The Son of the Banana King

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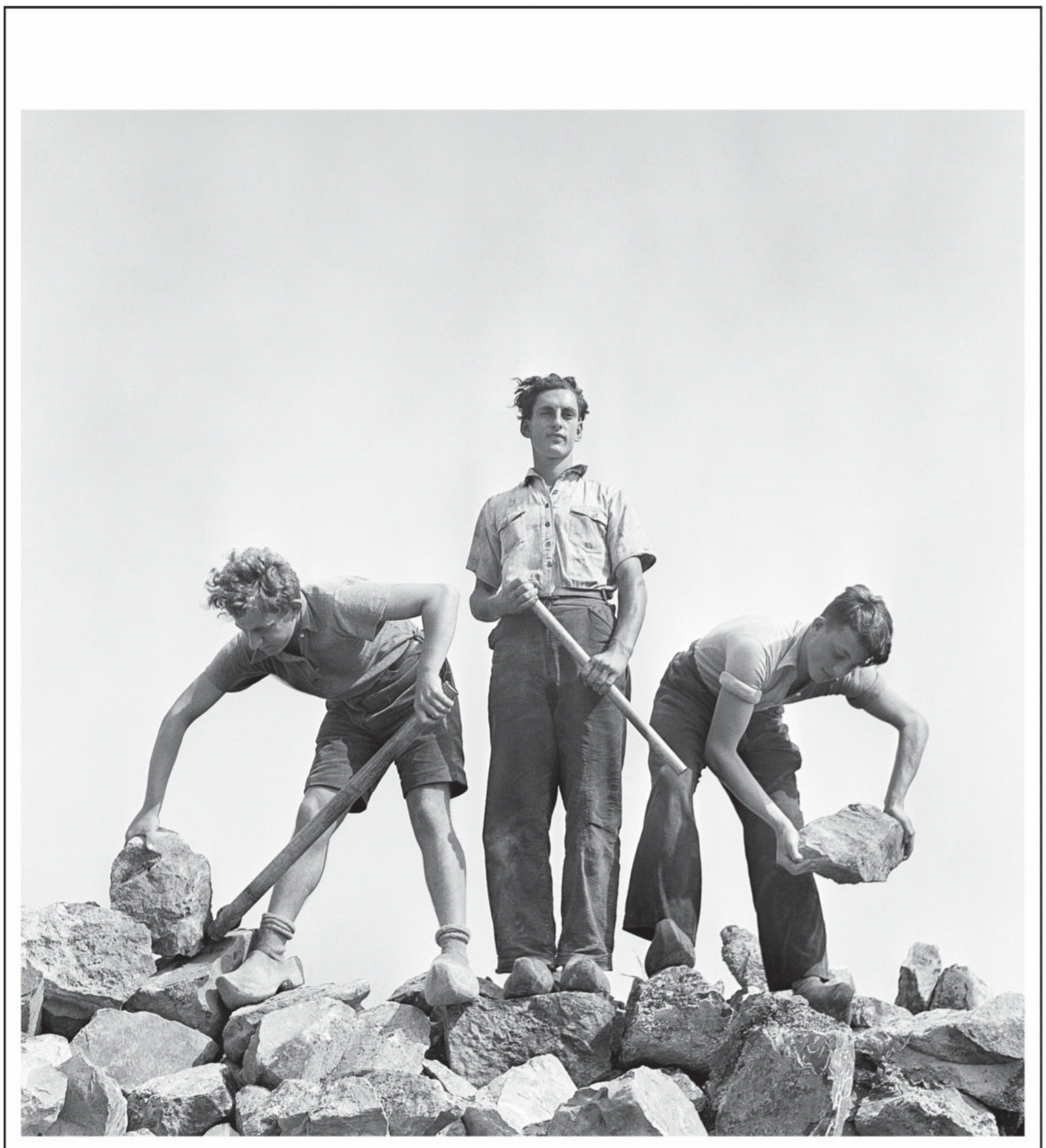
FOR SOME years late in his life, the philosopher Emil Cioran apparently felt incapable of reading novels, and instead devoured diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, and correspondences, declaring that, with age, he could only summon up any genuine interest for what had really happened and very little for what might have happened.

My Father and Myself is one of the strangest books I've ever read, because while it doesn't quite belong to any of the aforementioned genres, it has elements in common with them all, including the novel. Its author, Joe Randolph Ackerley (1896–1967), was a far from prolific writer, largely, as he says, because he couldn't bear to stay indoors: "The Ideal Friend was always somewhere else and might have been found if only I had turned a different way." As Cervantes said of himself, Ackerley was one of those writers who "had other things to do"; in his particular case, this meant looking for young men. Not that his book lingers very long over that aspect—apart, that is, from the remarkable twelfth chapter devoted to the subject, a very condensed and entirely unsentimental chapter, which provides us with one of the most dispiriting and convincing descriptions of casual sex ever written.

My Father and Myself describes a known life and a conjectured life, the lives, respectively, of the "myself" and the "father" in the book's precise and anodyne title. Both lives are partial and both are treated with the objectivity of a third-person chronicler who does not, in this instance, exist. The story of the father—to all appearances an exasperatingly ordinary man, a successful fruit merchant known as the "Banana King" of London—is definitely the most novelesque, not only because it contains all the secrets, revelations, and perplexities (on his father's death, the son discovered that he had a parallel family to his own, three half-sisters, whom he had never met and who lived just a few miles away, entirely cut off from the world), but also because of the investigative approach adopted by Ackerley with the aim of imagining his father when he was not yet a father or, more than that, when he could have been a man much more like the son than either of them could perhaps have suspected during a whole life lived in common. There is a particularly comic and unsettling moment in *My Father and Myself*, when the author—now an old man (the book was published posthumously in 1968), who has spent years recruiting possible Ideal Friends from among the promiscuous members of the Royal Horse Guards, to which his father had belonged in his youth—is studying a photo of his father (one of several intriguing photos reproduced in the book) and thinks: "It is true that, studying the photograph of him in uniform, I decided that I would not have picked him up myself."



The son's double investigation into his father's life, into the remote past and the immediate past, is as fascinating and as sleazy as the most indiscreet of stories. And yet that is not what makes the book so valuable, unusual, and original. (In England it has become a modern classic of autobiography; indeed, there is even an Ackerley Prize for the genre.) The most striking thing is his extraordinary, unwitting, or, rather, unthinking brazenness. There is nothing particularly scandalous about what he tells us or suspects. It's more that the conscious, stubborn, deliberate, almost routine determination of so many twentieth-century writers to recount anomalies and atrocities—always signaling their horrific nature in advance—has made any supposedly "shocking" text seem rather boring and prosaic. There is nothing more counter-productive than laying it on too thick. In Ackerley, on the other hand, there is no such deliberate intent. He tells his story almost as one's grandparents, aunts, or cousins might (and as parents tend not to), an approach that has been carried over into literature almost exclusively as a somewhat clichéd imitation of the oral tradition, in the form of homely dialogues or interior monologues, but never as interesting prose that neither overdoes the diction nor caricatures the rather mundane subject matter.

The world that Ackerley so casually presents us with is a world of squalid, rather rootless middle-class life, in which, without any desire to shock (and it is precisely the absence of such a desire that is so effective), he describes family life as it all too often was behind closed doors. You only have to read the list of belongings he found after his mother's death to get an idea of that familiar, paltry life: "a few old and ragged small articles of clothing, some aged feathers and other trimmings for hats, empty jewel-cases, empty boxes, empty tins, old cosmetic and powder containers, buttons, hairpins, desiccated suppositories, decayed De Reszke and Melachrino cigarettes, old and used sanitary towels done up in tissue paper, stumps of pencils, orangewood sticks, Red Lavender lozenges." Another example of Cioran's much-prized "what really happened"—and one that is in some ways emblematic of the narrative force and unshowy prose of *My Father and Myself*—occurs when Ackerley is speaking passionately about a Welsh boy he knew: "…I realized his value so deeply at last that he involved my heart. His feet smelt, poor boy, some glandular trouble, and out of politeness he preferred not to take off his boots. He was killed in the war." *My Father and Myself* is a laconic book, and sometimes, when reading it, it seems that this is, above all, because we, the readers, are holding our breath.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)