

## introduction

“What is the poet?” mused a great philosopher over a century and a half ago. “An unhappy man who in his heart harbors a deep anguish, but whose lips are so fashioned that the moans and cries which pass over them are transformed into ravishing music.”\* This romantic conception still characterizes many popular images of the artist—that he is usually the survivor of an unhappy childhood and a pilloried adolescence, that his heightened sensitivity entails a heightened vulnerability, that his psyche dips slightly askew (either tipped toward the melancholic or tottering along the manic-depressive)—and none of it has anything to do with the life and person of Los Angeles artist Robert Irwin, whom you can meet most any afternoon of the week, basking in the sun at his neighborhood falafel stand, palming his perennial Coke, and watching the world go by.

Indeed, for a long stretch recently, Irwin had not precisely *done* anything, or at any rate, he had little to show for his labors. A robust young abstract expressionist during the late fifties, he'd gradually pared back his painterly activities during the sixties, systematically dispensing, step by step, with the usual artistic requirements of image, line, frame, focus, permanence, and even signature, until by 1970 he abandoned his studio altogether. Throughout this trajectory, Irwin was beset by critics who lambasted his project as a descending spiral into pure negation, and the work *was* at all times lean, austere, reticent, sometimes almost mute. From the work, you might have expected to meet a stark, obsessively cerebral creator. The artist you do meet, however, is anything but dour. Indeed, his sunny, jovial disposition would be almost off-putting if it weren't so infectious. For a long time you have trouble squaring the man's personal presence with his production. But it's precisely through such encounters that you begin to understand that far from constituting an exercise in nihilist reduction, Irwin's minimalist passion arises in a spirit of zest-

\*Søren Kierkegaard, in his guise as “A,” the young poet-aesthete, in the first of the “Diapsalmata,” *Either/Or*, trans. David Swanson and Lillian Swanson (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 1:19.

ful affirmation of human possibility, and that his ambitions are as vast as his gestures are spare.

But the paradox of that presence turns back on itself. For no matter how care-free his behavior in public, no matter how antic the tales he weaves concerning his youth and his early years as an artist, the fact is that this man is also one of the most vigorously self-disciplined figures on the contemporary American art scene, a man capable of spending months on end without any human contact. How, then, does one square this dynamic sociability, the ease, grace, and delight with which he mingles among friends and students, with this extraordinary capacity for solitude? How can someone so carefree be simultaneously so driven? How did a young man who had never particularly fancied an artistic career suddenly become possessed, in his late twenties, by such an overwhelming aesthetic curiosity? For months as I was first getting to know him, during the many interviews we conducted concerning his life and attitudes, these dichotomies seemed unbridgeable. Only gradually did I begin to see them as twin emanations from a single source, his social ease as grounded in his self-sufficiency, his anarchic whimsy as contained by his fierce sense of discipline and integrity.

## **lifsource**

The search is what everyone would undertake if he were not stuck in the everydayness of his own life. To be aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

WALKER PERCY

*The Moviegoer*



**high school**

(1943 – 46)

“And then when I came back”—Robert Irwin was recalling some time he’d spent in Japan about ten years ago—“I’d taken one of those seventeen-hour flights from the Orient which really wipe you out. Anyway, I got home about midnight and went immediately to bed, thinking I’d probably sleep for two days. But I was so jazzed and hyper that I couldn’t fall asleep. So I got in my car and put the top back and put my tape deck on and was just driving along in the middle of nowhere. Actually I first went over to Fatburger and bought a Coke from Jay, and then I set out cruising the freeways. I was driving over Mulholland Pass on the San Diego freeway, you know, middle of nowhere at about two o’clock in the morning, when I just got like these waves—literally, I mean I never had a feeling quite like it—just waves of well-being. Just tingling. It’s like I really knew who I was, who I am. Not that you can’t change it or whatever. But that’s who I am: that’s my pleasure and that’s my place in life. To ride around in a car in Los Angeles has become like one of my great pleasures. I’d almost rather be doing that than anything else I can think of.”

Robert Irwin and I were sitting outside Mè & Mè, talking about him and his life. Mè & Mè is a falafel stand in the middle of the busiest section of Westwood, a fairly new stand, which means it has a fairly new Coke machine, which means it gives slightly better cola than some of its more established competitors. When they were new, Irwin used to frequent them—as it happened, the Coke fountain here was a bit past its prime, and for some days now Irwin had been restless (or as restless as he lets himself get), on the lookout for a new stand.

“In terms of just day-to-day life,” he was continuing, “basically I can have a terrific time doing nothing. I’m quite at ease, and always on the plus side. I can come down here and sit on the corner, and, I mean, nothing’s happening where I could say I’m having a hilarious time, but I’m feeling real good and the world’s fine.

“I don’t know how to explain it exactly. I guess I’m as confused by other people’s

insecurity as they are by my security. And my security is probably no more substantiated than their insecurity!”

Irwin is in his early fifties, but he gives the appearance of someone considerably younger, perhaps because he has something of a baby face—or, more precisely, a baby head, for his head is strikingly large, with soft benevolent features, and sits perched atop a comparatively thin neck, which in turn opens out onto a solid, almost hefty frame. There is a touch of elfin mischievousness in the delight that is usually transporting him, even in his serious moods. His forehead is high and broad, his hair thinning on top and graying to the sides. His body is still in very good shape; he downs a fistful of vitamins every morning and ritually jogs five miles in the afternoon.

I asked him if he had any notion what that sense of well-being grew out of, and without hesitation he replied, “High school. Or more generally, just the experience of growing up in southwest Los Angeles, which was a fairly unique experience—obviously turns out it must have been a *very* unique experience, because it produced a fairly interesting, rich activity. All of us at Ferus grew up basically with that same background.” (He was referring to the extraordinary group of artists who ranged themselves around L.A.’s funky, pioneering, avant-garde Ferus Gallery during the late fifties and the early sixties.) “For example, conversation was a continually running sarcasm; you never gave anybody a straight answer. You played games all the time, and where that comes from, I don’t know. But, man, I can talk to somebody in Michigan, and I can spot a Southern California person—West L.A. especially—in Europe or anywhere; I can spot them a mile away. We start a conversation, and it’s like I’ve been talking to this person all my life, and I’ve never met him! There was just a whole freewheeling attitude about the world, very foot-loose, and everybody in southwest Los Angeles had it. From the time you were fifteen, you were just an independent operator, and the world was your oyster. Maybe you didn’t have that much, but the world was just always on the up side. And that’s what that script is about, or at least I hope it’s in there. It was just really a rich place to grow up.”

For the past several years, Irwin has been living with Joan Tewkesbury, the celebrated scenarist whose credits include screenplays for Robert Altman’s *Nashville* and *Thieves Like Us*. Partly at her instigation, Irwin composed *The Green and the White*,

an unproduced screenplay about life at Los Angeles's Dorsey High School during the early forties (the school's team colors account for the title). This wistful memoir abounds with boisterous characters—Spider, Cannonball, Cat, Mole, Blinky, and others—but the protagonist, Eddie Black (“his hair in a pompadour with a slight duck tail”), is none other than Irwin himself. The screenplay's tone is raucously vital throughout, the incessant banter somehow simultaneously glib and heartfelt.

I asked Irwin if he'd be willing to take me on a drive around his old haunts, and he said, “Sure.” The sun was shining, a warm breeze rustling through the high palm stalks—a perfect afternoon for a drive. We dispensed with our Cokes and headed back toward his house.

As we were walking the few blocks back into the Westwood hills, out of the bookshop-record-store-and-movie-house glut of the village, past fraternities and densely packed student apartments, then turning right onto a slightly less frantic sidestreet, Irwin continued speculating on his L.A. youth. “I mean, people talk about growing up Jewish in Brooklyn, know what I mean? And they always dwell on the dark side. I hear all of that, and I grant that it makes for good drama, makes good writing, and it makes good intellects, in a sense. Well, apparently this made for good artists, 'cause we didn't have nothing to do with all of that—no dark side, none of that struggle—everything was just a flow.”

We just flowed into his carport and climbed into his car, a sleek, silver 1973 Cadillac Coupe de Ville, one of the few luxuries he allows himself within an otherwise Spartan lifestyle. In one fluid motion, he selected a cassette from the box on the floor, popped it into the tape deck (Benny Goodman filled the car's interior), slid back the sunroof, slipped the key into the ignition and the car out of the driveway, and eased us into the midafternoon surge of L.A. traffic.

A few moments later we were barreling down the San Diego Freeway, southbound, toward one of those amorphous undifferentiated communities that make up the mid-Los Angeles sprawl—not really a suburb, but not the central city either; not really poor, but by no means well-to-do. Bob spent his adolescence on the southeastern edge of Baldwin Hills, just north of Inglewood. (If you were to draw a line between the Hollywood Park Race Track to the south and the present site of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to the north, Leimert Park, one of the main staging areas of Bob's youth, would constitute the midpoint.)

“I don’t remember particularly much about my early childhood,” Irwin was saying, “but it was never sad that I can think of. Kind of floating and suspended, maybe, but that’s something I still do. The high school period I remember very well, however, and it was an unmitigated joy, even though it was in some ways minimal, because of my parents not having any money or anything. I had a job and worked the entire time, made all my own money. From the time I was very young, my mother had a lot to say about that sort of independence, which was nice for me. At age seven, I was selling *Liberty* magazine door to door, and within a few years I won this little award for being the magazine’s top salesman in the county. To this day I’m a sucker for any kid along the street hawking flowers or newspapers or a shine. I had jobs in a movie theater, in coffee shops, at garages. During the summer I’d lifeguard up at Arrowhead or out on Catalina. All those jobs involved a lot of action, a lot of involvement. They were really part of my pleasure. And they were very important, because they gave me total independence from very early on. I never had to ask my parents for anything, and they never in a sense really stopped me from doing anything. They were real open to me in that sense.”

As we threaded in and out of traffic, the warm air swirling about us, I flipped through the box of cassettes: Stan Kenton, Artie Shaw, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Count Basie, Al Hibbler, and Erskine Hawkins. “*That* of course was also a big part of those years,” Bob volunteered, anticipating my question, “the incredible music and the dancing. In fact, dancing even became an important part of my financial picture.

“At first, when I was thirteen or so, I just had no sense of rhythm at all. But I taught myself to dance by using the doorknob in the living room as my partner, and I got to be a pretty good dancer, good enough so that I could contest-dance. For a period I was entering contests almost every night of the week. There was a whole circuit: Monday was the Jungle Club in Inglewood, Tuesday was the Dollhouse out in the Valley, Wednesday was in Compton, Thursday in Torrance, Friday in Huntington Park.

“You contest-danced with a partner, of course. So you always had one regular partner and a few maybe that you were building up. Because a good partner was crucial: she could make or break you. Interestingly, you weren’t usually romantically involved with your dance partner. That was the thing about dancers, espe-



cially in terms of sex: got it all out dancing, that was their whole gig. It was just such a goddamned pleasure.

“Everybody at the school I went to, Dorsey, everybody was really into dancing. We used to dance at lunchtime and then after school. The big step at the time was called the Lindy, which was kind of like the New Yorker, only smoother. The key movement was the shoulder twist, where the girl came directly at you and then you spun each other around and she went on out. When you got it going real smooth, you could literally get to the point where you were almost floating off the ground, acting as counterweights for each other. It was absolutely like flying, just a natural high.

“At these contests there were maybe a half dozen regular couples who made the circuit, and they’d alternate winning, depending on who the judges were. You’d come out one couple at a time. You’d sort of be standing to the side, and they’d say, ‘The next couple is Bob Irwin and Ginger Snap,’ or whatever, and you’d take her and throw her in the air, she’d come down, you’d come boogieing out on the side, and then you’d start your routine. And you could make a lot of money doing that. At my peak, I was bringing in upwards of a hundred a week!”

About ten minutes out of Westwood, we swung off the freeway onto Slauson, a wide boulevard that skirts the southern flank of the Baldwin Hills, and proceeded east about two miles.

“By the way, this here was the big drive-in,” Bob indicated, turning off Slauson onto Overhill and then pulling into a parking lot. “Used to be called the Wich Stand—still is, I guess.” In the broad daylight, the pink thrusting roof, the jagged stone pillars, the dusty palm trees flanking a garish, orange Union 76 signpost in the distance, the virtually empty asphalt lot: it seemed the most commonplace of Los Angeles vistas. But years ago, this had been the hub of teenage nightlife in the region. *The Green and the White* offers a vivid evocation: “A round drive-in set in the center with cars parked three and four deep radial around it: the show and pussy wagons with a few family irons. There is a parking area to the side where the more radical looking rods are neatly parked side by side with walk-around space. A lot of boys stand around eyeballing.”

We negotiated a lazy arc around the lot, and just as we were about to ease back onto Overhill, Bob pointed toward one corner of the drive-in and commented

offhandedly, “Over there’s where I almost got shot once.” He paused for effect.

“Yeah, I used to come over here after work most nights when I was working at one of the nearby garages. I’d come over for fries and a Coke, and. . . . By the way, this used to be the race-strip right along here.” (We were heading south on a wide stretch of Overhill, which indeed was beginning to take a decided downhill dip.) “For a while anyway, that is, until the cops succeeded in stopping us. That signal wasn’t there.

“Anyway, I used to go there after work, all greasy and everything, and this real pretty girl started working there. Pretty soon I noticed that she was taking my car every time, and she started playing jokes, like putting roses on my tray, that kind of stuff. So we started having a kind of dialogue. I asked a couple of other drive-in ladies what the story was, and they said she’d just gotten married, so I didn’t make a run on her or anything. But one night she asked if I’d take her home, so I said okay. Had to wait till she got off at two A.M. and then drive her all the way out to Gardena, so I was kind of regretting it. But then she invited me to come in and—all this time I wasn’t really thinking. But I went in, and the point is that we began to have this casual love affair. She was sensational, so all that was very great. She told me her husband was a real bad-ass and so forth and that they were getting divorced. He was a bandleader.

“Anyway, so one night I’m sitting in the drive-in with a friend of mine, and she comes up to the car and says, ‘Don’t say anything, my husband’s in the very next car.’

“This, by the way, is Verdun, the street on which I lived in high school, and this here was my house—6221.” We’d veered off Overhill down a very steep Sixty-third Street a few hundred yards to the corner of Verdun. The modest stucco house, slightly smaller than its neighbors, was perched atop a slight hill, the carport level with the street, the living room above it, a brick stair path leading up from the driveway to the front porch. The street was lined with trees, and we parked in the shade. Bob killed the engine—and Benny Goodman. “That window on the right was my bedroom. This house was one my parents got. I mean, my mother was the instigator of getting it. That was late in the depression, so it was a big stretch for them. Boy, it took every cent they had. They had to get \$600 together for the down payment. But they made it, and then they lived here for a long time, only moved out about ten years back.

“But anyway, so this guy got out of his car, and he comes over to my car, and he says, ‘I know everything. My wife told me everything,’ and blah-blah-blah. I felt like a rat. ‘I love her,’ he says, and blah-blah-blah. I said, ‘Listen, you know, I’ll stay out of it,’ because I never wanted to get involved in that sense anyway. So he said, ‘God bless you,’ which really made me nervous, because those kind of guys are very weird. So that was the end of that, I thought.

“Then I came in the drive-in one night like three months later, and there he was. He comes up to the car—he was real pissed off, just enraged—and he says that he wants to talk to me. So we walked over to the back of the drive-in, where I showed you. He pulls out a gun and sticks it right up against my forehead and hisses, ‘You went all the way with her. She told me how you made her do it.’ His eyes were bulging. All I said was, ‘I never *made* her do anything.’

“By the way, that slope there was all ivy instead of lawn the way it is now. That was the bane of my existence, having to weed the ivy.

“Anyway, so he was shaking, nervous, sweating, and when I said that I never made her do anything, he broke down and started crying. He was leaning on my shoulder. At the time I didn’t get scared, because I guess you just don’t have time to put it all together. But he’d had four of Babe Pillsbury’s boys in the back seat of that car with him. What he was originally going to do was just pull me off the side of the road and have them stomp me, which they could have done very well, because they were real bad-ass motherfuckers. But anyway, instead he broke down crying and everything, you know, ‘God bless you’ and all that again, and then he split. A few minutes afterwards I really got shook up, because he really had the gun and he had been dead serious thinking about using it. I mean, he really was shaking and all upset, and those kind of guys can do that sort of thing. So, anyway, that was a bizarre side tale.”

He started up the engine again, Benny Goodman resurged, and we rolled out of the shade. We began climbing back toward Slauson, and the neighborhood steadily improved. “Over there’s where I used to catch the bus before I had any car. See, our school was kind of schizophrenic. We were like 35 percent black; the blacks lived down in the flatlands, where we’re heading now, and they had no money. (By the way, John Altoon, who later became one of the top Ferus artists, he lived down there, too, and also went to Dorsey, just a little bit ahead of me.) Then there