



# BREATHING LIKE HOUDINI

*A Life*



ROBERT L. KAISER

"What keeps us alive is not as bright as the ruby throat of a hummingbird, nor as present as the scent of honeysuckle at dusk; it is not as heavy as a praying mantis, nor as pungent as warm strawberries eaten in the field, not as loud as snow falling, yet we inhale, and keep on inhaling and exhaling every living moment, chest rising and falling like the ocean, always the invisible, weightless breath in us and around us; walking, praying, climbing, driving, loving, painting, spending breathing, breathing, breathing, everything and nothing until we let go at last."

—**Marcia Nehemiah**

## *I. Gasp*



**THERE ONCE WAS** a man who was most alive when he wasn't breathing. Sometimes he wasn't breathing in Schenectady. Sometimes he wasn't breathing in Cincinnati or Pittsburgh or Detroit. Where he was when he wasn't breathing didn't matter much. What mattered was that he was putting on a show, for it quickened his pulse and fed his ego whether he was in Manhattan or Kalamazoo. An escape artist and a death cheat, he routinely got himself into deep trouble just to get himself right back out or die trying. He braved underwater deathtraps capable of turning him blue if he didn't hold his breath and keep his cool, and everybody everywhere came to watch him do it. Plunking down their dollar-fifty and settling into velvet theater seats with wooden armrests discolored from sweaty palms and clawing fingernails, audience members found themselves spellbound by a man at once smaller than average and larger than life. The man, doing what he did, which he did like no other, suggested they hold their breath with him during stunts, a challenge to

which no one was equal and which everyone eventually gave up with a gasp.

*Puhhh. Puhhh, puhhh. Puhhh.*

Not breathing all alone in the dark, he might have been keeping company with death on death's terms if not for one tenuous connection to the land of the living. The way still water conducts sound, the percussive gasps of the audience came through to him crystal clear, mingling in the cold, dark water with the beat of his own heart so that in his ears there was something more than the mere susurrus of fluid and time; there was an oddly clear and resonant drumbeat, a human sound that spoke at once to the evanescence and wonder of life, to the magic and uplifting moments as well as the fateful and the sad, to the things that forever abide as well as the things we stand to lose—to the hopeful as well as the haunted. And when the curtain was drawn back and there he was again, half-naked and sopping wet and *breathing*, you knew that at some point, unheard, he too must have gasped, signaling another successful stunt. At such moments the cool, fresh air in his lungs and the cold water drying on his goose-pimpled flesh and the sharp applause or dumbfounded silence in his ears must have been intoxicating.

Then, early one Sunday afternoon in autumn 1926, he stopped breathing for good. The gasp and restart never came. It didn't happen onstage. It happened

in Room 401, Bed 2, off Corridor D, at the old Grace Memorial Hospital in Detroit, where he'd lain ill for several days while doctors did all they could, even bringing him takeout to satisfy his odd deathbed yen for Farmer's Chop Suey. Had he worked some sort of magic by leaving the earth on the eve of All Saints' Day? The wife of one of his doctors wondered. But this wasn't magic, not this time. This was death its own self. On Monday night, the night of the day that followed his passing, *The Detroiter* bound for New York City pulled out of Michigan Central Station with a special Pullman car just for him, and not long after his return home to New York City they took him to Queens and buried him just inside the front gate of Machpelah Cemetery, in a galvanized-steel, bronze-accented coffin he'd ordered for a stunt only weeks before and signed for himself. And finally it mattered. It mattered where he was when he wasn't breathing. It mattered that he was six feet under with the nematodes and the moles. Down there in that long, steel box, The Man Who Would Not Stay Put stayed *exactly* put.

But something strange happened. Audiences kept coming to see him put on a show. They came a year after he died and again a year after that and again a year after that, and though they took a break once, they never really stopped. People still gather annually in one city or another somewhere in the world in case the old death cheat has one last miracle in him, one more impossible

escape. They might not be holding their breath. But they're not giving up hope. They wait, candles lit, for him to come back again. They are waiting even now.

“Let's send him love and light,” the medium says.

And the Official Harry Houdini Seance commences.

## *II. Séance*



I ARRIVED WITH the living, my rental car crunching and popping up the gravel driveway toward the cabin where we would try conjuring the dead. This year's Houdini seance would take place at Heathman Manor in Melrose, Massachusetts, the family estate of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century illusionist and medium Anna Eva Fay. It would begin a few minutes after 1 p.m. and continue through the hour of Houdini's passing. He died at 1:26 p.m., on Halloween 1926. It was now 12:25 p.m. on Halloween 2009. I was either an hour early or a hundred years too late.

Houdini live must have been something to see, but Houdini dead? A ghostly wisp, a disembodied voice, the scent of deep earth and decay, anything but Houdini in the flesh would be a poor proxy for the man in a box in Queens, and I doubted we'd get even that. But here I was.

Wending my way past the stately house at the front of Heathman Manor, I saw the cabin in back. I saw more than a few locals milling about and more coming

in. I felt a cloud move across the sun and heard the wind rise. Something was coming. Gusting up to forty miles an hour on its way to the sea, the wind whipped the fallen leaves of honey locusts and red oaks into brittle orange vortices that whirled about with the scratch and rustle of silk taffeta at a waltz. It moved the clouds too. They scudded fast and low, cut with the clear blue of polar meltwater. The clouds and the breaks in the clouds cast a racing pattern of shadow and light that flickered unspooling over the prim houses and winding lanes of New England like a time-lapse film known only to God.

Houdini was here once. He came on the *New Haven* out of Grand Central, rocking northeast across Rhode Island. Looking out the window of the train he would have seen the Great Swamp. He might have seen the lily pads that float on the inscrutable black water hiding common shiners and brown trout. He must have seen the firmament arcing huge over that seething dark stew. He might even have seen an egret taking wing or noticed growing here and there, wherever it could, the purple blooms of the pickerel weed or the carnivorous slender pitcher plants that stood ominous and waiting.

Once, long ago, plant specialists thought pitcher plants came from Mars. They seemed so out of this world. They got their start growing in dry sand and there modified their leaves into the shape of a skinny pitcher so as to catch rain. The

plant gives the water a sweet smell that attracts insects. It's a pretty little death trap is what it is. An insect crawls in, slips helplessly down the slick lining of the pitcher's interior and falls into the water at the bottom, there to drown and dissolve and become food for the plant. Some things there's just no escaping.

**AS HOUDINI BORE** down on Heathman Manor that day, his life was a held breath. Though being Houdini used to be his greatest escape, now it was his greatest trap. How could he ever get out of the business that had freed him from the killing constraints of early poverty, made him a global superstar, and given him his identity and whole life? But how could he not? Something had to give. Houdini was fifty years old. He had white sideburns, shadowed eyes, and a lip given to twitching when he was tired. As happens to everyone with aging, his reflexes were slowing, his bones were thinning and his lungs were getting baggy. And then there were the residual effects of old injuries making him creak. Though still remarkably fit and muscular he was in better shape than many professional athletes of his day, whose ranks included the likes of the intemperate and paunchy Babe Ruth he nevertheless was well past his prime for a man in so physically demanding an occupation. Some escape artists were half his age. He was sensitive about becoming irrelevant. "He says I am fifty years old and I am not wanted anymore," Houdini snarled in response to a perceived slight from an antagonist during a contentious public forum in

February 1926. “Well, that is up to the public, not to J. Malcolm Bird...”

Houdini must have felt like Rip Van Winkle, wondering where the years had gone. Not so long before, it seemed, he himself had been young. In 1894, the year he changed his name from Ehrich Weiss to Harry Houdini and started his career as an illusionist and escape artist, he was 20 years old and had a face round with baby fat. He was only 25 when leading Vaudeville manager Martin Beck, a bookish man with an oval face and heavy glasses, saw his beer-hall show in St. Paul “Houdini, the King of Handcuffs” and launched his career with a telegram that read, “You can open Omaha March 26, sixty dollars, will see act probably make you proposition for all next season.” And he was just 26 when he started performing at top Vaudeville houses across the country, making as much as \$400 a week.

Four-hundred dollars. Today that translates to about \$10,000, or \$520,000 annually. Houdini had become a top draw, and top draws made good money, for Vaudeville was a popular form of entertainment in the United States and Canada. It had been for 40 years. Most of that time, movies hadn’t existed. While upper-class Americans were attending the opera, the middle and lower-middle classes were catching the shows at opulent Vaudeville theaters such as those on Beck’s Orpheum Circuit, which included venues from Chicago to

California. Vaudeville shows amounted to a series of unrelated stage acts featuring some combination of musicians, comedians, magicians, impersonators, dancers, acrobats and actors. Audiences included women and children as well as men, for the shows were family friendly, especially compared to the bawdy saloon-hall acts that had come before.

Having grown from a run-of-the-mill, card-trick magician competing with trained monkeys and fat ladies for the audience's attention to an internationally acclaimed escape artist playing to packed houses in Europe, Houdini might have been tempted to relax and enjoy his hard-earned success. If anything, however, he seemed to work all the harder. To stay fresh, mysterious, compelling, and in the news, he continually tinkered with his act and reinvented himself. No longer was he merely the Handcuff King. Now he escaped from straitjackets, jails, coffins, and shackles too.

In 1908 Houdini made the most important change to his act he would ever make, a change on which his whole career and reputation turned. He added water and risk, thereby becoming a death cheat as well as an escape artist. And five years later, when he was 39, Houdini found himself performing for the first time at New York City's opulent new Palace Theatre, a venue fast gaining a reputation for showcasing acts that had arrived. An observer standing behind

Houdini on the Palace's big gunmetal-gray stage as he basked in the audience's applause at the end of the show would have been treated to an ethereal scene, hazy and unreal in the smoke and lights: along the lip of the balcony, gilded scrollwork; high on each side wall a big cursive "P" like the winking eye of God; in the distant lobby teardrop chandeliers, two down the center four smaller light fixtures on either side; and, from behind, the star of the show himself, lit as if on fire and looking huge against the human particulate of the dark and convulsing crowd, a small man more than measuring up to his larger-than-life persona.

And yet everything wasn't as great as it might have seemed to the stranger. Though Houdini was good at *not* breathing he could hold his breath for almost three minutes while escaping one of his underwater death traps he was, by all indications, lousy at the simple everyday business of inhaling and exhaling. Those who breathe properly are said to be capable of living in the moment, after all. Houdini didn't live in the moment; he merely got through it. Life had taught him how to struggle, not surrender, to fight his way out the other side of here and now, not to give himself over to it. Growing up in a poor family moving from one tenement to another to dodge eviction he'd had to stay one step ahead of the landlord. Persevering through the hand-to-mouth early days of his career as an illusionist he'd had to stay one step ahead of the

competition. And entertaining spellbound crowds by negotiating underwater death traps he'd learned how to stay one step ahead of the reaper. He was a hard-driven man, and where is there any release in that, though escapes may be all around? Where is there any peace, though creature comforts may abound? Houdini had found his way out hundreds if not thousands of times, but he man still had not found his way free.

**LIKE SO MANY** of us, Houdini lived a life full of things he couldn't escape because they were locked inside of him, not because he was locked inside of them—things that wouldn't turn him loose, nor he they. Letting go, it's been said, is the opposite of holding one's breath. Which may explain why Houdini wasn't very good at it. Indeed, the world's greatest escape artist was and probably always would be hopelessly captive to an oddly long list of people, places and things. Along with the snowy little town in Wisconsin he dreamed about, the strong women who shaped his life, and the unbridled hubris propelling him toward a fate uniquely his, there was also locked in Houdini's heart a little old woman with a head of white hair.

The old woman was Houdini's mother, Cecilia Weiss. In 1913, after playing the Palace Theatre, Houdini sailed across the Atlantic to perform in Europe. While he was there Cecilia died.

Cecilia's death turned one of the best years of Houdini's life into one of the worst, plunging him into a deep and unremitting depression that would stay with him the rest of his life. He simply couldn't let her go. A year passed, then two, then three, four, and five; if anything Houdini seemed to sink even more deeply into despair. Developing a morbid obsession with death, he visited the graves of strangers and read with fascination about gruesome forms of death. He was a man haunted.

The only way Houdini could get past feeling depressed, it seemed, was to feel just as intensely some other emotion, and in the summer of 1922 that other emotion started to simmer in his gut. As he and his wife, Bess, were vacationing in Atlantic City with the writer Arthur Conan Doyle, Doyle's wife Jean offered to contact Cecilia. Hopeful, Houdini agreed and they repaired to a hotel room for a private seance. But Jean Doyle succeeded only in opening his eyes to the fakery of Spiritualist mediums, and in the throes of a midlife crisis that had him haunted by time and ready to play with fire, Houdini declared war on Spiritualist mediums, launching a ferocious debunking crusade seemingly bent on exposing every last one of them as a fraud. Pretending to commune with the dead was a crime against man and God. It wasn't just the \$5 or so mediums charged, fleecing the grieving and the gullible. It was the way they made a

mockery of love, death and memory.

“I have had more mediums arrested in two years than have been arrested in seventy,” he spat while testifying before members of a congressional committee on the legality of fortunetelling in February 1926, “because I know their tricks. I know how to catch them.”

“You are attacking Spiritualism?” U.S. Rep. Henry R. Rathbone of Illinois asked.

“No,” Houdini said.

“You are attacking the practice of occultism?”

“No, I am attacking fraudulent mediums. If there are any genuine mediums, I have never met one.”

**HOUDINI'S STORY IS** a revealing lens not only on his times but also on ours, one with subtexts of faith, religion, tolerance, and convenience, of America's ever-yawing parameters of belief and cynicism, wonder and reductive thinking. Houdini himself embodies America's diverse, conflicted, and always-changing

attitudes toward organized religion.

Raised Jewish by a God-fearing father who, for a while after the family emigrated from Hungary, was a rabbi in Wisconsin, Houdini at some point as a young adult likely faced a choice: overt adherence to Jewish customs and beliefs or broad-based popularity and success. In early 20<sup>th</sup> century America, a place where anti-Semitism still was prevalent and appallingly unabashed, he seems to have opted for the latter, tamping down his religion. After doing this for a while, he may have found himself at a spiritual crossroads, wondering which way to turn. His war on Spiritualism suggests that near the end of his life he wasn't sure what to believe, and the bitterness with which he waged his war suggests his uncertainty scared him.

In this way Houdini wasn't so different from most other people in the early 1920s. Reeling from World War I and the 1918 influenza epidemic, which combined to claim fifty million lives worldwide, Americans were haunted by the fragility and evanescence of life and American culture reflected live-for-today, eat-drink-and-be-merry-for-tomorrow-we-die approach to life. On the home front this manifest itself in manic consumerism, petting parties and flappers. Women, left alone while the men in their lives fought and died overseas, grew more independent, entering the workforce and, when necessary,

rebuilding their lives. Many of society's structures lay in ruins. For survivors of the war, returning home proved much easier than returning to normal.

Newly informed by a generation of young widows, America rolled from the age of the prim, high-collared Gibson Girl into wholly uncharted territory: that of the flapper, a term that first appeared in Great Britain to describe girls on the cusp of being women. In the June 1922 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*, G. Stanley Hall wrote of looking up the term in the dictionary and finding that it meant "a fledgling, yet in the nest, and vainly attempting to fly while its wings have only pinfeathers." F. Scott Fitzgerald described the flapper as "lovely, expensive, and about nineteen." H.L. Mencken's definition was "a somewhat foolish girl, full of wild surmises and inclined to revolt against the precepts and admonitions of her elders."

Whatever the flapper looked like, what she symbolized was clear. She stood for a footloose generation of newly independent young women making their way in the world while trying to have as much fun as possible. Zelda Fitzgerald wrote that a young woman had "the right to experiment with herself as a transient, poignant figure who will be dead tomorrow." This included pursuing happiness and men too, if so desired. It's easy to imagine the Gibson Girl, fast shrinking in the road behind America's careering Model T, looking on horrified.

America in the 1920s was a roiling, murky milieu that, while intoxicating, hid as many noxious ingredients as prison-camp stew. An elegant if tormented young author named Fitzgerald, born in 1896 to Irish-immigrant parents, would write about the glamour and immorality of the age. A spacey, bed-headed patent officer named Einstein might have seen America as a failing experiment in the accelerated passage of time. A scowling old man named Freud, from his vantage point across the water in Austria, must have regarded the United States as one big Id. Prohibition made rich men of bootleggers. Organized crime spread like cancer. The White Sox were the Black Sox, having thrown the 1919 World Series for a kickback from the mob. The furies themselves seemed angry at America. The perceived villains rising out of this stink pit of avarice and paranoia included United States Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who sparked the Red Scare that led to brutal civil-rights transgressions; Chicago gangster Alphonse Capone, who was making a killing off Prohibition; and gambler Arnold Rothstein, the mob kingpin who orchestrated the Black Sox scandal.

With so many bad guys running amok, America needed heroes. It found one in an upright lawman named Ness, whose only wickedness was a sense of humor that sometimes led him to toy with his primary quarry, the terrible Capone.

And then there was Houdini.

That he was real and not made up was only a technicality. He was and still is no less a great American literary figure than Ahab. It wasn't just his fate that made him so, a fate that was tragic and that anyone paying attention could see coming from a long way off. Nor was it only his fate plus his larger-than-life exploits, the way his story rides on the heights of myth and has something to say not only about him but about every one of us. It's all this and something else too, all this plus the way you had to imagine him, to dream him up. For in his day the media was quite limited — about as limited as it is *unlimited* today. There was no Internet. There was no TV, cable news or social media. For most of his life there weren't even any movies. Newspapers were about all there was.

Which is to say that what he was like offstage and what he looked like up close and personal were things left mostly for the mind's eye to see, even if you attended one of his shows. For the stage makes a man at once very small and very large.

So it was that strangers encountering him for the first time in person experienced a countervailing moment of uncertainty even as they recognized him. The face was right — the Roman nose, the stubborn hair slicked hard away from center, the big heart-shaped face with a forehead like an ice floe, the

devilish arched eyebrows but he was so *small*. In his socks he stood but a hair over five-foot-five. At least one reporter was agog upon cornering him for an interview one summer afternoon in 1904. Expecting Sampson, someone larger than life “massive, towering with enormous hands and feet, a great, shaggy head perhaps and a voice that roars and bellows and shoulders and limbs like pillars of rock” the reporter instead found herself looking at a guy who stood barely five-feet-five and jumped at loud noises.

But his most astonishing feature for those who saw him up close must have been those eyes. Newspaper photos then were black-and-white, and the colors on posters were so coarse, garish and untrue as to make his eyes look dark. Nothing would have prepared a stranger for those twin pilot lights. Except for tiny flecks of brown around the irises, his eyes were a bright, burning blue, little gas flames clean and still. Processing it all, a stranger would have been dumbstruck for a moment before finally speaking, perhaps in a whisper:

*It's you.*

As living proof that an honest man could rise above circumstance and out of trouble into a scenario of his own envisioning and engineering, Houdini was hugely popular, especially with America's growing working class, who saw in

the gritty, self-made escape artist a kindred spirit and found in his capacity to throw off chains a metaphor that spoke to and inspired them.

Whatever his own religious beliefs, Houdini himself had become for many a source of faith in a faithless world. This was obvious at his shows. For along with the coughing bursts of air that could be heard during his act along with the sound of audience members giving up holding their breath as long as he there was another sound, too, something in the interstices, a silence like the quietude of belief or the hush of wonder. It was the soundless sound of those in the audience who were still holding on somehow, those who were still not exhaling, filled to bursting with the breath of life that whispers through us all like hope.

**THERE'S A TERM** for the point at which holding a breath becomes painful. They call this the critical line. As Houdini grew older, approaching the critical line of his career, he introduced into his act detailed exposes of the tricks he'd caught Spiritualist mediums using. They were easier on the knees than folding himself into a milk can and so figured to prolong his career in the footlights.

How much of Houdini's fury at the Spiritualists was heartfelt and how much was a publicity stunt his friend Arthur Conan Doyle wasn't sure. "I have never

met a man who had such strange contrasts in his nature or whose actions and motives it was more difficult to foresee or to reconcile,” he wrote. The author knew from experience how real Houdini’s animus toward mediums was; it eventually ruined a close friendship between the escape artist and the author, who was a true believer in Spiritualism. But Doyle had no doubt that “enormous vanity” and a constant desire for publicity also factored prominently in Houdini’s war. The man had an ego as impressive as the parlor-car menu on the *New Haven*. Once, Doyle recalled, the famous escape artist, without any apparent irony, had introduced a sibling not as “my brother” but, rather, as “the brother of the Great Houdini.”

Whatever Houdini’s motive, he had successfully reinvented himself once more. And so as he rode the *New Haven* to Boston in 1924 to visit Fay, the question of how long he could go on performing had a less dire answer than it otherwise might have. But the question of how long he could go on executing his bitter war on the Spiritualists was more troubling than ever. Its critical line seemed to be approaching fast, imbuing with dark omen the lyrics of *Asleep in the Deep*, a song he often had the orchestra play during his shows. *Beware, beware, beware, beware—*

Houdini’s war on Spiritualism was even more dangerous than his stage act.

Though Houdini the performer was calculated, clinical and careful, Houdini the righteous warrior was captive to his emotions, ever angry and impulsive, pressing on heedless of the growing potential for a bad end to his war.

Infiltrating front-parlor seances to learn mediums' tricks and reveal them during his stage shows, he impugned reputations, ruined livelihoods, made bitter enemies and put himself squarely at odds with powerful and influential people. Spiritualism was highly popular in the 1920s; his friend Doyle was just one of many rich and famous people in the fold. But Houdini wasn't about to let it go, even as hostilities escalated to cold and perilous heights and it began to seem his war might consume him whole and he began to fear the Spiritualists might have him killed just to make him stop.

Houdini wasn't psychic. He didn't know what was coming. He might have imagined being sealed up forever in one of the coffins he'd ordered for a stunt. Or he might have been visited in dreams by the fat little ruby-eyed nightjars that come out at dusk to sing their songs of doom atop gravestones in Queens. But his late premonitions weren't detailed enough to serve as warnings. There's no indication that he knew 1926 would be the final year of his life or that the tour he would embark upon late that summer would be his very last. He couldn't have foreseen the freak foot injury or the fateful change of plans, Montreal for Buffalo, or the tall stranger at the door or the sucker punches or

the excruciating pain or the uneaten lunch and raging fever. It may be that there was nothing *to* see, that his unspooling was no foregone conclusion and his fate not yet gelled. It may be that nothing in life, even that which we plan, is going to happen until it does.

But it just might be the other way around. It might be that Houdini's demise was a long time in the making and that he couldn't avoid what was coming down the pike any more than he could avoid seeing blue eyes when he looked in the mirror, so central was his end to who he was. It might be that the hubris that had created him was bound one day soon to destroy him, that all claims were coming due and that he was doomed just as he feared. It might be that even by the time he visited Heathman Manor the end had begun and that the only question remaining was which day of the dwindling few left to him was the one when he might have saved himself if only he'd been somebody else. It might be that only the dead go free.

**PARKING AND GETTING** out of the car, I stood looking around. The cabin was made of knotty pinewood and bigger than I expected. Leading up to it were tiki torches stuck in the hard earth amid moldering rubber corpses and other Halloween decorations. The flames of the torches alternately convulsed wildly and burned strangely still.

At the door of the cabin, loud speakers issued forth with Bach's Piano Concerto No. 1. "Walking music," said a small man in black who was greeting people at the open door. He introduced himself as Gene Yee. He and his wife, Jennifer Yee, owned Heathman Manor. Jennifer was the great grandniece of Anna Eva Fay. The week before, Gene had sent an email to everyone who would participate in the seance, writing: "From past séance pix, it appears that a tapered white candle on a candelabra is par for the course. Is this correct? Or is a pillar candle acceptable?"

Entering the cabin I saw a pillar candle. The inner circle assembling around it comprised professors, entrepreneurs, writers, businesspeople and real-estate brokers. We had creased pants, leather soles and haircuts that cost more than \$12. We made good choices, spent our time wisely and knew when the show was over. And yet we'd shelled out hundreds of dollars each traveling to Boston this weekend despite knowing that many other people have tried bringing Houdini back and failed, knowing that it's not just him being him but also the dead and how they are. Why? Because a life without wonder and imagination is no life at all. Houdini himself taught us that. It's why he abides, even in this reductive and faithless age. Like Kierkegaard said, life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved. This seance isn't really about bringing the dead

back to life, after all. It's about bringing the living back to life.

Sinking with a metallic rattling scrape into one of the folding chairs spaced carefully around the big circular table at the front of the cabin, I realized I was breathing like Houdini. Which is to say I was not breathing at all.

“Let's bring him back today,” someone said.

“Yes,” I said, “let's.”

### *III. Time*



**THE RAILS WERE** like a tuning fork. They carried forth the vibration of the approaching train. You could feel it if you put your ear to the track. See it if you looked to the horizon where white smoke rising heralded before anything else the approach of a train, like a ghost sent up to do reconnaissance. He was coming. Houdini was coming to Boston. Coming to Heathman Manor. Headed Northeast through Rhode Island. Northeast from Westerly, from the state line on up to East Greenwich. The landscape sliding past much as it would be 50 years hence, 80 years, 100. No overhead electric wires. No signs of civilization. Only the Great Swamp. And after that, approaching and leaving Kingston, only agricultural fields, rolling away to the horizon.

Looking out the window of the first-class parlor car, Houdini would have seen the sprawl of the summer fields. He may have seen the short lines for Narragansett Pier, Newport and Wickford where they joined the main line. And he couldn't have failed to notice the busy corridor as the train was approaching Providence, where stretches of the line were three or four tracks wide. See the

vital brick industrial buildings. See beyond that a vast and busy rail yard. See things that would not always be so. Things that time would change because that's what time does. A vanishing world under glass. Through the eyes of a vanishing man.

### About the Author

Robert L. Kaiser is an award-winning journalist and writer whose work has appeared in publications across the country, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Best Newspaper Writing 2000*. In 1996, the Kentucky Press Association named him that state's best columnist. In 1999, he was recognized by the American Society of Newspaper Editors as one of the nation's top long-form narrative writers. And in 2000, the *Chicago Tribune* named him its writer of the year. Besides the *Tribune*, Kaiser worked at *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, where he was a columnist and editorial writer, and the *San Antonio Express-News*, where he was the paper's first writing coach and the assistant managing editor for Sundays and projects.

In 2010, after 27 years as a full-time journalist, Kaiser traded newsrooms for classrooms, joining the faculty at Canisius College, in Buffalo, New York. At Canisius he was a full-time assistant professor of communication studies and director of the colleges' new journalism program.

He lives in the northern Buffalo suburb of Amherst, New York, with his wife, Laurie, and their two sons, Sawyer and Jacob.