now he's scraping by as a Tony Robbins-style life coach, which at least allows Kurzweil some satisfying condescension: “The more he opens up, the more it becomes clear: Cesar has been on a hamster wheel of self-pity and delusion all his life.” A bit of a dim bulb, Cesar also has no idea that he's being set up for another fall, this time in the pages of Kurzweil's memoir. Eventually he manages a New Age-ish apology: He hopes Allen will finally get closure, and he's sorry for what “may have happened in the past.”

It's hard to imagine this helps. Memorializing your childhood pain doesn't exactly minimize its aftereffects. However, Freud

has some backdoor aesthetic advice for those taking this route: sublimation. Transform the injuries into something *else*. The problem for us post-Renaissance types, of course, is that we live in post-sublimatory times. The dominant genres for conveying our emotional wounds tend to be blunt instruments, aesthetically speaking. I mean they convey experience very bluntly; they hit us over the head a little.

When faced with a lot of explicitness, my attentions tend to veer toward the inexplicit, the figures on the margins. In *Whipping Boy* that figure is Kurzweil's mother. Married four times, with a penchant for “champagne socialists,” she's rather enigmatic—sometimes attentive, sometimes absent. She plants her son in boarding school while she does fieldwork for a PhD and encourages the attentions of an ardent Marxist sociology professor. Kurzweil reproduces a handful of his plaintive, misspelled letters from school, in which he wonders where she's disappeared to: “Dear Mom, I am a little homesick . . . I haven't been hearing from you resently [*sic*].” What's she up to? Who's she with? There's something piercing about this fleeting glimpse of a retreating form—or maybe she just reawakens some childhood homesickness in me, too.

Freud leaves us wondering whether Leonardo's talents would have amounted to anything minus his childhood grief, but what if the grief were more explicitly spelled out? Would we have gotten over his work a few centuries faster? The power of Mona Lisa's smile is that it's a condensation, he suggests, which makes it similar to the language of dreams and jokes, and also to symptoms—the slips of the tongue or the pen that condense unconscious desires and conflicts. These small errors give away what you're hiding from yourself: What's repressed invariably leaks out. Freud dwells on a minor mistake Leonardo makes recording the time of his father's death in his notebook. With that in mind, it's hard not to notice that the small error in Allen's letter to his mother condenses two words—*recently* and *resentment*—into a new coinage, “resently,” adding a layer of complicated poignancy to the son's story of losses and stifled hatreds. So was Cesar really the sole author of Allen's traumas that year? Or was the energy that propelled his later investigations—as with Leonardo's researches—something more primal, and thus more unspeakable?

Here's the conundrum: We want to tell our stories! But if condensation is the language of wishes—especially the most verboten and destructive ones—the more you spell the story out, the less aesthetically charged it becomes. The question is whether untransformed experience can ever be aesthetically powerful, or whether it's simply *interesting*. Literary language is one solution, with its habits of duality—metaphor, irony—and other techniques for saying opposing things at once. For haunting the reader with ghosts of buried meanings.

Your story may be interesting, but what if, paradoxically, it's what you *can't* say that makes it lasting? □

Laura Kipnis's most recent book is *Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation* (Metropolitan, 2014). (See Contributors.)