Yizkor, 1997
Inspired by my grandfather, Naum Perkel
cardboard mounted on plywood, 49" x 33"

From the very beginning my childhood passed under a dark cloud of death. When I was two, the war began. My father was on the frontlines. Mother, my older brother Yasha and I were evacuated to the Urals to the town of Chkalov. There, Yasha was hit and killed by a truck driven by a drunk driver. My mother heard the neighbors screaming, ran out into the street and saw his body lying in the road. Yasha's crushed head was covered with a bloodied newspaper. He was seven years old.

That same year, the Nazis killed every Jew in the shtetl of Brailov, in the Ukraine, including my grandparents, Sarah and Naum Perkel.

Many years later, I heard an eyewitness account from a distant relative, Lev Medved, who was twelve years old then and who was marched to the execution with my grandfather and grandmother. From his story, I learned that Grandfather was a furrier by trade and made sheepskin coats. The Germans offered to spare his life if he would work for them: winter was near, and Hitler's army needed warm clothing. But Grandfather refused and said he would go with the rest.

On that tragic day, he shaved, put on his best suit, filled his pockets with the gold coins he had inherited from his father and joined the column of Jews who were being marched along the main street of the shtetl.

Knowing that they were about to be slaughtered, Grandfather took the coins out of his pockets and threw them to the Ukrainians who had lined up on the sides of the street, many of whom he had known since childhood.

They were brought to a large pit which had been dug on the outskirts of the shtetl, forced to strip, lined up and shot. Lev Medved was alive when he fell into the pit. Hours later, he was able to make his way out...

Thanks to him, I learned what a proud and courageous man my grandfather was. To his memory, and to the memory of all the murdered Jews, I dedicate the "Yizkor."

Composition Lessons, 1997
Inspired by Pavel Vasilyevich Votinov
Cardboard mounted on plywood, 49" x 33"

Since I was twelve, I started having occasional thoughts about what I would do when I grew up, which profession I would choose.

I was getting older, and I still had no passion for anything—many various interests but nothing that would consume my consciousness. I had no talents to speak of. The one thing I loved was reading. I had a passion for books, but reading is not a profession so the question remained open—until my school decided to hold a drawing contest.

I decided to participate, and since the drawing had to be made from a real-life still, I bought watermelon and some other fruit, cut out a quarter of the watermelon so that the bright red center would be visible and placed it in the middle of a large tray, then put the watermelon slice next to it and arranged the apples, pears, grapes and plums around it. First, I carefully sketched the outline of the still life, then took a small brush and began to paint with watercolors.

To my unimaginable delight, my hand was creating fruit that looked just like the real thing. Moreover, it happened with no effort on my part, almost by itself. Suddenly I felt like a creator, a creature of a higher order than before.

That was in September 1955. I was sixteen. From that moment, I turned from an ordinary teenager into a fanatic. Drawing whenever I had time to spare, and I didn't care what: landscapes, portraits, still life. It was so easy and enjoyable that the question of my profession resolved itself: I was going to be an artist.

For a year, I prepared for the Moscow Art School entrance exams. At the exam, one had to make two drawings: of a plaster model and of a still life. Furthermore, the same still life had to be painted in either oil or watercolors.

The results were depressing. I got F's for the drawings and a C for the painting. I couldn't believe that these grades were fair, especially since I had seen the drawings and paintings of others who took the exam and got A's and B's. I thought my work was better, but I also knew that they were children of prominent artists.

I shared my doubts with my father. He took it all

as a personal insult. A common man, a hard-working railway engineer and a war hero, he was a respected man in the country of workers and peasants. He had little trouble getting the school principal to see him and to review the results of the exam. This was a serious matter; my father went to the higher authorities accusing the school administration of corruption. But, as it turned out, that was impossible to prove.

The teachers who had graded the exam, a representative of the ministry of education, and the principal gathered in the principal's office. Drawings, mine and those of applicants who received higher grades, were spread out on the desk. In the language used by art scholars, which neither my father nor I could understand, the principal explained why my work was inferior to the others, and concluded by saying, "Young man, you have absolutely no talent. What are you doing trying to get in here? Why not take a tip from you father and learn how to drive a locomotive?"

Tears of unbearable hurt, helplessness, and shame at being so humiliated in front of my father flowed from my eyes. I ran out of the principal's office screaming, "I'm going to be an artist no matter what!" For several days after that I lay low, buried under the rubble of hope and ambition. "You have no talent, no talent, no talent..."—these words kept repeating themselves in my head like a steady drumbeat. That was what tormented me most: what if I really have no talent? Then what?

Just then I learned that Pavel Vasilyevich Votinov, who had been my art teacher in fifth and sixth grades, was teaching evening art classes for amateurs. I hadn't seen him in a few years, and no doubt he didn't remember me. I brought him my drawings and told him the whole story of the exam. For some reason he was greatly amused, as if the entire episode was a really funny joke. "Young man, you have nothing to worry about. You do have talent, and remarkable talent at that, but you have to know that we live in a corrupt world, and you must learn to fend for yourself. This incident will do you good."

I studied with him for two years until I finished high school. While studying with him, I learned some secrets of the trade. But the best thing Pavel Vasilyevich did for me was to support me at a difficult time and shore up my faith in myself.

I shall never forget the words he said to me when I was eighteen on one of the last days I was in his class. "Grisha, you have a lot of hardships ahead of you, but I believe you can become a major artist if you apply yourself seriously..."

Later I went to an art college, and I had a different life and other teachers. But Pavel Vasilyevich Votinov was and still is my first and only teacher, to whom I owe the fact that I am an artist.

The Armored Train, 1997
Inspired by my father, Zahar Perkel
Cardboard mounted on plywood, 49" x 33"

From early childhood, I held in my mind an image of my father as a soldier in uniform with a Kalashnikov across his chest. My mother showed me the photograph she had received from the frontlines and said: "This is your daddy; he's protecting us from the Germans. When the war's over, he'll come home."

The war ended, and father came home. But for me, his role as a protector did not end with the war. He fit the Soviet propaganda image of the ideal working man to perfection. A railway engineer in peacetime, he was drafted in 1942 and traded the locomotive for an armored train, which he drove all the way from Stalingrad to Berlin. He received decorations and medals and returned to his old line of work after demobilization. On the labor front, too, he continued to receive medals and awards as one of the best railway engineers. He was six feet tall, a handsome, powerful man of many gifts. Even though he was not music literate and had never taken any lessons, he played several instruments. He could fix and build anything and was pretty good at drawing.

I was proud of him and a little scared of him too, for he had an uncompromising and unbiased sense of justice. If he felt I was not at fault, he would go to any lengths to defend me. If he concluded that I was to blame for what happened, I had to bear all the consequences and was punished on top of that.

I was a mischievous, lazy kid; I goofed off, got bad grades and was belligerent toward teachers in school and in college. I caused my father plenty of trouble. But one particular incident made me change and grow up instantly.

It happened in my third year of college. At the midyear finals in December, clearly due to my defiant behavior and my criticism of the conservative methods that were being used to teach drawing and painting, I flunked two subjects: the History of the Communist Party and Political Economy. The former involved the study of the achievements of the Soviet Communist Party; the latter attacked capitalism and explained the superiority of the socialist economy. These two tests provided a convenient way to kick out undesirable students. However diligently you studied, you could always be failed on the extra questions. No one could memorize everything in these idiotic textbooks.

And so I was expelled from college, on the condition that if I immediately took a job in my field and received good references from my bosses, I could come back in the fall as a third-year student. This form of disciplinary punishment was known as labor education.

My father took this in stride, saying laconically, "Fools like you need to be taught a lesson." Then, with help from someone, he found me a job at a printing shop selecting and mixing colors for printing. I enjoyed working there. Six months later, I quit, received a glowing reference and took it to my college.

But things turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated. Apparently, they were determined to get rid of me for good. I was told that instead of re-enrolling in daytime classes, I could go to night school—which meant that after my first week, I would be drafted into the army for three years. Under the law, students attending regular daytime classes received an exemption from military service. The exemption did not apply to students taking night classes.

Upon hearing about this, my father decided that it was horribly unfair and that he had to intervene. The first step in his crusade for justice was a visit to the dean's office.

On such occasions, he usually wore his ceremonial railway uniform, decorated with his wartime and peacetime awards and medals. He looked most imposing in this uniform—a sight to make bureaucrats tremble. But the blockheaded bureaucrats in the dean's office came from the academic world and were not very impressed by my father. With no explanation, they simply refused to readmit me as a day student. This infuriated my father, and without giving it much thought, he simply told them they were all a bunch of fascists who should have been shot along with Beria.*

Then he left, slamming the door behind him.

I knew very well that after this scene, the dean would dig in his heels and do anything in his power to keep me from ever setting foot in his college again. But Father had gone far beyond the bounds of wise prudence. My cause had become his personal war, a crusade for justice. It wasn't so much about me as it was about the principles he followed and held dear.

His next visit was to the college president. My father came into the president's office and quickly explained the situation. The president, of course, knew the entire story and declared that he had no grounds to change the decision of the dean's office. For a while, my father stared silently at the president, as if sizing him up; then, slamming his fist down on the desk with enough power to send everything on it into the air, he thundered in unison with the clatter of objects falling back on the desk: "And where were you, scumbag, when I was shedding my blood all the way from Stalingrad to Berlin?"

Then, locking the door with the key which was in the keyhole, and putting it in his pocket, he calmly said, "Until you sign a paper reinstating my son as a daytime student, you're not going to leave this room." The president, pale with fear and fury, sank back in his armchair; Father sat down across from him. In about five minutes, father cooled off and realized that he wasn't going to get anything from the man. Then, unlocked the door and left.

For me, that was the end. The irritated bureaucrats at the dean's office were joined by the infuriated college president; together, they were a force that, to me, seemed insuperable.

Even my father was discouraged by these two failed attempts, but fighting Soviet bureaucracy was a marathon, not a sprint. Father was well aware of that. His next trip was to the Ministry of Education. The people there paid more attention to him, since they knew very well that if he went to higher authorities—the Central Committee of the Party or even the Politbureau—his story would have more credibility than theirs. Father was received by the First Deputy Minister and gave him a brief account of the events. The official took a good look at all the decorations on my father's powerful chest and said in a confidential tone, "I'll tell you what, Zahar Naumovich. Why don't you come here at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, I'll summon everyone involved, and we'll try to straighten everything out."

The next day at nine o'clock sharp, we were in the waiting room of the First Deputy Minister's office. The college president, the dean and his associates were already there. A secretary invited us in. "Comrades," the deputy minister said, "what is this tempest in a teapot you're having in the department? Why does such a respected laborer—[pointing to my father]—have to waste his time going from one office to the next instead of resting after a hard day's work? After all, it all seems to be pretty straightforward. You promised, in writing, that after six months of work Perkel would be readmitted as a daytime student."

The president tried to say something, but the deputy minister cut him off sharply and said, in a voice that left no room for objections, "Starting tomorrow, Gregory Perkel must be readmitted as a daytime student."

When I came to class the next day the dean approached me and said in an oily voice, "Listen, Perkel, you've been readmitted, but now that you got what you wanted and satisfied your ambition, why not take evening classes? You would have a much easier time there," he hinted.

Since the question was obviously a provocation, I had no desire to have a discussion. "You see, Valentin Sergeyevich," I replied, "I'd really like to. The problem is, my father wants me to attend day classes, and you've seen my father—you can't argue with him."

"Yes, your father—he's an armored train," the dean said thoughtfully...

That's it, I thought. My father is an armored train.

** Lavrenty Beria was Stalin's secret police chief who was tried and executed after Stalin's death in 1953.*

Balancing the Spine in Space and Time, 1997
Inspired by Reuben Hoppenstein
Cardboard mounted on plywood, 49" x 33"

In a very simplified scheme, human life can be encapsulated in two images. One is Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, a man whose physical existence depends entirely on his own efforts. The other is a man immersed in a social anthill to which he is connected by many ties and on which he is, in effect, totally dependent. The sole exception that does not fit into either model is the life of an individual who has inherited a large amount of money.

Most typical, of course, is the second model: the life of a man embedded in the social system and dependent on its rules. There aren't very many rules, but compliance with them ensures a more or less comfortable life. Without enumerating all these rules, I will point out the most important ones. Above all, one must get an education, which gives one the opportunity to get a well-paying job—which, in turn, enables one to get a home, a car and medical insurance. In our social system, having medical insurance is one of the basic rules. Yet it's no secret that plenty of people in the U.S. make money but have no medical insurance. Mostly, they are illegal aliens, vagrants and members of the free professions. Fifteen years, ago, my wife Natasha and I belonged to the last of these groups. We had no insurance and no money to buy it. Besides, who thinks about getting sick when you are young and healthy?

But the best-laid plans can go awry. And so one fine day, a disk in my spinal column slipped and pressed on a nerve. God had decided to remind me of His existence. From this point on, my tale must take on Biblical overtones.

Thinking logically, one must conclude that if higher powers do indeed exist, they must also have agents on this earth. Without any doubt, they function undercover and usually have no idea of their own mission. They may appear as a passerby, a police officer, a businessman, a bank teller. In my case, Heaven's messenger was a neurosurgeon, and his name was Reuben Hoppenstein.

By the time I met him, I had been bedridden for two months in severe pain and had been using various folk remedies which, of course, could not help someone in my predicament. Besides, we had only been in this country for several years; neither of us had ever been sick, and we did not know where to go or who to turn to—not to mention that we barely had

enough money for rent and food. My helplessness drove me to the brink of utter desperation, and one day, when I was cursing everything including the higher powers, the phone rang...

It was my friend Simon Pinkhasov, a physical therapist, telling me he had been given the name of one of the best neurosurgeons in New York, an art lover willing to help a suffering artist. That very same evening, he took me, bent over in pain, to the office of Reuben Hoppenstein, who took little time to diagnose the problem and concluded that I needed an operation. Then he said that he knew about my financial woes and was willing to do the operation for free. And then, opening a desk drawer, he took out three $100 bills and handed them to me, saying, "That's for a CAT scan." I believe it was a rarity in medical practice: a patient leaving the doctor's office with more money than he had going in.

The second episode in my life in which providence ordained that Reuben Hoppenstein would play a major role was no less mythic. It happened a year after our first encounter and after the brilliantly performed operation that returned me to my normal activities.

At the time, I was involved with a gallery owned by a crafty and not very honest businessman. He purchased an installation from me for which, under the contract, I was to receive monthly payments over a period of three years. With that money in mind, I rented a studio space. A year later, the businessman said that he had no money and had to suspend our contract, offering in return a new one for my future paintings for which, he said, he could get the money. Needless to say, I turned him down and sued him. But lawsuits take a while, and Natasha's earnings were barely enough to pay the rent for our apartment. So we decided to give up the studio, take everything back to our apartment where I had worked before and start all over.

I made arrangements for a moving van and called Reuben to come over right away and pick up the painting I had made for him in gratitude for his kindness. He said that, unfortunately, he would be busy in the next few days and would be unable to come, and asked what the rush was. I briefly explained the circumstances to him. He paused and then asked what the monthly rent for the studio was. I told him.

"Listen, Gregory," he said, "you're a bloody talented artist. You should be sitting in your studio and working without worries. If you don't mind, I can pay your rent for a year. And now I have to go, I have patients waiting."

I hung up. What had happened had not yet sunk in. It was like falling into a precipice and, halfway down, having your fall stopped by a tree growing from the rock—and you are left hanging there, not knowing if you're dead or alive.

And then, everything unfolded just as it was written somewhere in the invisible book of fate. For a year, Reuben conscientiously mailed the checks; I carried on my mission at the studio, and Natasha was offered a job as an artist in the map department of *The New York Times*, which solved all our financial problems. Meanwhile, one more work by Gregory Perkel was added to Dr. Hoppenstein's collection.

Reuben occupies a unique place in my heart—not only as a kind and compassionate man but as an example of an incredibly creative personality. He is a marvelous photographer and a fairly good painter; his brain is always busy coming up with various incredible ideas. Every time I drop by his office, he takes me, with a conspiratorial air, into one of the rooms of his magical labyrinth and shows, describes or explains his various projects, illustrated with drawings and charts jotted down on any piece of paper at hand. Over the last fifteen years, I have been introduced to a great multitude of his ideas: a Broadway musical based on the life of Theodore Herzl, a fantastic project for a resort on some island in some sea, 3-D X-rays, new designs for safe and efficient cars, springier soles for sneakers, and finally, his latest brainchild, still in the development stage: a three-dimensional image with limited motion and sound which can be applied onto paper or plastic and used for many purposes.

So far, most of these projects have brought him nothing but headaches and monetary losses. And yet his mind continues to generate more and more ideas. After all, money isn't what really matters to a man who lives in such a complex grid of co-ordinates: somewhere between childhood games, surgery and myth...