

*My Life and Hard Times*, James Thurber (1933, Harper Brothers)

In urgent need of something amusing, I've turned again to James Thurber, one of our most inventive American humorists, and to his great classic, *My Life and Hard Times*. Having lost my copy somewhere among several moves, I found quite a few at Henderson's and one at the Bellingham Public Library, among other possible sources. Henderson's also has the 1945 anthology, *The Thurber Carnival*, which contains the full text of *My Life*..., and it's also in the Library of America's collection of Thurber's work chosen by Garrison Keillor.

Thurber isn't really witty, though some have said he is; I don't find clever one-liners to quote. His field, instead, is the calmly ridiculous. Although it's true that he had parents and an older and a younger brother, the family he describes in *My Life* seems to have little else in common with his own, evidence that he scarcely owes anything to reality. In a characteristic incident, the police called to his home because of a possible burglar hear a noise from the attic, where James' grandfather sleeps: "I realized that it would be bad if they burst in on grandfather unannounced, or even announced. He was going through a phase in which he believed that General Meade's men, under steady hammering by Stonewall Jackson, were beginning to retreat and even desert." And a bit later, "Somehow, we all finally got downstairs again and locked the door against the old gentleman. He fired once or twice more in the darkness and then went back to bed. 'That was grandfather,' I explained to Joe, out of breath. 'He thinks you're deserters.' 'I'll say he does,' said Joe."

In his Preface, Thurber explains that "writers of light pieces" aren't really happy and carefree. "They lead, as a matter of fact, an existence of jumpiness and apprehension. They sit on the edge of the chair of Literature....The little wheels of their invention are set in motion by the damp hand of melancholy." However that may be, the eyes of the reader grow damp only from too much laughing.