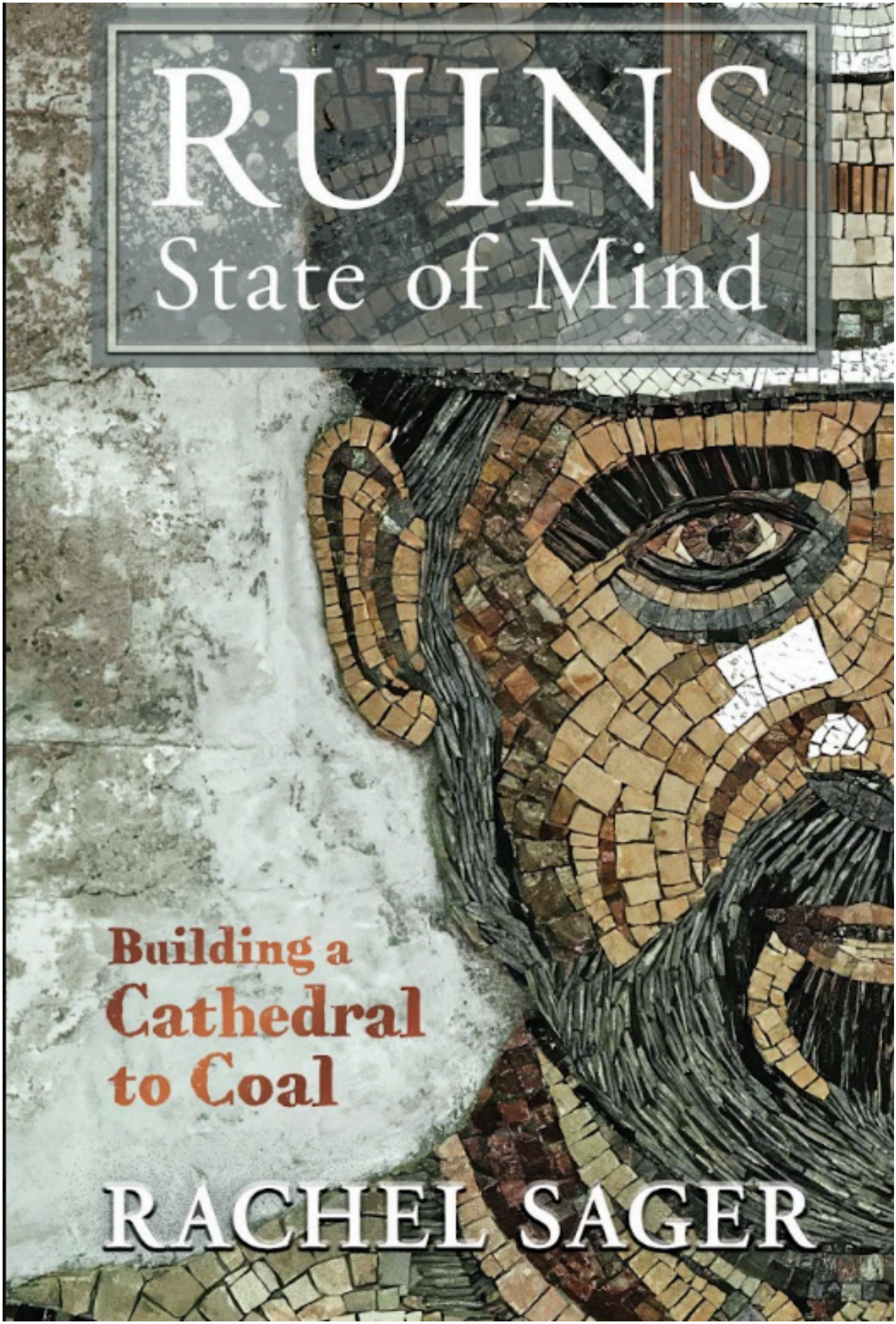

RUINS
State of Mind
Building a
Cathedral
to Coal
RACHEL SAGER

Excerpt from Ruins State of Mind: Building a Cathedral to Coal

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CHAPTER 14

The Infinite Resource

I remember my two visits to The Frick Collection on Fifth Avenue in New York City, each one about a decade apart.

The first was before I found my purpose at The Ruins, but I was old enough to understand how the world worked. The chemistry of art displayed in a grand home was electrifying to me. I made the connection between Frick, the man, his empire, and Pittsburgh.

But the second visit. That time I understood something that I have been chasing ever since. I had crossed from viewer into builder and owner.

I remember standing in front of The Forge by Goya, seeing the three heavy-shouldered men in motion with their hammers, bodies bent into force over a fire. Almost religious in their treatment. Stark background and no decorative setting to rescue the viewer with any kind of softer interpretation.

Purchased by Frick himself in 1914, The Forge belongs to the permanent collection, which means he chose to bring the image of labor into his gilded life. I notice how it stands out from the rest of the collection. Hanging among the portraits and old master landscapes, the simplicity of The Forge helped me see the full circle of the story I have been trying to capture all these years. Coal is more than a simple metaphor. More than just a symbol of nostalgia. Coal drags me back to first principles. The beauty in the Frick rooms has an origin story.

Coal became coke, coke became steel, steel became fortune. And finally, fortune became culture.

Everything rough has been removed until only taste and refinement remain. But the story underneath the beauty has always been there. The story of men who mined a black rock with shovels and picks for fifty years. Today, we can see its big picture because time can be compressed into clarity. Coal can be disguised as art, but it's still there, under the surface, for the ones who want to see.

It strikes me as I continue to name-drop Henry Clay Frick that I feel a kinship to him. He came of age just down the road at West Overton where his family started the coke fires that he later perfected and expanded so hard that he became known as the King of Coke. His beehives lit up the

night sky for decades. But his building ended with smoothing out the story in favor of hushed rooms at the top of the New York City food chain. The thing I am building keeps pulling the beauty back to its first principle.

I am reminded of my favorite Han Solo line, "I'm out of it for a little while, everybody gets delusions of grandeur."

The absurdity of me and Frick in the same room is real. On paper, the comparison collapses immediately. Frick had a mansion on Fifth Avenue.

Frick owned so many masterpieces he stashed Turners where no one could see them. The man who cancelled his Titanic trip because his wife had sprained her ankle. The man who sat alone listening to his $50,000 Aeolian organ that played itself, and kept a private organist on staff to work it.

I have a ruined mine that drops concrete and rebar from its ceilings every week. A donation box for tipping the tour guide. One man with a chainsaw battling heavy things. Piles of salvaged possibility that I am convinced are not garbage. Fighting through muddy installations, collecting eggs in the woods from rogue chickens.

But still.

The word I give Frick is compulsion. The word I give my father is pursuit. I carry both, which may be why Frick unsettles me more than I want him to.

He is not family, but the shape of his hunger is not foreign to me. The man forever tied to the Battle of Homestead. Build it bigger. Make it last. Put a name on it. Gather the beautiful things and arrange them so they cannot be ignored.

My father held both poles: laborer and owner. That means I did not inherit a clean story where workers are pure and owners are evil. I inherited pursuit itself. The need to build, reach, acquire, risk, try again, keep going, stay unfinished. From him, I inherited a version of pursuit that could be beautiful, exhausting, and impossible to turn off.

Somewhere between the two, I keep building The Ruins.

Frick collected Vermeer, Bellini, Rembrandt, Goya. Beauty with papers and provenance. He collected paintings so valuable they seem to bend the air around them.

The Ruins collects a different kind of beauty.

A coal screener pulled out of grapevine. Furnace grates. Red dog. Stamped bricks. Broken china. Names from old ledgers. Faces from family photographs. Stories told at the end of tours by people who waited until the last possible minute to say the thing they came there to say. I collect artists too,

though that sounds worse than I mean it. I collect their signatures, their decisions, their willingness to leave a piece of themselves on a wall that began as someone else's workplace.

Our gold is not their gold.

* * *

After a big rain, down by the river.

I visit the riverbank after it's been high and just as it goes low again. This time between risings is when it brings the gifts and when the beach opens up enough for foraging. A new crop of artifacts tumbles down to be deposited at our switchback curve where they wait to be rediscovered.

I don't forget my glasses and boots. And sometimes Robert if I know I will fill the bucket. Our biggest foraged stone at the river is shale. I don't know its geologic name so I dub it Youghiogheny Shale and it's the blackest of the black, but only if you know how to cut into it against the grain. From its weathered outsides it looks unremarkably gray-brown.

But today, I am looking for bricks.

My eyes adjust to looking for the rectangular lines and oblique corner curves in the mud. I scratch into the hillside if I see an end poking out. I flip one over and hold my breath as I anticipate a new stamped name.

Bricks are never just bricks.

The maker's mark on an old brick holds a message from the past. Its factory name.

The most familiar names we find here are LAYTON and SAVAGE. I use the name to start a thread of research about the factory that made them, just upriver near the soon-to-be-gone Layton Bridge. These bricks outlived the people who made them. They outlived any of the people with living memory of the people who made them.

I dunk the brick in the river water and watch the mud flow away until its mark reveals itself. It tells the story of an America that made beautiful things that worked. Form and function in my hand. I think about the vanished culture of industry as I picture a hundred bricks, all with different names, organized in new mortar to tell the story of the bricks made from the same clay that my family battled as farmers one hundred years ago. The familiar orangey brick that built our house, the disappeared lamphouse, the ventilation fan house, and still stands in the dozens of coal operations I see on Sunday drives. But also the gray denseness of the fire bricks made to line the inside of coke ovens and take the highest heat.

I consider my place in the long line of people who make things. I am an artist watching history become entertainment. The railroad is now a bike trail. The Carrie Furnaces give tours. The coal mine becomes a museum.

There is always a next project wrapped in a new urgency that must be built. That is my infinite resource. But it is also what keeps me up at night as I imagine all the untold stories sleeping under the mud.

Robert asks me why we need to turn these bricks into a story. "Isn't The Ruins enough as it is today? The people are coming, why do you need a new project that won't be paying the property taxes?" I know he's right.

The Ruins is enough already. As I reach down for the next brick.