

PRICE \$8.99

MAR. 25, 2019

THE NEW YORKER



Ulrichsen

WHAT LIES BENEATH

An artist draws power from the hidden layers of his work.

BY JOSHUA ROTHMAN

A painting by Peter Sacks looks one way from a distance and another up close. From twenty paces, "Amnesty," a large triptych hanging in his Tribeca studio, seems to depict three figures in procession, writhing in pain or rapture. From ten, details of its surface emerge—ridges, crenellations, ribbons of paint—and it resembles an aerial photograph of farmland, cities, rivers. From five, the variety of the work's materials becomes visible: the river is a strip of West African cloth, dyed indigo; the farmland is corrugated cardboard; the city is a patch of lace, charred at its edges. Lean in and the waves of the sea resolve into the typed testimony of an inmate at Sednaya prison, in Syria. The words—"They stripped us and dragged us to a cell and made me lie on my stomach"—have been inked in Courier type on a swatch of linen. Step back and the testimony recedes into the ocean. The landforms suggest a globe in turmoil. The figures express vitality amid suffering.

Sacks builds paintings like "Amnesty" through a painstaking process that takes years. He might begin with an underpainting of a creature or a figure. He then obscures that image with text, which he drives into fabric, one letter at a time, with an old typewriter. Over the text, he layers maps, cardboard, paint, fishing nets, funeral shrouds, prison shirts, his own garments, and other materials found in junk shops around the world. He integrates more literary extracts—"Amnesty" contains several hidden layers of testimony from prisoners at Sednaya; other paintings include sections of Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" or Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism." The text of the Kyoto Protocol might flow around segments of Indian and African fabric, which can evoke ocean currents and mountain ranges. The paintings are "ravishingly beautiful," Glenn Lowry,

the director of the Museum of Modern Art, says, and "global, in the best sense of the word. Their sweep, from history to literature to world events, is astounding."

As Sacks adds each new layer, he feels the presence of the materials he has buried, as though history itself is pressing upward. Sometimes he sets fire to the topmost layer, singeing its surface and revealing what's below. His completed paintings, which have been acquired by institutions ranging from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Constitutional Court of South Africa, often have seven or eight layers. Their striated depth, like that of an archaeological site, suggests the accretions of civilizations.

Sacks's emergence as a painter involved a similar process of effacement and exposure. Born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in 1950, he began his working life as an English professor who, on the strength of a single, definitive book—"The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats," published in 1985—was given tenure at Johns Hopkins. Harold Bloom judged the book "a grand achievement" with "no rivals," but Sacks never finished another work of literary criticism. Instead, the year after it came out, he became a poet, eventually publishing five acclaimed collections of poems. J. M. Coetzee described him as "a poet whose sense of history lies deep in his bones, yet who can convey the changing textures of wave-water and shifting modalities of light."

Sacks made his first painting at the age of forty-nine. In the twenty years since, he hasn't written a line of poetry. Instead, he has labored over nearly a thousand works of art, mounting ten solo shows at increasingly prestigious galleries and becoming one of the most exciting painters in America. In doing this, he has surprised his friends, his

colleagues, and himself. Sacks is a private, solitary man. He spends fourteen hours a day alone, painting. He struggles to explain his transformation, late in life and seemingly overnight, into a visual artist with a fully formed and dauntingly complex aesthetic.

Six feet tall, with silver hair, Sacks has an unlined, mournful, luminous face. In his youth, he was an Olympic-level swimmer; he is still fit enough to swim two miles a day in the ocean off Martha's Vineyard, where he lives with his wife of twenty years, the poet Jorie Graham. Sacks swims even in winter, wearing a wetsuit, breaking through the ice that sometimes lines the shore. In New York, he swims in a pool in Battery Park City; when we met at his studio in Tribeca, he had just swum his miles. It was a little after lunchtime, and sun filtered grayly through the skylights. He took a notebook down from a high shelf—he has kept notebooks ceaselessly since he was very young—and began leafing through it.

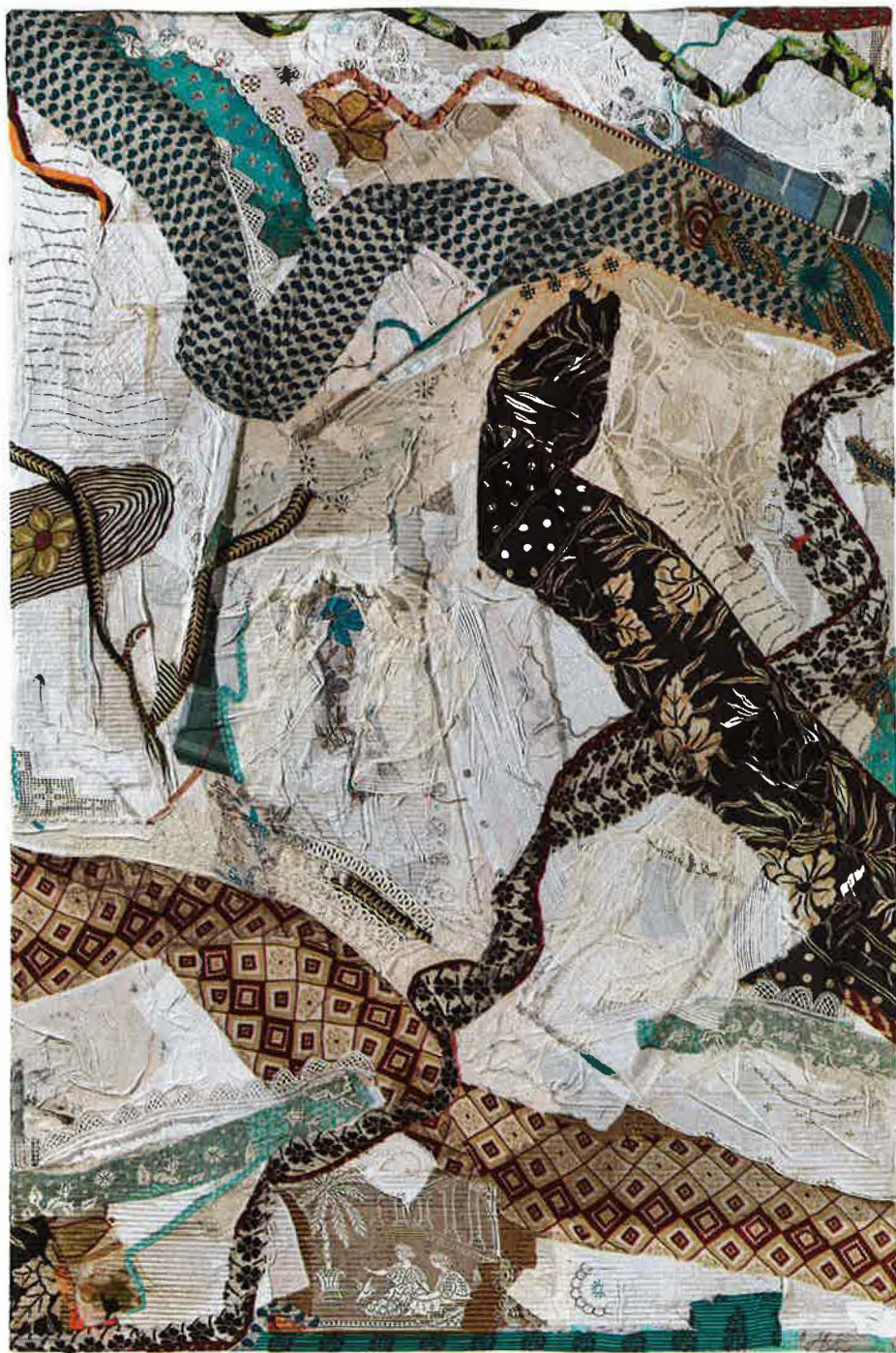
"This is from the nineties," he said, in a gentle South African accent. He ran his hands, which were flecked with blue paint, over the pages. "Crossed-out writings . . . quotations from a Greek poem . . . notes on Vermeer." One section chronicled a trip to Ireland: "Passages from Yeats . . . Seamus's phone number . . ." A tuft of wool floated from between the pages. At that time, he was still a poet, not yet a painter.

"But then, mixed in, drawings," he went on. "Here's one of Perugia. Here's a kind of self-portrait of myself as a night swimmer—I particularly like swimming at night. Here's a sequence trying to capture the effect of a lunar eclipse." On each page, a disappearing moon shone from within a different shade of black. "These drawings existed, and I wouldn't show them to anybody," he said.

With an athlete's languid energy,



Late in life and seemingly overnight, Peter Sacks became a visual artist with a fully formed and dauntingly complex aesthetic.



"Report from the Besieged City 2" (2016-17). Sacks builds paintings through a painstaking process that takes years. "I think of

Sacks led me to one end of the room, where we regarded "Amnesty" from afar before walking toward it. He pointed to a raised square area. "This is an older painting that's been buried," he said. He indicated an intricately patterned confluence of fabrics: "This has been burned." He ran his fingers along undulating waves of type. "I think of these as works of uncovering," he said. "I'm trying to do justice to my feeling of what the mind is like—it's sedimentary." He, too, had buried his experi-

ences; for decades, they had fused and compounded. Only late in life had they transformed into art.

Sacks describes his childhood as "overwhelmingly beautiful, overwhelmingly atrocious." He says that he saw his first painting when he was nine or ten years old, in the Drakensberg mountains, where his family hiked on vacation, sleeping in caves. One morning, he woke as the dawn drew out an eland—a kind of antelope—from the

ceiling of the cave in which he'd fallen asleep. Its body incorporated the shape of the rock; it looked like a part of the cave. Sacks thought of the people who, thousands of years ago, had painted it: the so-called Bushmen, whose descendants, during the colonial era, were driven into the Kalahari Desert and often killed. The story of South Africa was a chronicle of violence that even children knew.

When Sacks was young, his family moved to Durban, a port city on the



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Indian Ocean. He walked to school wearing a safari suit and sandals. In the street, he passed Zulu men carrying shields and walking sticks; bare-chested African women with loads on their heads; Europeans in Western dress; Indian women in saris; black men in prison garb, laboring at the roadside with pickaxes. Sacks was on the "white" side of the color line; his ancestors, Lithuanian Jews, had come to South Africa toward the end of the nineteenth century. Still, the government included Nazi sympa-

thizers, and, at his segregated school, bullies called him "Jew boy," while his own lapses were met with strokes of a cane. The human world was inhuman. Meanwhile, a vast landscape surrounded him: long, deserted beaches echoing with rolling surf; grassy hills creased by ancient mountain shadows. At Durban's port, he watched ships arrive from India, France, Japan—emissaries from an unfathomable world.

Sacks's parents sought to resist apartheid: his father, an obstetrician, taught

at a black medical school. Still, there was no escaping a sense of complicity. "I was waking up always too late in a ravishingly beautiful garden mostly run by thugs, and guess what, I was one of them," Sacks has said. It was a relief for him, as a teen-ager, to become a competitive swimmer. His four daily hours in the pool were a ritual of solitude, discipline, exertion. Sacks went for training runs or daylong walks on the edges of towns. He was running along one of Durban's beaches when a line unfurled



Sacks published "Necessity," his last book of poems, in 2002; bits of it, torn out, are in some recent paintings.

in his head: "If they capture me, I have not learned to speak." Decades later, he incorporated it into a prose poem. The line was a plea: don't make me account for a life I don't wish to have.

When Sacks was sixteen, he enrolled in an exchange program that would take him to America. He dreamed of California—by then he'd become a surfer—but the program placed him with a family on the west side of Detroit. It was 1967. Smoke from the race riots hung over the city; armored cars idled in the streets. Sacks read James Baldwin and Stokely Carmichael—writers who had been censored at home—and, when he returned, he transferred from medical school to the political-science program at the University of Natal, a center of anti-apartheid activism. He became friends with Steve Biko, the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement, and studied with Richard Turner, an intellectual leader of the South African left. At nineteen, Sacks gave speeches and organized anti-apartheid demonstrations.

Not long after he earned a silver medal in the backstroke at the Maccabiah Games, in Israel, a friend of his in

the anti-apartheid student movement was "banned," or put under house arrest, for five years. "I went to visit him and was followed," Sacks said. "My phones were being tapped. Things were getting more threatening." The anti-apartheid movement had begun splintering along racial lines, as Biko and other African nationalists argued that black activists would be better served by all-black organizations. "I remember one conversation in particular where a number of his colleagues were persuading me of why they had to do this," Sacks said. "I was standing literally with my back to the wall, and they were urgently explaining. And I was thinking that I couldn't see my way forward. I wanted out of my skin."

In 1967, the government had made military training compulsory for all white men over sixteen. Sacks was called up—a nightmare. His parents couldn't afford to send him to college abroad, so he endured a few months of military training while applying for American scholarships. In 1970, he won a scholarship to Princeton, and left.

Sacks is sometimes described as an

African or South African artist. Once, the great anti-apartheid lawyer and activist Albie Sachs came to one of his shows; he pointed to a spot of red and remarked, "That red is African—if you'd grown up in South Africa, you'd know it." (The red was like that of a blanket typically worn by Xhosa people.) But Sacks does not feel at home in any particular place. "Here, we have this notion of the melting pot," Jorie Graham told me. "We don't have a concept of the émigré. But the émigré African, the diasporic Jew—Peter is both. South Africa was a door that closed behind him."

Earlier this winter, Sacks began preparing for a new show at the Marlborough gallery, in midtown. The vast paintings that had hung from the walls when I'd visited a week earlier had been moved to the gallery; the studio was now bare. The idea that the works would soon be seen by strangers made him uncomfortable. "I think of burial mounds, or the pyramids," he said. "You'd have the major artists and craftsmen of the period working for a long time. And then they wouldn't just

bury their work—they'd seal it up and make it impossible for others to find it." The night before, Graham had sent me an e-mail. "The gallery install is very hard on P," she wrote. "Letting them go into public view—you'd think that's what it's all about—but somehow it's yet again a breach of the very carapace of privacy, or practice of inwardness, which led him to remain in that wilderness of privacy for so many years."

"Is that appealing, the idea of sealing it away?" I asked.

"A little," he said, smiling. "Yes." With time, his paintings have grown less sepulchral and more alive with figure and movement. And yet they've also become increasingly layered, so that, beneath their vibrant surfaces, more and more is hidden from view.

Sacks first entered the "wilderness of privacy" when he arrived at Princeton. He retreated into the library, reading obsessively. At night, he went for long walks, exploring, he says, "the solitude of a self that wasn't national." He took six courses most semesters, wrote a senior thesis about forgiveness in Shakespeare, and became a Rhodes Scholar.

At Oxford, he studied with Richard Ellmann, the great biographer of Yeats, Wilde, and Joyce. He spent hours in museums, standing in front of paintings, describing and drawing them in notebooks. He visited the frescoes at the Basilica of St. Francis, in Assisi, and was transfixed by the mountain brook in one of them, which seemed as real as the wall. Halfway through his time at Oxford, he left to spend five months walking through South America, sleeping in a hammock he carried over one shoulder. He began in Venezuela and then moved through Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, going over the Andes and into the headwaters of the Amazon, following it east to the coast of Brazil. As he walked, he observed birds and plants; women ambling by the roadside, winding yarn; the granular composition of the earth. He returned, anemic and emaciated, and sat for his exams. He went to Yale, to earn a Ph.D.

The next year, Steve Biko was murdered by the police. The year after, an assassin killed Richard Turner. At Yale, Sacks had started the work that would become "The English Elegy." The words

"South Africa" appear nowhere in the book, but it begins with a quote from Wordsworth, who writes that a poet is someone who is "affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present." Sacks's argument was that an elegiac poem doesn't merely describe loss. Instead, like a funeral ceremony, the writing of an elegy is "a symbolic action," a ritual, with two aims: remembering the dead and helping the living return to the stream of life. The work of elegiac writing memorializes and revitalizes. It helps poets accept the continued existence of their own creativity. Paralyzed by loss, they are inclined to grieve in silence. They must learn to speak again.

Sacks was describing something he had not yet done. He was still in the wilderness. In 1980, he married Barbara Kassel, a painter; soon afterward, he took a job in the English department at Johns Hopkins. In the dozen years after "The English Elegy" appeared, he published his five books of poems. Sacks finds it hard to describe this period, which combined extraordinary productivity and, eventually, hermetic muteness—a silence so profound that it was apparent neither to those around him nor to himself. "My feelings went underground," he said. "I was unhappy in ways I didn't understand, and which I was only able to come to terms with much later, once I realized what had been somehow waiting to happen."

He filled small notebooks obsessively, copying all of Yeats into one, selections of Dickinson into another. Around and between those passages, he made drawings in pen and crayon. He continued to take notes on Corot, Velázquez, Courbet. Colleagues wondered whether he would publish his notes as art criticism. The drawings grew more experimental and abstract. He showed them to no one.

He began work on a new book about late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century poetry. The book contended that, at the turn of the century, subjectivity in poetry had become so rote, so inauthentic, that it had had to be abandoned completely—in a sense, killed off—and replaced by a more impersonal kind of lyric voice. Sacks says that he spent four years on the book, and then

lost it, unaccountably, in a computer mishap. He'd already started treatment for depression; the loss of the book deepened it. He had no interest in rewriting the study or starting another.

He turned fully toward poetry. In "Command," a poem named for a military base in Natal Province, where Durban is situated, he ranged freely through images from his own life: his father's coffin, men in a chain gang, a near-drowning in a violent sea. The poem suggests that experiences remake us, but not all at once, or in ways we can perceive:

The will is broken,
realigned, then broken further,

burning like another
spine within the spine.

A sentry-spy,
it stalks us from behind.

The sunken path emerges
not as feeling nor as thought

but as the mind itself,
historical, embodied, and alive.

In 1999, Sacks—who had joined the Harvard English department a couple of years before—took up a summer residency in Marfa, Texas. He planned to write some poetry. Instead, for four months, he wrote nothing and spoke to no one. He took long walks, sometimes overnight, travelling thirty miles at a time. The landscape was barren and desertlike, the heat intense even at night. "Sometimes I'd go down towards the border with Mexico and walk the border," he said. "Maybe I felt like I was at the edge of things, at a border within myself. I was sort of out of my mind."

He bought a disposable camera and photographed the landscape while he walked, but when he developed the pictures they seemed meaningless and empty. He laid the photos out on his kitchen table. Then, following some instinct, he started erasing them with layer after layer of Wite-Out. It formed troughs and crests, valleys and ridges. He seemed to be watching in a reverie as terrain emerged—tundra, ocean, blankness, covering the paths he'd just travelled.

He went to his refrigerator. From cucumbers and zucchini, he extracted green

pigment; from tomatoes and peppers, red; from coffee, brown. He colored the landscapes so that they resembled the earth. "They became little landscapes of my own silence," he recalled. "Then they started to speak to me, these erased, blotted-out things. They were both terminal and initiatory. They were little windows where, if I bent down to them, I could hear something."

Before leaving for Marfa, Sacks had separated from his wife. When he returned, he asked for a divorce. He stopped writing poetry. He began buying huge canvases from an art-supply store, carrying them back to his apartment, in Cambridge, and working on them in secret.

Philip Fisher, a colleague of Sacks's in the Harvard English department, was one of the first to see the paintings. He entered Sacks's apartment and found them leaning in stacks. "They were doors, in effect—pictures taking up whole walls," Fisher said. "They were either white or black. They had the feeling of the surface of something very large—the sea, or the night. At the same time, if you were standing very close, which you were, in this very small apartment, they were very minutely attended to, with detailed brushwork to create the surface, which was many, many layers deep. It was hard to say how many times it had been painted. . . . It had taken over his life. He was like a person undergoing a renewal or rebirth. He was a demon of energy. He never explained his motivation. He acted like it was a gift."

Sacks keeps the photographs from Marfa in a cigar box. They are small, flimsy, and not particularly beautiful; no aura hovers over them. This makes them only more mysterious. "You know, there's not many ways in which one takes seriously the end of Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo,'" Sacks said. "Yes, O.K., so the headless statue says to you, 'You must change your life.' One takes that at relatively low temperature. But then to say, 'O.K., I'll really do that, in every way I know . . .'" He laughed quietly, then trailed off.

In his bare Tribeca studio, Sacks had dragged a new, blank canvas onto the floor. Around it, he'd arranged scraps of cloth, pieces of wood, and bits of cardboard. On a wall nearby, he had hung

AMBITION

We had our heads down
baiting hooks—three wild salmon
already turned back that morning
for the in-season hatchery silvers
now out there somewhere
counting their luck—when
under our small boat the sea
gave a roll like a giant turning over

in sleep, lifting us so high I thought
an ocean liner or freighter had
slipped up on us, the sudden heft
of its bow-wave, our matchstick toss
to depth we'd taken
for granted in order to venture there
at all. But when I looked up expecting
collision, the quash of water from their

blowholes pushed to air in unison,
a pair of gray whales not two hundred
yards away: "Look up!" I shouted so you

a painting he'd completed many years ago, a kind of talisman, which incorporates a ghostlike portrait of Kafka and the text of "In the Penal Colony."

"In my end is my beginning," he said, shrugging—a quote from T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets."

After Marfa, Sacks began exploring the possibilities latent in his painted-over photographs. At first, he applied paint in layers. Then he began working on surfaces that were themselves layered, such as corrugated cardboard, which could be pulled apart to expose its hidden ridges. (Simultaneously prehistoric and postindustrial, the ridged cardboard reminds him of the improvised homes in South Africa's "townships.") He discovered that, by manipulating scale and distance, he could turn viewers into archeologists: one might excavate a figure of a man by walking up to it and finding that it was made from the text of Kafka's "Before the Law." A vast work, completed in 2004, included all of Eliot's "The Waste Land": thirty-three feet wide and executed entirely on cardboard, it hung from the rafters of his studio in Normandy, where Sacks and Graham lived for a time—a wall unto itself, from which ancient images seemed to emerge.

Now, barefoot, he crouched at the edge of the new canvas, which measured seven by seven feet; its center was just within arm's reach. Using a broad brush dipped in archival glue, he began fixing objects to it. He draped a twisting slash of linen across an old wooden shingle; I was surprised to see that, through two holes in the wood, eyes of red fabric shone. He placed a piece of West African cloth in the upper left corner. On the lower right, he slipped red-and-black batting he'd torn from an old dress beneath a stained piece of lace, so that the overlapping patterns formed a mountainlike crest. (After Sacks adds something to a canvas, he has four minutes to modify or remove it; it takes that long for the glue to dry.) On the lower left, he had placed a small, rectangular canvas divided into rough, horizontal bands of color—black, beige, red, and then white. This painting, which was upside down, depicted Omaha Beach: black rocks, a strip of sand, a blood-filled sea, and the sky.

Eventually, Sacks lifted the canvas and propped it against a wall. Under the force of gravity, some of its parts settled into a slightly different arrangement. He walked to the middle of the room and looked at it. From there, the

didn't miss the fear-banishing
of their passage that made
nothing of us. Not even death could touch
any mind of us. It was all beauty and
mystery, the kind that picks you up

effortlessly and darts through you
for just those moments
you aren't even there. Held that way
and their tons-weight bodies plunged
silently under again, I turned for proof
to you, but the clarity was passing through
as a swell under us again and the sky of the sea
set us down like a toy.

And that's the way it was, and it wasn't
any other way—just looking at each other,
helpless one thought and huge with power
the next. We baited up,
dropped our herring into slack water—
two ghosts fishing for anything but whales.

—Tess Gallagher

painting seemed to be telling a story, its
parts in dialogue, connected by links of
color and texture.

Sacks bent down and selected another strip of linen. Using his brush, he glued it to the wooden shingle, half obscuring its red eyes. The fabric flowed vertically down the canvas. Leaning in, he used his fingers to adjust its path, creating ridges and folds so that it would be open to oxygen. Then, from a nearby worktable, he retrieved a box of kitchen matches. He struck one of them and set fire to the linen. The flames rippled upward, serpentine. He watched them climb, then, after a few seconds, used his brush to snuff them out. Some of the linen was gone. We stood looking at the materials, colored by smoke, now joined by a scar.

"It's strange, isn't it?" he said. "Ultimately, the reason I'm not writing poems is because I can't express whatever just happened there."

His time in Marfa was still mysterious to him, but there were some lessons he knew he had learned: the importance of ritual; the power of erasure; the difference between burying something so it could never be found and creating something new, layer by layer. Everything he had done to the painting so far would

be hidden—buried again and again, over a period of years. It would survive by shaping the layers to come.

Although Sacks has stopped writing poetry, he continues to teach it. His classes at Harvard—this spring, he is lecturing on the history of lyric poetry and giving a seminar on Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath—are beloved. Fifteen years ago, when I was a graduate student in the Harvard English department, I signed up for the graduate section of a class he was giving on T. S. Eliot. Sacks lectured to a packed hall. Wiry and lithe, dressed all in black, he paced in the front of the room, speaking without notes, occasionally standing on an empty chair in the front row. His intensity was sometimes transfixing, sometimes opaque. Eliot can be a cerebral and remote poet, but Sacks talked about "The Waste Land" as though it had happened to him. The poem drifts through time and space, from modern-day London to the ancient cities of the Odyssey, then on to a desert and finally to a shore. Eliot's pilgrim has arrived late to history and is unnerved by the idea of new life amid the wreckage. He sits by the water, opening his mind to snatches of prayer,

song, and poetry, and thinks, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." The incantations were moving but abstract. I never thought that a person I knew might have lived them.

The word "poetry" derives from the Greek *poiesis*, which doesn't refer to the writing of verse; it just means "making," in general. There are many ways to explain how this making is done. One is to think biographically. Leora Maltz-Leca, an art historian at the Rhode Island School of Design, grew up in Durban and wrote the catalogue essay that accompanies Sacks's current show. She points out that emigrants often "turn to the skills they can absolutely depend upon"; in Sacks's case, this meant finding paid work as a scholar before attempting poetry, and moving to painting only once his career as a poet was secure. Waiting so long may have had its advantages. "Look at the wealth of what he's drawing on," she said. "It's the continents he's walked, the libraries he's read, this rich fund of decades of stuff."

Christopher Bedford, the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, sees Sacks's story as a search for an artistic form commensurate to his past. (Bedford, who was one of the first curators to write about Sacks's work, caused a stir in the art world, last year, when he announced that his museum would be selling paintings by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and others to fund the purchase of contemporary art by women and artists of color.) "I'm of the opinion that the actual language at his disposal, in the form of poetry, wasn't adequate to the task of representing his experience," Bedford said. Painting pictures wasn't enough, either: Sacks needed to invent a ritualized form of art-making—creating, burying, burning, uncovering. "The paintings are deeply labor-intensive, almost painful in their execution," Bedford said. "And the physical awareness that you're in the presence of something that was wrought over time, and that contains depth and layers that aren't visually perceivable, is very important. The feeling that the end point was reached through a process that you can sense but not perceive—that feels like history to me."

Art may both alter and grow out of a life over the decades, the way a river,

over aeons, hollows and takes its course from the rock through which it flows. When Sacks was four, his family sailed from South Africa to England, and a storm in the Bay of Biscay so damaged their ship that it had to be towed into port and dismantled; they settled in rubble-strewn postwar London, then received word from South Africa that an electrical fire had burned their house there to the ground. Decades later, Sacks began a series of works on paper, called “Ulysses,” featuring ships of the sort Odysseus might have sailed, afloat in oceans of fabric. Sacks’s paintings resemble Joyce’s novel more than they do any other literary work. “I love ‘Ulysses,’” Sacks told me. “Its density. The fact that it’s a merger between early-twentieth-century Dublin and the ancient world. The way it contains layers of both the empirical and the mythic. That it’s the journey of an estranged, walking Jew.” In a sense, he has lived out his own *Odyssey*. Life shapes art that shapes life, in rhymes audible only with time.

And yet it would be a mistake to see Sacks’s paintings entirely through the lens of his life story. Although only one person could have made them, they are not about that person. In the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” from 1919, T. S. Eliot argued that an artist’s mind is a kind of test chamber—“a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.” What matters is the pressure with which those elements are “fused” and the artist’s ability to get out of the way during that fusion—to keep the chamber clean, so that the transformed materials can speak for themselves. Art, he concludes, “is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” At the same time, “only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.” It can take a long time for an artist to learn how to disappear in just the right way.

After he’d set fire to the surface of his painting, Sacks began adding, slowly, to its blank areas. As he worked—ripping fabric, pulling threads, juxtapos-

ing patterns—the blue fabric at the top left of the canvas began to stand apart from the maelstrom gathering around it. In its odd independence, it started to resemble a figure. I thought of the eland that Sacks had seen, as a child, emerging from the ceiling of the cave.

Jorie Graham, who had been in the other room, on the phone with the gallery, came to stand beside me. (She is a skilled navigator of the art world’s shoals; her mother, Beverly Pepper, is a celebrated sculptor.)

“It feels like something, doesn’t it?” she asked. I nodded.

Sacks came to join us. “I’ll step back and then ask, ‘What am I feeling?’” he explained. “And then, when I go back in, I’ll have half forgotten what I felt—but the half that I remember will dictate the next few moves, which will then dictate the ones after that. So there’s a half-life, which gives to the next half-life, which gives to the next half-life.”

He loaded a brush with black paint and began working it into the cardboard’s corrugated ridges. As he worked, the brush made a rough scraping sound. The black turned the cardboard tough and industrial. He leaned in, inches from the surface, refining edges and details. Then, with a sudden sweep of his arm, he painted a giant, snakelike “S” in the center of the canvas.

I was horrified. He had ruined it. The “S” was a cartoonish scrawl.

I turned to Graham, who seemed unperturbed. “It looks like something



underwater,” she said. “Can’t you see him swimming through it?”

“Look at this!” Sacks called, from across the room. I turned and saw that he had changed the flow of fabric across the canvas. The “S” had been obscured. A piece of wood had rotated onto the diagonal. A run of sheer fabric connected it to an area of blue. A reef of lace was growing under his hands. “See, now,

there’s a kind of—a cross between . . .” He struggled to express himself. “There’s *bliss* involved now.” He was right.

Sacks does most of his painting on Martha’s Vineyard, in a large studio behind his house. On the way there, last month, he drove us to see the nearby beach, crescent and rocky, where he swims. “I hope I’ll swim later, before it gets dark,” he said, from behind his scarf, as the wind whipped spray out of the frigid, turquoise water. I was grateful for the warmth of the studio, which is high-ceilinged, like a barn, with white walls and a concrete floor. A small wooden table in its center is surrounded by piles of fabric from India and Africa.

On a desk in the studio’s back room, books were piled haphazardly: Paul Celan’s “The Meridian,” Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Walter Benjamin’s “Illuminations,” Nelson Mandela’s “Long Walk to Freedom,” the third volume of Proust. An antique typewriter—a gift from Janet Malcolm—contained a long roll of linen on which Sacks had been typing passages from “The Voyage of Argo.” Against the back wall, door-size paintings leaned in stacks five or six deep.

“This is a piece in process that I’ve just abandoned for the moment,” Sacks said, hefting one of them upright. A riverine wave of pale-blue fabric was held in place temporarily, by pins, above a field of text. “This is partly taken from a book called ‘Heart of Dryness,’ which is about the people living in the Kalahari,” he said. “It’s about how they find water underground. But then the text gets confused, because it ends with a Chekhov story in which a body is lowered into the water.” He returned the canvas to its stack. He might work on a painting for several years, off and on. “I know it’s done when I look at every millimetre and feel that I can neither add nor subtract,” he said.

In recent years, the poem Sacks has inserted most often into his paintings is “To Ryszard Krynicki—A Letter,” by the mid-century Polish poet and essayist Zbigniew Herbert. In it, Herbert, who lived through the Second World War, addresses the younger Krynicki, who came of age during the Cold War. “Not much will remain Ryszard really not much / of the poetry of this insane cen-

tury,” Sacks said, reciting it from memory. “Certainly Rilke Eliot / a few other distinguished shamans . . .” Herbert thinks of the grim political poems he has written—“We took public affairs on our thin shoulders”—and then wonders whether it was “worth it to lower holy speech to the babble of the speaker’s platform the black foam of the newspapers.”

“Too easily we came to believe beauty does not save,” Sacks continued. “In our poems Ryszard there is so little joy—daughter of the gods.” He paused. “What strength is needed to whisper / in the garden of betrayal—a silent night.”

Outside the studio, the sun was getting low. Sacks’s paintings are hard to photograph, in part because the materials from which they’re made absorb light differently; as the sun angled through the windows, some fabrics glowed while others receded.

Back at the house, Graham was waiting for us. Like Sacks, she was dressed all in black. A woman of many words, she has published fourteen books of poetry and has received a Pulitzer Prize; in person, she speaks with astonishing verve, speed, and ingenuity. I sensed that she had been keeping her distance so that Sacks would have time and space to speak. Now she wanted to take us down to the basement, where many of his old paintings are stored.

“I’ve got this all rationalized,” she said, as we descended. “These are all triptychs, and these are all cardboards.” Dim and unfinished, the basement was filled with the work of many years.

Graham led us to a collection of work done on cardboard—perhaps fifteen paintings stacked on the floor. “This one is really incredible,” she said, pointing to the top of the stack. “And the one underneath!” She bent to reveal the hidden work.

“It’s O.K., Jorie,” Sacks said.

“I think Peter gets embarrassed because of the amount,” she said. She led us toward a wall of triptychs, stacked sideways. “Can you just pull this one out?”

“This?” Sacks asked. “Why?”

“Because it’s worth seeing!” Graham said. “I’m the conservator of this, because his idea is ‘destroy everything.’” When they had sold their house in Normandy, she explained, Sacks had chosen to burn many paintings, rather than pack them



“You’re juggling me again, Norman, and I told you, I won’t be juggled!”

up. “I have to protect them from him,” Graham continued. “Honestly, the day he burned them, the only way I knew was that I saw the smoke going up.”

“Lots of them were burned to begin with,” Sacks pointed out.

“But they’re so beautiful!” Graham said. She started down the hall. “Just so you can see back here . . .”

“It goes on and on and on,” Sacks said, blushing.

“There’s your Auschwitz painting,” Graham said.

“Oh, let’s not get into that,” Sacks said. He turned to the opposite wall. There, despite himself, he began to look through the canvases. “There’s a triptych

here that has the whole Book of Ezekiel typed out, with fiery chariots and all kinds of crazy stuff,” he mused. “There’s one of a burning figure, and it’s full of Dante’s Purgatorio.”

Graham walked into yet another room, calling to us, but Sacks fled upstairs.

“How many paintings did you burn, exactly?” I asked him.

“Oh,” he said. “A lot of stuff. Up to about here.” He lifted his arms at his sides, indicating shoulder height. Graham had closed the door to the basement. Sacks turned to it, as though to seal it up. It seemed possible, for a moment, to feel the paintings below us pressing upward. ♦