Image from Columbia Law School website

Preface to A Multi-Volume Suicide Note

With apologies to Le Roi Jones (Amari Baraka)

Jonah Raskin

Writing about my past strikes me as a way of committing suicide; a way of murdering my old self or selves, not excavating and resurrecting them. My memories are not identical to anything that might or might not have happened. This seems especially true for 1968, a year I muddled through and that seems in hindsight hardly the greatest spectacle on Earth that I once thought it was. Time and perspective change everything.

In 1968, I was a Jonah in more ways than one. Like my Biblical namesake, I brought bad luck and trouble to others and to myself. Growing up after WWII, in backward farming country on Long Island that morphed into ugly suburbia and that changed the landscape and the contours of my own life, I saw myself as a misfit among misfits and lonely in every crowd. In college, I read Marx, called myself a Marxist and adopted Marx’s notion that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.” That sentence appears in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon in which he also wrote famously that history happens twice, the “first time as tragedy and the second time as farce.” Marx might think that my life has been farcical in act one and farcical in act two.

For the first nine months of ’68 every month and almost every day felt like another. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, came an extraordinary day that followed Tet—when the Viet Cong stormed the American embassy in Saigon and everyone in the antiwar movement knew the US was bound to lose the war. That day followed my birthday, and the wave of assassinations in a nation bloodied by assassins. On that day, when time itself seemed to be out of joint, I began to call myself a revolutionary, and, while I did not have a role model there were all manner and make of revolutionaries to choose from: paper revolutionaries, Black revolutionaries, cultural revolutionaries, revolutionaries for the hell of it, Maoist revolutionaries, revolutionaries in the revolution and of course counter revolutionaries. I would conjure a revolutionary self as I went along. Play it by ear and not according to a script.

Everything I write here is true, though it probably would not be admitted as evidence in a court of law. A judge would dismiss it as hearsay.

Of course, you must remember that for most of 1968 I was out of my mind. Not certifiably insane and not a candidate to be placed in Bellevue or another mental institution, but definitely deranged in the eyes of those around me, including my wife, my friends and my beloved aunt Ada, one of my mother's older sisters, who mothered me more than my mother. Ada described me as a "luftmensch," which she translated from Yiddish to English as someone who lived on air; someone who didn't have his feet planted firmly on the ground and didn't attend to practical necessities like a job, money and a place to live. She nailed it. That was me all through college when I drifted through the semesters.

In 1968 I refused to heed Aunt Ada who warned me not to believe in "the revolution." She had lived through the raucous 1930s when the commissars had led her to believe that a revolution was imminent, only to learn that it was a figment of their imaginations. "Don't do what I did," she told me. In her eyes I was a mad man as well as a luftmensch.

Years later when the Occupy Movement pounced on Wall Street in New York and in other American cities to protest against the 1% who controlled most of the wealth, I joined the crowds in the streets and performed my poetry at Occupy in San Francisco. But when the twenty- and thirty-year olds insisted that Occupy was the start of the socialist revolution, I shook my head, told them that they were wrong and repeated what my aunt said to me in '68. The revolution is not coming any time soon. They did not believe me.

I was also a mad man in the eyes of my shrink cousin, Fred, who I thought of as my older brother and as a character in a Philip Roth novel or a short story from Goodbye Columbus. "Getting laid," as he called it, was the only thing that mattered to him. Sex was his addiction. My drug was excitement. I could not get enough of it, especially after I carved out my revolutionary road. Dr. Fred wanted to prescribe a pharmaceutical for my "hallucination of the revolution," as he called it. I declined the offer and went on hallucinating.

Like Fred, I was a married man and a husband in '68; married because he had married, though after Tet and after the assassinations, my marriage crumbled, much as his marriage crumbled. In an unsettled time I couldn't expect to live a settled life. By the summer of that year, my marriage needed life support that I refused to give it. But I held on for dear life; it was dreary but it was what I knew.

A decade earlier, I had been a teenage beatnik complete with beret and turtleneck. I knew the peaks and the valleys of Beat legend and lore as well as I knew the twists and turns in my own life, though perhaps not as well as I knew the plot of Casablanca, the movie I watched on my birthday in the Thalia Theater, a block off Broadway; watched it for the umpteenth time, sobbed all the way through, scene after scene. Sitting in the dark, invisible to others I felt as sorry for myself as Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, who feels sorry for himself. My old life was ending, my marriage imploding and the times exploding exponentially.

In ’68 it was too late to become a real Beat, but not too late to become an existentialist rebel like Albert Camus, maybe a guerrilla like Che Guevara, or even a Regis Debray, the French-born intellectual and author of Revolution in the Revolution? who threw his life away in war-torn Bolivia and then recreated it in Paris as a government official. Regis introduced me and my peers to the idea of the foco, the small guerrilla organization that was meant to overthrow imperialism. The radicals at Columbia had their own foco; one student named himself “General Giap” after Vo Nguyen Giap, the military genius who led the Vietnamese to victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in ’54. Now the Viet Cong were outrunning, outgunning, outsmarting and outdistancing American GIs and American pilots; Tom H., our General Giap, thought he would lead us to overthrow Columbia University. After graduation he became an Episcopalian priest.

My first occasion to become a revolutionary presented itself at the Columbia University Law School where my wife enrolled in classes, wore fashionable silk scarves, furs and dark glasses, studied torts and contracts and caroused with members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the tribe of unholy nose pickers who opposed the War in Vietnam. (At meetings they picked their noses and argued about ideology). Most of them were arrogant, privileged kids who assumed they would live happily and perhaps forever in a kind of hippie paradise allocated to them by Black revolutionaries with guns who would triumph over honky America. I did not share that dream.

Night after night, my wife talked in her sleep, so much so that she woke me while she remained unconscious. She did not say much, but what she said seemed to reveal a life she had concealed from me. The one word she spoke while she slept was “Gus,” the name of one of her law school classmates. I met him in the library where he and my wife cracked the books, and did something together that made me jealous and suspicious, two feelings I regarded as bourgeois and that were ripe for garroting.

Gus sported blond curly hair and round cheeks; he looked like a Renaissance angel you might see in a mural in an Italian villa. But he was Jewish, working class, and Brooklyn born, attended a state college, belonged to a fraternity and graduated with honors. Also a pot head and a libertine who boasted about the women he fucked and the joints he smoked. “Flaunt it” was his mantra and flaunt it he did, whatever it was. He was the first druggie I met and got to know. I wanted to annex his life.

Gus had been arrested and beaten bloody by cops the previous spring at Columbia. He was arrested in Chicago in August ‘68 at the Democratic National Convention when the protesters chanted, “The Whole World Is Watching.” Not true, but it sounded good. Now, the university wanted to put Gus, aka Gussie, on trial for his antics and make an example of him. He was ready to be a martyr for the revolution.

My wife and Michael Ratner—a law school classmate from the multi-million dollar Ratner real estate family—wanted to turn the tables on the university and put it on trial. In

Ratner's cushy apartment I listened to Gus's defense team prepare their opening arguments, ask one another the questions they would invite witnesses to answer, and then I followed their closing argument. They played at being real lawyers and weren't convincing.

Gus's tribunal was held in a large classroom in the law school that seated several hundred observers. Most were scruffy members of SDS who had been arrested the previous spring and had been charged with disorderly conduct. "Free Gus," they chanted. "Free Gus," as though he was the leader of a national liberation movement or a group of exiled guerrillas plotting to overthrow a government. My wife wore a few spears of asparagus in her hair and handed out spears to the SDSers. Aspar a Gus. Too cute for words.

A student in a three-piece suit chaired the tribunal; the other members were august and crusty members of the faculty, all of them taking themselves very seriously and as though the fate of the university if not western civilization itself rested on the outcome of Gus's tribunal. I watched. I listened. I paced at the edge of the front row; a tiger on the prowl.

At a crucial point in the proceedings—actually a lull in the testimony—I leapt on top of the makeshift bench, kicked the legal briefs to the floor and tried unsuccessfully to wrest the gavel from the chief justice. Mind you, this was a spontaneous, unrehearsed act. I had not planned it, though the university big-wigs assumed that my SDS wife had directed me to do it. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I wanted to upstage her and steal her thunder. My dramatic act, a piece for a theater of the absurd, seemed the right thing to do, the only sensible thing to do at that moment. Make a mockery of the proceedings.

When I leapt on top of the makeshift bench I heard my wife murmur "Jomo," which was the nickname I had acquired when I was a student at the redbrick university in Manchester, England where I wrote a thesis about British literature and the British empire, and earned a Ph.D. (In Manchester when movie theaters played "God Save My Queen" I remained seated as a symbolic expression of my antipathy to the royals.) At the Columbia tribunal my wife followed the name "Jomo," with a gasp and "Oh, no." I had pissed royally on her carefully planned defense of Gus.

The students in the amphitheater went wild. They stood up *en masse*, shouted, jeered and yelled. My wife and Ratner looked on in amazement, speechless. I leapt down from the make-shift bench, and, when a reporter from The Spectator, the student newspaper, asked me my name, I said, "Jonah." I had nothing to hide and didn't consider the consequences. The words consequences and responsibilities didn't exist in my vocabulary. In the news story which described the tribunal and my improvised theater, I was identified as "The Prophet Jonah."

Of course I knew about Old Testament Jonah. When I was a boy, my Russian-born dowager aunt Lily read the Book of Jonah aloud to me while I sat in her lap. I also knew Father Mapple's sermon about Biblical Jonah in Moby-Dick, a novel I read and reread half-a-dozen times as a boy; in Melville's epic Jonah is described as "a fugitive" and a man on the run. I seemed as ancient as him and he seemed as contemporary as me. Oddly enough, my parents, brothers, aunts and uncles called me "Joe," as American as "Joe Blow," "GI Joe," and "Joltin' Joe" DiMaggio. "Joe take out the trash"; "yackety yack and don't talk back."

After the tribunal and the arrival of the Prophet Jonah, I had the fame I wanted where it counted—in the ranks of SDS, on the Columbia campus and in New York's New Left circles. In a matter of minutes, I had vaulted from outsider to insider, from an existence as an unknown to a life as a celeb, and from a mild-mannered college prof to a firebrand with an inflated ego.

Professor Quentin Anderson, a representative of the Columbia University administration, contacted me by phone and demanded that I apologize. After all, as he put it, I was a graduate of the college and therefore a "scholar and a gentleman." The scholar part I owned, not the gentleman part. Fuck him. In his eyes I created chaos. In my own eyes I created revolutionary order; something new and beautiful.

Professor Carl Hovde, my favorite prof when I was an undergraduate, suggested that I might persuade Columbia to let me off the hook with a slap on the wrist if I pointed an accusing finger at my wife and blamed her for my action. I couldn't disown my own agency. Besides, I loathed Anderson; loathed his lectures on Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne in a class on American literature which I attended as an undergraduate. For years I had resented my miseducation at Columbia; finally at Gus's tribunal my bottled-up resentments exploded.

I remembered that Professor Anderson told the students in the class, "Henry James was not excited by the idea of the penis in the vagina." He probably thought that notion would excite us horny undergrads. It didn't. My mother-in-law threatened to disown me if I apologized to Columbia. I kept her in the dark about my plans. I kept myself in the dark and played with both sides of the equation: to apologize or not to apologize. Those were the options in those days when everything was either/ or and not both. I would keep the world guessing. It was my show. I started it and now I would end it however I wanted it to end.

After I disrupted the tribunal, my wife vanished and Gus and I became pals; we smoked dope together, went to the movies together, and shared meals at an old Jewish deli on the Lower East Side. When Gus died in 2012 at the age of 65 the obit in The New Times remembered that outside his courtroom—he had become a New York State Superior Court Judge—he allowed prophylactics to be given free to sex workers and was known as "The Condom Judge."

Decades earlier, my wife had plunged deeper and deeper into the underground. I refused to apologize for my misdeeds; the Columbia administration filed criminal charges against me. I was arrested and escorted by a police officer in a suit and tie—who looked like a traveling salesman for the Fuller Brush Company—to the jail at 100 Center Street. He handled me with kid gloves; I was not handcuffed. My friend, Michael Wilding, an Oxford grad and an English professor visiting from Australia, witnessed my arrest, and wrote about it in a short story in which he noted that it was "Nineteenth- Eighty-Four in America." "Big Brother has been watching you," Michael insisted. He reminded me that, as Orwell had observed in his prophetic novel, "War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery" and "Ignorance is Strength." That too, Michael insisted, was America in '68. "Doublethink" for real.

At 100 Centre Street. I went on trial for disorderly conduct and attempted petty larceny, an ignominious charge. Gerry Lefcourt, a hotshot young attorney who drove a Porsche and boasted a "Gucci girlfriend," defended me in court and assured me at the start of the proceedings that nothing bad would happen to me. I would not be tossed overboard and be swallowed by a leviathan. At the worst, he said, I'd be fined one hundred dollars. He opened his wallet, removed a one-hundred-dollar bill, and stuffed it in the pocket of my tweed jacket, a relic of my student days in Manchester. I also wore blue stripped bell bottoms and a blue lawn shirt.

Lefcourt explained to the judge that I had a Ph.D., that I was a college professor and the author of scholarly articles about Henry James and Joseph Conrad. The judge looked like he was falling asleep. But suddenly he was all ears, his eyes bulging from his oval face. “If he's so smart why did he do something so stupid,” he barked. He pounded the gavel on the bench and shouted, “Five months in Rikers.” My heart sank, the words on the wall, “In God We Trust,” blurred before my eyes and I gasped. Five months in the hell hole of Rikers would have broken my soul. Rikers was not a part of my revolutionary scenario.

Lefcourt rushed toward the judge. “Can we have a cash alternative, your honor?” he asked. The judge replied, “five hundred dollars,” and pounded the gavel again. My mother-in-law, who had been watching the proceedings, paid the fine in cash. An Old Red from the 1930s, and wiser than Lefcourt, she had come prepared. I had the presence of mind not to leap on the bench and try to take the gavel. I walked out of the courtroom and into a crowded, noisy corridor very much like the one that had prompted comedian Lenny Bruce to observe that "In the halls of justice, the only justice is in the halls.” The felons and ex-cons were my brothers, or so I liked to imagine.

The dust settled and a semblance of normalcy returned. I was a nobody again. I went back to teaching, and Gus married a Barnard student who belonged to SDS. Unfortunately, my spontaneous act of defiance became fixed in Columbia lore and New Left legend. I moved on, but the students who had observed me in action froze that moment in their memories. Years, even decades later, they would remind me of what I had done and how much it had made them deliriously happy: a perfect dramatic act for a time out-of-joint.

Gus never forgot and neither did Michael Ratner who went on to become a famous civil libertarian, and a criminal defense lawyer who represented the Guantanamo Bay Detainees in the US Supreme Court.

The further the distance from '68, the more my performance was massaged until it was hardly recognizable. Year-by-year and decade-by-decade, nostalgia for that time and place grew by leaps and bounds. Like so much else from the Sixties, it became a mythic event.

“Oh, Jomo,” Michael Ratner would swoon years later. “That was amazing what you did at Gussie's tribunal.” For a time, I felt guilty about the disruption I had caused, though I also liked the idea that I had created chaos. Guilt and pride ran neck and neck. In those days, I was in two minds about almost everything. Save my marriage or kill it. Ditch my career or salvage it?

Gus was also of two minds. He wanted notoriety as a revolutionary but he also wanted to become a lawyer like his hero Clarence Darrow. Gus had a difficult time passing the New York State Bar Character Committee. I blamed myself, though Gus didn't. He had a criminal record that he had compiled all on his own and a fat FBI file to go with it. He only had himself to blame for his woes. In the end he was admitted to the bar, practiced law and became a judge who sentenced men found guilty of murder to life imprisonment, and claimed that he was compassionate. He might have sentenced them to death row. My wife never forgave me for sabotaging her defense of Gus and stealing the limelight she craved. Years later, she surfaced from underground and like Gus became a respectable judge. I thought, two revolutionaries in one family would have been one revolutionary too many.

After the Columbia tribunal and my trial at 100 Center Street, the time continued to feel out-of-joint. Only more so than it had in a decade that was rapidly spinning out of control and slouching toward the apocalypse. Black Panthers were shot and killed. The war raged on, protesters were rounded up and radicals gathered in dark rooms and talked about the coming of fascism.

Still, I congratulated myself for enduring my glorious rite of passage. Victor Laszlo, the resistance hero in Casablanca, might praise me. Gorgeous Ingrid Berman might kiss me and Humphrey Bogart might invite me to become his soul brother. Years later, while a tourist in Casablanca I looked for Rick's Café and couldn't find it. My Moroccan hosts assured me that it had never existed, except on a Hollywood set.

Soon after my initiation and crowning as a revolutionary in New York in 1968, I borrowed from Leon Trotsky's playbook the "notion," as Quentin Anderson would have called it, of "permanent revolution." (Yes, I learned something from Anderson.) I disliked the bearded New York Trotskyites and avoided their paper-thin sectarian organizations, but I loved Trotsky's book, Literature and Revolution (1923). I thought that if you were gonna make a revolution you might as well make it a permanent revolution. That way it wouldn't lead to reaction, calcification and cannibalism, as it did in Russia.

Always, always, I told myself there had to be a revolution in the revolution to keep it honest and prevent it from turning into its opposite and eating its own children. I vowed to follow in Trotsky's footsteps; literature and revolution would be my "thing." I rolled up my shirt sleeves and began to read and to write furiously. I published reviews and articles under the alias Jomo in underground newspapers and in Liberation News Service (LNS), the lefty answer to the United Press International (UPI), headquartered appropriately in a windowless underground office on Claremont Avenue. At 6 p.m. five days a week, I watched, along with the LNS communards, the evening news with Walter Cronkite, then typed stencils and ran the mimeograph machine, my hands stained with black ink; Les mains sales, Sartre might have called them. They were a sign that I was no longer a misfit. I never did apologize to Columbia in '68, and I wouldn't apologize to the institution today. After all, it has caved in to Trump and the Trumpers and hasn't protected all its students, Jews as well as non-Jews, and hasn't defended freedom of speech and expression. Columbia never was an Ivory Tower, as it liked to think, and still isn't one today.

Jonah Raskin is *Caveat Lector*'s non-fiction editor. His newest published work is *Keeping the Beat Alive*, a Caveat Lector book, that includes his essays and reviews about the Beat Generation writers and their circle, and *Isolato*, a collection of his poems written in San Francisco, 2020-2026.