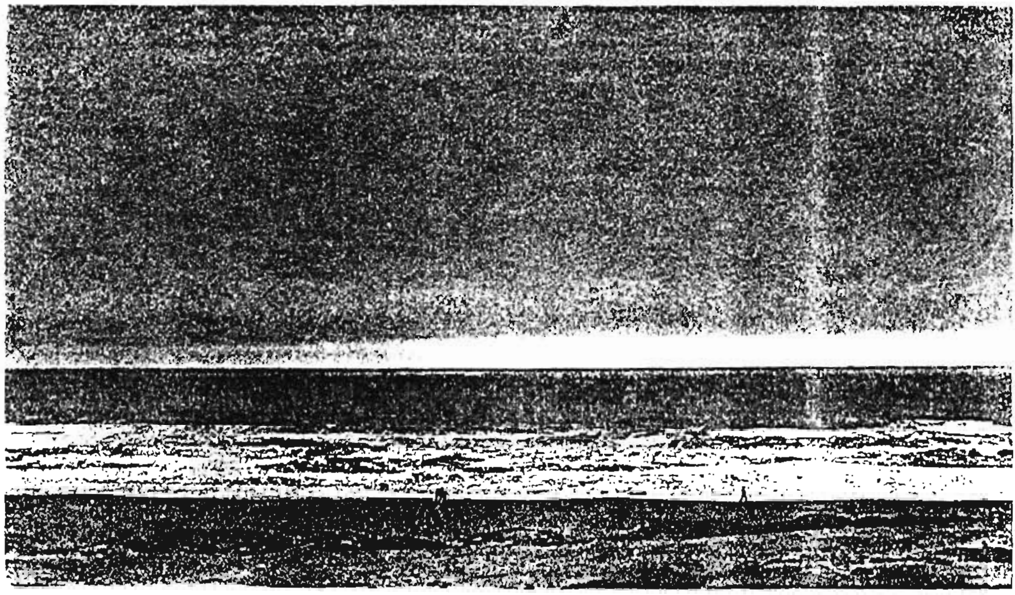

SYLVIA PLACHY

Once on Long Island

Kraft and McGonigle Get in the Swim

By Sally S. Eckhoff

LITTLE FOLLIES:
The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy
By Eric Kraft
Crown, $22

GOING TO PATCHOGUE
By Thomas McGonigle
Dolkey Archive Press, $19.95

What does it mean to be from somewhere? If it's Long Island, you've swum naked in the ocean at night. There's a huge ratio of coastal area to inland, which makes for lots of honeysuckle-choked passageways to sandy cliffs that overlook the water, and protected places to slip in. I know of beaches where you can take a horse for a dip. Nearby are beautiful white oil tanks and yacht clubs where the preppies learn to smoke and sail at 13. I can find you an abandoned root cellar near a manor house whose ballroom-sized front porch overlooks a purple marsh. Have you ever seen the Italianate ruins of the Tiffany glassworks, complete with monkey house, secret pond, and real totem pole? What about the Prohibition-era underground bowling alley in Northport whose roof sticks out of the ground about two feet? Joe's King Neptune burned down, though, and KO'd Louie's Clam Bar, and therefore it's reasonable to conclude that Long Island is going to hell in a boat: any soul it had left is being poisoned along with the oyster beds off Bayville. Nobody under 30 misses those great outdoor raw bars—a child will file her first tax return before eating a raw cherrystone—but these two books are not for the young, or for those too tough to be shucked from their shell by the knife of regret.

Eric Kraft and Thomas McGonigle write about almost identical harbor towns, two stops away from each other on the Long Island Railroad's South Shore run. Kraft's stories concern a boy, his growing passion for writing, and his puzzled wranglings with the grown-up world. McGonigle ruthlessly refits the novel in an attempt to expose himself. His *Going to Patchogue* melds its destination with other places and voices, challenging the reader's notion that there should be any "there" there at all. For one, writing seems simply an act of love; for the other, of turning away.

Eric Kraft downed a homey, sexy clam somewhere on the South Shore, found it good, and stayed to eat another. *Little Follies* is his bushel of short stories, all but one previously published, about a boy named Peter Leroy who spends his life in a chowder and cherrystone town and regrets none of it. Each tale is prefaced with a reminiscence by the grown-up Peter, who we are told is living on an island that's visible from Babbington, where he grew up. (It's a fictitious name, but is almost certainly meant to be Babylon, maybe with a little bit of Huntington thrown in, though definitely on the more bourgeois Atlantic side.) The Bolotomy River, site of the Clam Fest boat procession, runs through town, nice and slow. Peter's dad runs a gas station, his grandfather sells Studebakers, and Peter moves through life with great care, slowly and experimentally. When we meet him in the first story, "My Mother Takes a Tumble," he narrates, "I was lying in my crib picking at the fur on the back of my teddy bear's head." A few installments later, Peter accounts for himself in "The Fox and the Clam" by beginning, "One quiet morning, a Saturday, in the spring, when I was three . . ."

On certain mornings, when he dips buttered toast in his cocoa, Peter revels in salacious daydreams. Nightmares, human folly, family tragedy, girls in white fur muffs, suspicion, and failure sway him. In the first story, the Leroys' next-door neighbor hits on a scheme to put himself on Easy Street. Mr. Beaker runs a lonely-hearts ad in the local paper, pretending he's a woman. He begins getting mash notes (included, à la *Griffin and Sabine*, in the book) and spending cash from a likely mark, who, unbeknownst to him, is a woman pretending to be a man. Somehow the two become lovers and wind up relaxing on the Leroys' lawn with Peter's folks, and when Peter's mom falls out of her deck chair and exposes her thighs and garters, our hero gets an intimation of why people go through it all. He's off on the first of his tiny adventures.

In the second story, "Do Clams Bite?" Peter sees his grandfather slip freshly dredged clams down the front of his bathing suit, realizes he's expected to do the same, and learns the meaning of fear, primarily the fear of asking a stupid question. This story shows the kid in the grip of pelecypodophobia, which means "fear of having one's penis bitten off by a clam after sticking one down the front of one's bathing suit," which is what he thinks is going to happen to him if he goes clamming with his granddad and actually catches anything. One summer night, Peter's Penrod-like buddy lures him outdoors, and presents saucy twin girls, lovely ones. "If we had been clams, you would have had to throw us back," says Peter of the young group, remembering how he watched the girls undress in the dark.

> *Then the clouds moved aside, and for a moment before they dove into the water everything glowed with moonlight: the sumptuous skin of the water, like pewter, and Margot and Martha, side by side, before the fluorescent white cabin, two smooth sprites, their hair as soft and bright as the moonlight, and between their long thighs, no penises.*

Martha draws Peter close in the water, and as their hands wander, he realizes it is not the bite of the bivalve that has made the girls different, and pretends that he's known it all along.

What startles about *Little Follies* is not so much the abundance of appropriately poignant memories. It's a faithfulness to something that approximates human desire—a curiosity that finds a demanding voice in a person not old enough to walk to school alone. In "The Fox and the Clam," Mr. Beaker decides it's time that three-year-old Peter learn to read. Mr. Beaker buys the boy a book containing the eponymous fable, but Peter doesn't see what the writing has to do with the actual story. "It seemed to me that it was an outline . . . that the best parts of any of the stories were waiting in the spaces where your mind was free to wander, to decide what the fox's children were doing and what his house looked like, to make up the stories that were told about the clam." For someone who can't read yet, a story must have an impetus that sets it in motion the way an elbow does a glass of milk. We marvel that anybody ever learns to read at all. The story never mentions anything about the fox having a family, but it seems perfectly natural to Peter to put one in. When he adds the fox's children to the story and has them always fighting over the toy lamb, his parents are puzzled. And we start wishing that life was not so sad.

That wish and $9.75 will get you to Patchogue on the train, where you will find Thomas McGonigle's ghost-town-by-the-sea. This seamless trip is made for dreaming, since you don't have to change at Jamaica: just park yourself in an orange or tan seat and press your face against a scratched, insulated window with condensation between the panes, and watch the switching yards, the warehouses, and graffitied loading docks go by. Note the oily spot on the window where your forehead has been. The town, like Babbington, isn't bad; that's all. To McGonigle, Patchogue is merely where he's from. Though he's been everywhere else (he writes of Bulgaria as if he can always see it distantly through his window), he has never really escaped his hometown. He's turned it into an annoying presence that follows him, like an unwanted dog. In *Going to Patchogue*, he turns around to pet the stray.

This is the homogenized Long Island of Robert Moses's dreams, the one he would have paved from shore to shore in order to make everything accessible. In the '60s, Moses proposed connecting tiny Oyster Bay with Connecticut by filling in a couple of salt marshes and constructing a bridge that he saw as arcing harmlessly, gracefully through the air. Indeed, larger places—better places—are tangible presences from any Long Island shore. It depends on what your Brideshead is. "Never have I read of a person being with another in Paradise," McGonigle says, establishing himself as a lonely traveler who aches as he feels a city closing in around him, and must leave. *Going to Patchogue* is the same as going to Sofia, Istanbul, Venice, Milano, Paris, Pavia, Milano, Paris: going is coming. What is left, therefore, to report?

"To go. To look. To come back, having forgotten what has been seen: stuck back here with the blindness necessary to walk about these streets." The journey in this book is actually a journey of form. It is a collection of impressions that seem to sift down over the entire body. Imagine that you could see with your skin, could pick up visual impressions with your eyes closed. Dust is sifting down over your shoulders. Each mote is information; you perceive them all.

What is nearly imperceptible in *Going to Patchogue* is plot. The writer is making a trip back home, he gets there and has an imaginary testimonial dinner, is presented with the Homesickness Award, and then leaves again. His girlfriend, Melinda, flits in and out of the proceedings like a pigeon under the eaves. She is a thing of delicate beauty. Other times, some imaginary boozy muse mops McGonigle's brow. He harrels through the text with a Joycean lurch. "To go is to be already on the way back. Sounds like two drunks in a bar arguing about the origin of zero," he says.

O. It is two Long Island drunks as perceived by an American, maybe second- or third-generation, Irish Catholic. But the intended effect of his ethnic background on the proceedings, especially the language of the book, is far from clear. We are bombarded with names that don't become characters: instead, they seem like signifiers for experiences we're not going to have. Texture and rhythm are kneaded out of the prose until it is smooth, accomplished, and flat. And like a loaf that's been punched down too much, this book fails to rise. *Going to Patchogue* is all structure, an experimental novel with a highly developed sense of its own worth.

Nostalgia can be a cheap ploy, too, especially when the writer fires up a familiar old form—like the boys' adventure story. A sense of place, though, is a measurable quantity in writing, however arrived at. On Long Island, it doesn't make much sense to consider the objective merits of where you're going. The place is electrified, strung together, a circuit. Most joints, you can't eat the seafood: the Long Island madeleine can give you hepatitis now. But give us this day our daily bread, and lead us not into Penn Station, because we are liable to wind up in Patchogue instead of Babbington, and that kind of profound disregard is just a couple of stops from the end of the line. ■