

Metamorphosis – GQ

Andrew Corsello, Gentlemen Quarterly

IN HIS FIRST LIFE, Jon Sarkin was an orderly man, controlled and controlling. Now, through the agency of a burst blood vessel, he has had an entirely new life thrust on him, a life in which nothing — especially Jon Sarkin — is the same.

“BLUE!” HE’S YELLING.” “Blue!”

The sea off Cape Ann is calm and dark, the air above it suffused with a rich, beer-colored light. Families wander lazily in and out of the restaurants and antiques shoppes along the rock pier, perusing porcelain knick-knacks and sculpted soaps. There is peace here in Rockport, an observed quiet that gives the town the mute liveliness of an aquarium.

But then, over there on the bench — that man. That bent, cross-eyed, loud, middle-aged man, clutching a cane with enough force to whiten his cuticles. With an emphatically slow, full-throated elocution broken up now and then by giggles, he goes on about how one small alteration to the physical aspect can rive a self. Heads turn, children scare. Yet still he argues — ecstatically, belligerently — rending the early-evening quiet with his raucous talk of blue.

“I lost my health. I lost my job. I lost my left ear. I lost my ability to see straight. I lost my ability to talk straight,” he rails. Then grins. “But in return, I got these...thoughts. Blue! Blue!”

He rises, teeters, points his cane toward the end of the pier, slowly moves off, zigging and zagging. He is noisy and strange, yet there is nothing about him that menaces; this man seems unprotected, without a shell.

“It’s like you’ve never known blue! Sure, you’ve been exposed to it all your life. But you haven’t had the right...uh, what’s the world?” He irons his thick mustache with the fingers of one hand.

Receiver?

“Receiver,” he barks, coming close enough to kiss. “It’s fallen outside your visible spectrum. And all of a sudden, you have the vision of a fly. You see blue! You see infrared! You see ultraviolet! You hear sounds outside the normal frequencies!”

Drained by his own urgency, he pauses for breath, recharges, steps closer still — he observes no personal space.

“Like a fly! How could you possibly communicate to someone else what that’s like? How could you...?”

He freezes midstride, transfixed: The asphalt at his feet has called to him. He’s constantly stopping with a considered formality before a bush, a scuffed picket, a veiny maze of cracks in an asphalt patch. Each is an exhibit. For a moment, he stands dumb, like a man passing through a powerful memory. Then he totters off toward the end of the pier. But what he’s seen has left him with a vague burden, as if he’s glimpsed through a keyhole some enormous sadness or joy or possibility that must be preserved.

What was that?

“Heh?” he says, making a gesture of irritation with the cane. “Nothing.” Nothing?

“Blue was invisible to you,” he says abruptly, putting a hand in the air to fiddle with a make-believe knob. “‘I can’t get blue!’ Get it? Get it?!”

Got it.

“Do you?” he asks edgily, stepping forward.

Yes, you got it.

“Do you?”

Got it.

“I am verbose!” he shouts, hailing the unspoken sentiment. “I babble! I interrupt! I drive people crazy! My social circle has shrunk! I’m off the grid!”

Others on the pier are watching.

“Off the grid!”

A tiny leaking vessel in the brain has done this, stripped his mind of its filters. He has no restraints and no shields; he speaks everything he thinks and, in turn, like some black hole of perception, retains everything he sees. This immediacy, this rawness, can be disquieting. One likes to think of the body as apart from the mind, to separate the ghost from the machine. His mere presence exposes that lie.

Minutes later, with his wife present, he addresses this.

“What happened with Christopher Reeve makes you think about what constitutes the self. I mean, he’s still himself. I’m still me.”

“No-no, you’re not,” she says quietly. “You’re different. You’re not who you were before.”

BOLTFLASH 7/15/96

UNI fetishes!! small animal sculptures that 2 th believer(s) are focussed//power symbols that bring inner peace is the fetish—just like the ZUN/fetish shtich, i’ve come up w my own fetishes, e.g., CADILLAC! CHRYSLER! CACTUS!

BEFORE THE METAMORPHOSIS, when Jon Sarkin was still a chiropractor, before he became playful and mischievous for a living, before he became infused with a Promethean creativity and began making quirky art that went into galleries all over Cape Ann and in SoHo and into The New Yorker and The New York Times Magazine, he crafted his life carefully, put things where they belonged, controlled every aspect. When it came to his big house and his big private practice near Gloucester, Massachusetts, he was deliberate. Though not prone to self-reflection, he did have ideas about manhood — that it meant ambition, aim, security, control, strength. Once, shortly before he was married, he spoke of his career in a way that gave his future wife pause.

“Well, Jon,” she said, laughing nervously, “the family will be the most important thing.”

Sarkin looked at his fiancée.

“No, Kim,” he said.

Still, still...there was something about the way he used confidence as a means of locomotion, the squareness of his shoulders as he strode from the house, starched and white, on his way to faraway cities where practitioners waited by the hundreds to hear about chiropractic approaches to temporomandibular joint disorders. It was hard, sometimes, to be with a man incapable of downshifting, but comforting too, to be aligned with so much competitive drive.

Sarkin's patients knew him as a man who had in his hands the power of restoration. Straightening spines and untying knots of muscle was serious business, and he approached it with an efficient certainty: There was sickness, and there was wellness, and he was the shortest distance between the two. To the bedside he brought an undistracted intensity, neither cold nor sentimental. Patients left feeling that attention had been paid, a problem corrected.

In Jon Sarkin's memory, the afternoon of October 20, 1988, has a surreal, preserved quality, as with a shape captured within a crystal and held up to light. Everything that followed, the violence that mangled his mind and transformed him, is full of motion and speed. But the trigger moment is oddly still. He remembers the autumnal light, yellow and fatigued but still warm. He remembers the grass of the eight green, crosscut into perfect, pleasing squares. He doesn't recall the sounds of the breeze or of distant traffic or anything his friend Hank said; as of October 20, 1988, at the age of 35, Jon Sarkin did not possess the kind of acute antennae that detect every stray transmission from the external world. Not then.

In the seconds before the incident, the world was reduced to the comforting plop and gurgle of his ball dropping into the hole. He approached, reached. Then, his hand hanging, fingers splayed — a faint wet snap, like a pea pod breaking, within the labyrinth of his left year. Sarkin pressed a palm to his temple. There was a shiver, as if a spirit had passed through him. Then he plucked the ball from the hole and moved on.

"WHERE THE ART THING comes from?" he asks slowly, repeating the question while staring into the lemonade the waitress has just delivered. As he sips, beads gather on the bottom edge of his mustache. "Part psychological — I can't do other things anymore, so I need this. But it's neurological too. The way info goes in from my eyes to my brain now — totally different."

So is this new creative capacity the result of something that was introduced, or removed?

"Removed, I think. Like there was some barrier that was destroyed, letting all this" — he gestures at his own countenance — "flood out. The governor is broken, man. Example: I'm sitting outside this cafe with a friend, and there's a place down the street called Art Jewelers. Now I look at the place and start to laugh. I say, 'I just had a great idea. I'm gonna take a picture of that sign: ART JEWELERS. Then I'm gonna blow it up so all it says is ART JEW. My friend looks at me, says, 'I wonder if Jewish people look at that sign and think that.' I say, 'This Jew does!' I think that's really funny and whimsical, right? Some people will say, 'What the fuck is this?' Hey, I don't give a shit! Art. Jew. Get it?"

Well...

"I love that look on your face."

It's sort of...

"Art. Jew." He leans in close, his left eye quivering almost indiscernibly. "Get it? Art Jew!"

...

"ART! JEW!"

BOLTFLASH #25 9/13/96

Timeism: overrated. The linearity of time, this assumption that the past is gone, the future hasn't yet happened, and the now is all we have: only a social construct. I think this is a helluva lot more slippery...The past is now! The future is now!

Sarkin had just made his way home from the golf course when the feeling of acceleration began. The instant he sat, he began to fly, hurtling through space at impossible speeds. His body wasn't traveling so much as lurching, leaping instantaneously between the points of a trajectory. He wasn't in pain, per se. Still, he knew — though it would be weeks before he allowed the thought to rise to the level of awareness — that something terrible had happened to him, and that he would never be the same. When Kim Sarkin returned, she took one look at her husband's face and, without knowing what or why, she knew, too.

Sarkin woke the next morning to discover he'd been ripped out of time, uprooted then replanted half a second behind himself. The feeling of quantum travel, now passed, had given his perceptions a parabolic weirdness; sight and sound quietly oozed one moment, then peeled the next.

Strange days followed. Without seeming louder, sound became ugly and unbearable. Still, there was no pain. An alien brand of suffering for which he had no vocabulary, yes, but no pain. And with no palpable sickness, no symptoms that fell within the spectrum of things that can happen, what was there to do but go out into the world as usual and cut a wake? Sarkin mustered his will and went back to work.

Illness often dulls the senses; a body curls up, rejecting the outside world to focus all energies inward. Yet Sarkin did not dull. Far from it. The event within his ear had a bizarre, dilating effect. With bionic sensitivity, he began to hear things, faraway things. Soon the world's whirs, clicks, shrieks, and twangs so overwhelmed him that at the end of each day his only recourse was to sit absolutely still while his perceptions reeled and revolved. "I don't know what's happening to you," his wife would say, and Sarkin, lost in the whirl of it, would say nothing in response.

On the seventh day, the screaming began: the piercing, sexless howl of a baboon, sampled and stretched to infinity. It rose quickly in volume, mutating into the seamless neon shriek of an emergency broadcast signal. The din passed effortlessly through his resolve, casting splinters of light down his spine. Once it began, it did not stop. It was with him when he woke, when he ate, when he worked, when he slept. Kim Sarkin, who had never seen her husband cry, watched in horror as he returned from work each evening, fell to the living-room floor, curled into a ball and wept. Within two weeks, he was thinking constantly of suicide. He enumerated to his wife the many different ways. He vowed that he would never put her in the position of coming home and finding him. I don't understand, she would say. Does that mean you would do it in a way that somebody else would find you?

Sarkin was in a state of terror, yet he also found himself...loose. The screaming jostled with seams of his brain, unlocking drawers and dumping their contents — half-formed plans, shards of discarded selves, pieces of pure color and texture, lists of words that sounded alike — into the roil and flow of his thinking. Watching his mind turn itself inside out was like watching a rock star trash a penthouse suite, and with an uncharacteristic abandon that grew by the day, Sarkin let it happen. Later he would not remember what he thought during this time — only that the vocabulary of his brain, its hardware and software, its way, felt larger, and vaguely threatening.

Three weeks in, in mid-November, Sarkin's doctors still hadn't divined the source of his tinnitus — a generic term for ringing sounds in the ear. Sarkin waited.

Nine months passed.

BOLTFLASH #70 7/30/96

Boltflash: a noun, a verb, an exclamation. It implies, all at once, any instance of revelation or exuberant self-expression, the capricious and wrathful nature of the gods, and the proclamation "This just in!" It also refers to Sarkin's extraordinarily voluminous oeuvre of "correspondence art."

"YOU WANNA WRITE a story? Be prepared," Sarkin warns when first contacted. "You're gonna get Boltflashed, and you may not like it."

Two days later, a manila envelope adorned on the outside with four pictures — two Cadillacs, a cactus and a desert landscape — arrives in the morning. Pasted to the inside is a piece of cardboard carved in the shape of Sarkin's profile. The contents: ten pages of indecipherable philosophical ramblings. Another package arrives in the afternoon. Two letter and a large envelope the next day. Three packages the day after. Over the next few months, nary a day passes in which Sarkin does not Boltflash me between one and five times a day.

Each package takes up to half an hour to go through, not only because of the sheer bounty of Sarkin's musings, poems and artwork but also because of the heavy drawing paper he uses. Before mailing, he invariably soaks the paper, wads it, then attacks it with a stapler. He then riddles the outside of the Boltflash with scores of staples before duct-taping the whole thing.

One day Sarkin happens to call as I'm dismembering a Boltflash. He wants to talk about rock and roll.

"What the hell is with the staples?" I interrupt. "Why do you do that?"

A pause, while his response gathers.

"I like to fuck with things," he says giddily.

"Well, I just cut my finger on one of those things. My cuticle is bleeding."

Another, longer pause.

"Good."

BOLTFLASH 8/30/96

NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL PROCESSES ARE ILOGICAL IN A MAXIMUM WAY. MY LOGIC IS ELLIPTICAL, "MOEBIUS-STRIPPY," CONVOLUTED AND PRONE TO SHORT-CIRCUITRY...MY MANIA AND PLAYFUL DELINQUINTY-NESS AND DADA GESALT HAVE SERVED ME WELLER THAN WELL!

THROUGHOUT THE FALL of 1988 and the winter, spring and summer of 1989, as Sarkin traversed the Northeast looking for someone to give his malady a name, many of his friends and virtually all of his professional peers withdrew from his life. He appeared more crazy than sick — a depressive or perhaps even a malingerer. People around him observed his prolonged moments of inertia, the way he seemed always to be staring through, and discreetly categorized him as "in crisis," as they might a mumbling, half-naked man sprawled on a grate. They could not hear the howling, after all, nor witness Sarkin's efforts to combat it. They could not comprehend how it deprived him of sleep at night, not how his internal exertions during the day so exhausted him that he experienced his body as a fragile husk, lighter than tumbleweed.

Not until August of 1989 did a Pittsburgh neurosurgeon named Peter Jannetta identify the siren in Sarkin's head: A tiny, distended blood vessel was impinging upon the acoustic nerve in the left ear. Every pulse of that vessel plucked the nerve, stroking the howl. Jannetta offered not only a diagnosis but a cure — an

exquisitely delicate procedure involving a hole drilled in the skull, and a tiny Teflon wafer insinuated between vessel and nerve.

“Do it,” Sarkin and his wife told the doctor. “Do it now.”

As with all surgery, Jannetta warned, there were risks. Stroke was one of them.

“It could kill me,” Sarkin said, “and it’d still be worth the risk.”

Several days before the surgery, Sarkin threw a poker game at his house. His friend Hank, who’d been with Sarkin the day he stooped to pick up his golf ball, was there. So was John Keegan, the front man for a local blues band called Madhouse. Three years before, Sarkin had begun showing up at Madhouse jam sessions with his steel guitar. Sarkin wasn’t much musically, not much at all, but Keegan liked him, and they became drinking and poker buddies. In those three years, Keegan had never failed — not once — to spank Sarkin out of major wads of cash. A hundred here, seventy-five there. It probably added up to thousands.

Not that night. That night, the very hand of the Man descended from above to usher Sarkin into the zone. Sarkin remembers laughing his way through the game. Roaring, actually. He roared his way through the hands. Roared his way through the bluffs. Roared his way through the hits, the stays, the tequila shots. “God has looked down on this sucker who’s gonna have his friggin’ brain operated on,” Sarkin bellowed at the others, “and cut him some slack!” At the end of the night, he had to herd his winnings with both forearms. He’d won \$500 off Keegan alone.

“Uh, Jon,” Keegan began.

Sarkin, who knew Keegan was good for the money, smiled at his bewildered friend and told him he had two weeks to cough up.

JANNETTA DRILLED THE HOLE and inserted the Teflon wedge the morning of August 7.

“The ringing, Jon,” Kim asked when Sarkin came to. “Is the ringing gone?” “Yup,” Sarkin mouthed. “Gone.”

And that was it, the bottom line. A day passed. Sarkin, though barely present, was pleasant. Early the next afternoon, Sarkin looked at his mother, Elaine, who was with Kim in his hospital room, patted the bed beseechingly and smiled.

“Come here, Ida,” he said.

Kim Sarkin stared. Ida, the Sarkins’ Labrador retriever, was back in Gloucester, being tended to by Jon’s indebted friend, Keegan. As she had when it all began, Kim knew.

“Something’s wrong,” she yelled, running into the hallway.

A doctor arrived.

“Feeling OK?” he asked.

“Come here, Ida,” Sarkin mumbled.

The doctor gently peeled the bandage above Sarkin's left ear. When he saw what was beneath it, he quietly asked Sarkin's wife and mother to step out of the room. Nobody moved. "Step out," he repeated slowly, as if speaking to children.

The bandage had been acting as a dam, concealing a bloody postoperative event. Sarkin quickly fell into respiratory failure. Yelling, a crash cart, a priest offering to take the Sarkins' 19-month-old son, Curtis. Elaine, whose first husband, Sarkin's father, had died young of a freak heart attack, took on a frozen look and began mumbling "Not again."

The doctors reentered Sarkin's brain to stem the bleeding and stayed there through the early evening. When it was over, the leaky vessel, as well as a chunk of Sarkin's cerebellum, had been removed. Later Jannetta came to the room where Sarkin's family had gathered and slumped to the floor. "I don't know what happened," the family recalls him saying. He didn't know if Sarkin would live, or if he did, how. Later, when the Sarkins considered suing Jannetta (who did not return calls about this story), a videotape of the operation showed that the stroke had not resulted from any "mistake."

"When will he wake up?" someone asked.

"I don't know," Jannetta said. "Soon."

Two months passed.

MUCH OF SARKIN'S ART evinces a preoccupation with the inner workings of things. His Boltflashes are peppered with disembodied organs, unidentifiable creatures whose bodies have been cleaved and cross-sectioned and labyrinthian tangles of plumbing pipes that connect only to themselves and seem to serve no purpose. And then there are the stuffed nostrils. Stuffed with sticks. Stuffed with pipes. Stuffed with ribbed, plungerlike devices that seem both asphyxiating and highly sexual. Multiple stuffed nostrils appear on the same page, at different angles, until it's impossible to tell where gravity is. Which is up? Down? Is the nostril supine, subject to violation, or is it swallowing, encompassing? Together, the many nostrils mesmerize, adding up like pixels on a screen into a message, a mood. And that mood, constant throughout Sarkin's Boltflashes, is a dry, raunchy, even salutatory amusement at the fact that existence is exposure, that we may at any moment be "royally fucked by the Big Guy."

Parts dominate Sarkin's art. His surfaces constantly call attention to their own mosaic complexions. To him the inner math of objects — the pieces that make them up, the infinite number of arrangements those pieces imply — holds more interest than their sum. Individually, the pixels in his paintings appear square shaped and robust, like plant cells under a microscope. Yet they do not fit together seamlessly. With a humming, antigrav energy, they resist one another; they resist completion. With his countless colorful bits, Sarkin conveys a feeling of phosphorescent anticipation and, with it, a sense of moment — the instant before crystallization.

In his second life, Sarkin has become a man with no interest in or use for completion. To him "finality is static and smug"; incompleteness implies motion and life. Sarkin's work represents the way he sees himself: in a perpetual state of foreplay, a state in which he is always moving toward.

IT WASN'T A COMA, not quite. More like a daze. Sarkin couldn't speak, but when Kim would ask him to squeeze her hand if he could her her, he sometimes could and did. Mostly, he hovered between nothingness and REM, adrift in a continuous loop of half-formed images that had the weird physics of nightmares but seemed scripted by his faint awareness that things were as bad as they could be. "I was aware of nothing," Sarkin says now, "except this obsessive nightmare where people were sticking things up my nose. Which of course they wee. It was a dream that kept getting realer and realer and realer until, finally, months later, it was."

Before Sarkin began to ascend the long ramp to consciousness in early October, however, his body was taken apart, split from throat to groin and reassembled wholesale. There was a bleeding stress ulcer (intensive care is indeed very intense) that required emergency surgery and three bodies' worth of transfused blood. There were staph infections, a heart attack, bacterial growth around the tubes in his lungs that led to pneumonia, a 106-degree fever. All were life threatening. Most required that Sarkin be reopened, rattled and puzzled back together again.

Though Sarkin recalls none of these violations consciously, the notion of himself as a Frankenstein seeps into most every artistic gesture he makes. The gluing, duct-taping and stapling of the Boltflash packages convey strength and security, but also the notion of having been ripped asunder and haphazardly patched together again. The contents too — the cross-sectioned humanoid heads, the plumbing-pipe mazes with their makeshift fittings and corkscrew configurations implying Band-Aid-style maintenance — constantly conjure Sarkin's scrambled viscera.

In late September of 1989, before he could even speak, Sarkin was flown from Pittsburgh back to Massachusetts. That was where John Keegan saw his friend for the first time in more than two months. Sarkin was barely conscious, with tubes entering every hole in his body. Half his head was shaved. He weighed about 140 pounds. He looks translucent, Keegan thought.

"Hello," Keegan said, then burst into tears. Sarkin stayed slack, his eyes moving slowly. If he'd had the energy to speak, the tracheotomy tube threaded through the slit in his throat would have prevented him.

"I'm sorry, Jon," Keegan said, standing before his friend. "I'm so sorry."

Sarkin's right arm rose. Up it came, until the hand was inches from Keegan's face. The tip of the thumb then touched the tips of the index and third fingers, rubbing them in a little circular motion — the international sign for "gimme."

"Jon?" Keegan sobbed.

Slowly, Sarkin unfurled his hand, holding the fingers in Keegan's face so the point wouldn't be lost.

Five hundred dollars.

Several days later, Sarkin focused his gaze upon his wife as best he could (to this day, Sarkin has double vision; the image on the right is the mirage; the one on the left, the real deal), then pointed to the tube in his throat.

"Jon, can you talk?" Kim gasped. Sarkin nodded. Kim called for a doctor, who removed the tube. There was a thin exhalation, then a plaintive wisp of a voice.

"I can talk?"

"You can talk! You can talk, Jon! Talk to me! Talk!"

"Absolve me," Sarkin whispered.

"What?"

"Please absolve me."

"Absolve you, Jon?"

"Absolve me of my sin," Sarkin said, his voice trembling and wheezy. "Absolve me of my sin."

BOLTFLASH #51 9/11/96

Because of my physical limitations, I've compensated for 'em by my hyper-talkin'-head-esome "gesalt," i.e., my proclivity for bombast et prolific excess-gluttony, my mental/artistic/creative obsessive-compulsive diarrhea aesthetic. I am sure that it turns people off and that they think I'm a blowhardy jerk. They're right.

HE STARTED AT point zero. It took weeks to teach him how to breathe and wean him from the respirator. With his diplopic gaze splitting the world in two, he had to learn how to see. Then he got to work on chewing, swallowing, speaking, sitting and walking.

Some symptoms — the speechlessness and the thought vacuum accompanying it — disappeared over weeks. Others, like the acute slurring and the vertigo, took months. (In the time before Sarkin could explain to his nurses how being forced to sit up caused him terrible dizziness, he protested whenever they tried by ripping the breathing tube from his throat. Once, in Pittsburgh, when orderlies propped him up in a heavy wooden chair with his hands and ankles strapped down, Sarkin stood — the chair attached to him — then fell forward, whacking his head against the floor. Messy stuff.) Now Sarkin is completely deaf in the left ear. His vision is blurred, his speech slow and mildly slurred. Ataxia has left him weak and uncoordinated on the left side of his body; he walks delicately, with a cane. These things will no change.

Once Sarkin returned home, he issued his first demand: Recycle. "Everything from paper to fountain pens," Kim recalls. Problem was, the town of Gloucester didn't recycle. No problem: Five hundred miles away, in Buffalo, where Sarkin's older brother, Richard, lives and practices pediatric medicine, most anything can be recycled. Problem solved. Sarkin ordered his wife to send every scrap of recyclable paper, plastic and glass in their home to Richard Sarkin; Kim soon discovered it was easier to stockpile the goods in the basement in preparation for "shipping" and then discreetly dispose of them.

Other demands followed. When it came to the bathroom, Sarkin wanted nothing, nothing to do with lightbulbs. Candlelight only. He wanted to bury gold in the backyard. He told Kim to make sure there were always extra cans of gasoline handy. Jugs of springwater were to be kept in the basement, as were canisters of Sterno.

"Three things!" he announced one day.

"Progresso kidney beans! Progresso lentil soup! Progresso vegetable soup!"

"OK, Jon," Kim said, humoring him. "Would you like a can of each?"

"Ten cases!" he snapped.

"Ten cases?"

"Of each!"

"Listen, Jon..."

"Emergency! Nuclear war!"

"Of course, Jon, but..."

The supply, most of which Kim gave away, lasted seven years.

BOLTFLASH #91 7/3/96

HOW HAS MY STROKE EFFECTED A CHANGE IN NEURONAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS TO INCREASE MY ARTISTIC CREATIVITY? NOTHING WAS ADDED BY MY BRAIN INJURY; RATHER BRAIN WAS REMOVED. SO, IT FOLLOWS THAT BECAUSE BRAIN TISSUE WAS LOSE, SOME O TH PART THAT WAS REMOVED ACTED AS A GOVERNOR ON MY ARTISTIC CREATIVE PROCESSINGS. IT CERTAINLY FEELS THAT WAY. MY SIGNIFICANT PERCEPTUAL CHANGES RE: MY STROKE HAVE DECIDEDLY SCRAMBLED MY TAKE ON REALITY. NOTHING IS TH WAY IT WAS PRE-STROKE. I HEAR THINGS DIFFERENTLY, SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY. I THINK DIFFERENTLY. TH STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL CHANGES IN MY BRAIN, E.G. HOW MY VISUAL CORTEX NOW PROCESSES TH INFO FED TA IT BY MY OPTIC NERVES, IS REAL MIND-BOGGLING AND SUPER-INTRIGUIN TA ME....

IS CREATIVITY A PRESENCE, a gift — or an absence, a process by which a filter is removed, freeing something common to every brain? Several neuroscientists presented with Sarkin's case say there's scant evidence to suggest that brain trauma can "create creativity." (Or even selectively affect it: Though there are discrete brain centers for functions like hearing and eyesight, advanced, essentially human traits like creativity, as far as neuroscience can tell, are diffusely located all over the brain.) The changes brought on by brain injury, in fact, are almost invariably changes of diminishment. A damaged brain is not like a damaged liver: Neurons don't regenerate; lost IQ points don't return; stroke does not improve a skill or talent.

Still, neither Sarkin nor anyone who knows him believes there was real precedent in his first life for what he has become. He doodled and drew, but with only a fraction of the energy and imagination evident in his current work.

It took Sarkin two years — a time in which he tried to return to his life as a chiropractor, only to discover that he no longer had the fortitude or skill — to gain his bearings within the new configurations of his brain. (Like many doctors, Sarkin was insured to the gills. Added to the nest egg he had amassed through hard work and thrift in his prior life, his disability pay will provide his family in perpetuity; the income from his artwork is gravy.) The obsessiveness, the roaring urge to create, began slowly and quietly, with lizards. He had been fond of them since he was a child, and as an adult, he kept an aquarium full in his home. Now he stared them down for hours. To others it seemed the lizards served as a palliative, helping Sarkin escape the imprisoning aspects of his stroke. Sarkin was tuned out, to be sure, adrift in a kind of mental deep focus, with the muscles behind his eyes loose and at rest. But this was actually an exertion, a means of transport to a place composed entirely of the colors on the lizards' backs and the patterns of their scales. The reptiles soon took on an almost sacramental value; they were projections, objects that gave form to the pure colors and shapes that the tinnitus and the stroke had discharged into his brain.

Soon his attraction to certain colors and color arrangements — and, more important, to the real-world objects that most closely approximated them — struck like fever. He began to fixate on cacti as well as lizards. The presence of one or both — in a room, a newspaper photo, his head — put Sarkin in what he calls "an itchy state of mind." They called to him, distracted him, imparted to him a feeling of being on the verge of discovery. His fascination replicated itself, spawning new objects of fascination, new fetishes. The Chrysler Building, plumbing pipes and the tail fins of '59 Cadillacs soon emerged as icons. Sarkin drew them to life, rendering their surfaces in elemental but surreal color schemes and with a veiny intricacy that implied the peeling away of skin, an anatomical inspection. Sometimes he'd paint a watercolor Cadillac fin, let it dry, then paint a cactus on top of it. Then a lizard on top of that. Then another Cadillac fin. And so on and so on, until the work resembled...his brain, with scores of mica-thin layers of sediment that evoked ancient desert civilizations razed and then buried under new, entirely different civilizations.

The filter that had previously kept Sarkin's artistic impulses in check apparently was — and is — the same one responsible for what might be called conversational pause, the ability to give and take, to receive as well as transmit, to interact. Words and art spill out of him at a breathtaking pace. He can't stop transmitting. He tells jokes constantly, leaping from the punch lines into their explanations without waiting for any reaction. "It's a joke!" he says breathlessly, upon presenting one of his earlier, less...ambitious works — a sculpture consisting of large, blocky letters that spell WHITE and are painted...white. "You get it? White? That thing? White? You get it?" When I tell him that, yes, I think so, he steps close, eyes aglint — as they invariably are when he senses he's getting under someone's skin with a jest or a truth — and presses the point. "It's white? It says 'white'! White! Get it? Get it? Get it? Is that funny?"

This playful babblingness is everywhere in Sarkin's more ambitious projects as well. Odd, colorful creatures chatter at one another. The Chrysler Building is pink. Elvis's disembodied head pays homage to an image of Sarkin perched in a window ("The King and I"). Being around the man and his artwork, one comes away with an impression of having seen something both silly and true.

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the artistic output of th creator is merely th external manifestation of his inner conception o the universe.

"JON'S PERCEPTION IS still warped," Kim says one night after the children (Curtis, now 9, and Robin and Caroline, 5 and 2 and both conceived after the stroke) have gone to bed. Sarkin, off in one corner of the living room, leans on his cane, eyes fixed on the floor.

"Like what happened with the kitchen," he says, almost to himself.

"When we moved to this house a month ago, Jon thought he would 'help' by unpacking the kitchen for me," Kim explains. "So while I was out, he opened all the boxes and put everything in the cabinets — randomly. A 2-year-old would have done it the same way. Scotch tape and videos with the dog and tea..."

"I've never seen her so upset," Sarkin begins, looking bewildered as he explains how he unpacked the boxes onto the counter, thought, My God, what have I done? and then put everything away as quickly as possible so his wife wouldn't "find out."

"It's not that I have high standards, or even that Jon has low standards," Kim says. "He has no standards."

"No standards," Sarkin concurs.

"Then again, that's what's so fun about some of his art. His studio is totally chaotic. He'll stumble around, accidentally step on something he's working on and like the effect. Or the baby will drop something on his work and he'll say, 'Oh! That's nice!'"

"My brain is scrambled," Sarkin admits, his voice suddenly and uncharacteristically dark. "A lot of my work is an acknowledgment of entropy. Things fall apart."

A rupture in the brain destroys the governor; the learned inhibitions evaporate; the man for the first time sees blue. Sarkin's way of expressing himself in speech and painting, his way of getting from A to B to C, is chaos, the way of a dream. In his second life, Jon Sarkin floats between this plane and another — a locus most people achieve only temporarily, when "altered." This man is not quite present, one thinks, while at the same time wondering, But isn't that wispy, dissociative drift the very climate of creativity, the place where it lives and grows?

The artist recollects in tranquillity, a state of untroubled aloneness. Color and shape emerge not from focus and strain, but from unfocus, from relaxation; the ingredients of beautiful things bubble up slowly from subconsciousness and the mind receives them. A person in such a state is impervious to the physics of the outside world. He is not aware of gravity. He is not aware of time. He is beneath the level of language. He is not sharp. He does not even really comprehend what he is doing.