

from My Life as Roland Barthes

Jaime Brunton

aide / help

As a boy he was often rather put off by the children who lived next door to his grandmother, at whose home he spent a great deal of time. They seemed innumerable, those boys with close-cropped hair and the girls who never looked at him. Mostly, they looked through him, but he was nonetheless obliged to hand over his clothes and toys when it was decided he'd outgrown them. By the time Barthes was a young man, away on scholarship, he had little occasion to think of these children aside from Mother's updates (the middle girl helped style her hair, the youngest boy drew her a lovely picture of a horse, and so on). One day, Mother called to say she'd given away his bar bells, a Christmas gift gone unused for many years, to the oldest boy. He had enlisted for lack of steady work and worried that he wasn't strong enough for the army. This was during the war. Barthes tried to imagine the boy's arms growing baseball-sized lumps for biceps, like those he'd once seen on a Chinese gymnast. He could not. He also attempted to visualize this boy handling a rifle under some foreign sun, but managed only to conjure the landscape, sandy and windswept (he'd seen this on a newsreel before yesterday's *matinée*), devoid of people. This was vexing, for it might have made a powerful image. *Michelet*, he remembered, *was able to write virtually nothing about his own time*. This did not help.

déception / disappointment

There is no way to be systematic about this. The oak tree out his office window now is the deep brown of soaked wood, the leaves that were yellow last week are brown-orange like overcooked sweet bread, and there is no way to be systematic about this. Something about the tree and its changes—necessary and usual and somehow still surprising—you'd think this could mean something. You'd think the tree suggestive. *I begin producing by reproducing the person I want to be.* There are days when that person is at hand. He chases him up the stairs, follows on his heels through the long dark halls of the library stacks. *Suggero.* To bring up, supply, provide, add. The other carries him. Not today.

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