

marvin bell & christopher merrill

I F & W H E N

The following eight paragraphs are from *If & When*, a dialogue in progress between Marvin Bell and Christopher Merrill that follows their previous collaboration, *After the Fact: Scripts & Postscripts*, published in 2016.

D O N E N E S S

May 29, 1919. Stillwater, Minnesota. Charles Strite, unhappy with the burnt cafeteria toast at his workplace, files a patent for the first pop-up toaster. The mass brutality of the recently concluded First World War did not foretell high-tech warfare at a distance. We were yet to experience exponential change. Hence, a small convenience could brighten the mornings before work and school. In the time it took to toast two slices of the mealy American bread at which Henry Miller poked fun, my father drank four glasses of hot water, an Old World digestive cleanser. Dinner times, however, we chewed a dense pumpernickel, which needed no such curing. I think now it was, in my father's mind, a vestige of his rural Ukraine. It's a pure nostalgia that attends a gadget that needs but a lever, a spring and a dial to lend the first meal of the day a little pop. The new pop-up toasting was fun. The cliché advice to build a better mousetrap was wrong. Build a better toaster and the world will beat a path to your door and to the bank that gives them free to new account holders. "You do not have to watch it," crowed the ad for Strite's better toaster. From gadgets like the pop-up toaster to the flying autopilot and the self-driving car, civilization has been a brilliant holding action against doom. We used to ask for seconds just to use the new toaster. (M.B.)

TALL SHIPS

July 4th, 1976. From the rooftop of an apartment building in lower Manhattan I watched the regatta of tall ships sailing into New York Harbor for the bicentennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence. *Hair of the dog*, said a friend, pouring mimosas. The water glinting in the morning sunlight made my head pound; the sight of the white sails and rigging left me yearning for the sea, perhaps because I was reading Joseph Conrad. Navies from around the world were represented in the Parade of Ships, including a pair of German barques surrendered to the Soviet Union in 1946 as war reparations. Even then I knew I would not go to sea, confirming Conrad's insight: *Love and regret go hand in hand in this world of changes swifter than the shifting of the clouds reflected in the mirror of the sea*. By nightfall I was drunk again, driving south toward the fireworks emporia and my job at the lumberyard; when I drifted into the median on the interstate, falling asleep to the music of The Beatles ("While My Guitar Gently Weeps"), a trucker following me flashed his high beams on and off until I woke. This ringing in my ears might be the sound of the rigging the lookout registered on his last morning at sea, when the sky was red. (C.M.)