Blame It On Blake

a memoir of dead languages, gender vagrancy, Burroughs, Ginsberg, Corso & Carr

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Blame It On Blake

I: Changeling Child

1: Nowhere

I was born nowhere, and there I remained for the first thirteen years of my life. To speak a bit less cryptically, I drew first breath and smoked my first cigarette in the suburbs of northern New Jersey, a not unpleasant but utterly characterless place, like any number of such locations throughout the United States, and indeed Europe and the rest of the developed world. Separate houses, each with its own little lawn and driveway, along a maze of tree-lined streets, in an endless succession of look-alike towns, elaborating the outstretch of infinite and identical highways with their green-and-white signs. You'd find the same in Ireland or Israel or anywhere.

There were no foods or flavors specific to this location. The same Chinese takeout, pizza and burgers you'd find anywhere were here. I have no nostalgia for the place. When I drive past the house where I grew up I feel nothing. I wonder whether it wasn't a bit like this in the late Roman Empire, when every town was laid out the same: forum, theater, villas, aqueduct. Every local language flattened under Latin, a single undistinguishable world linked by superhighways designed to hasten the advance of the troops on their hobnailed sandals. (Our modern highways originated in the Germany of the Reich, and they too were primarily designed to facilitate troop movements.)

All this makes it easier to understand a part of the initial appeal of Christianity. Jerusalem was indisputably, uniquely *somewhere*. The incarnation was a particular punctum of time, *sub Pontio Pilato*, supremely irrepeatable, with such intensity of location that ever since, wherever you were on earth, you faced that way to pray.

Northern Jersey was Jerusalem's antipode in the entirely negative, unrealized sense of a being a non-place. It wasn't Hell, nor even Purgatory. If one had to locate it somewhere on the *axis mundi*, and one must, since in the archetypal sense the axis, the center, is *everywhere*, then my original home was probably a subdivision of Limbo.

I think that the spiritual yearning that has characterized my life, and made of it a directionless quest, may have its origins in this desert of meaning, this landscape that, for all its clutter, was everywhere identical. It was the far less picturesque equivalent of the wildernesses of Arabian or Judean sand whose emptiness called forth the visions of Isaiah and Mohammad.

I am then at odds with Rimbaud. He made childhood his golden age, and mourned his failure to perpetuate the idyll into adulthood, even with drugs and poetry. Growing up was his fall from grace His ultimate grim renunciation of illusions for a life of action was pure adolescent reaction. He was, in his phrase, "absolutely modern," but it was sixties-modern. He remained a sulky teen, lacking only the Ray-Bans and the leather jacket. *A Season in Hell* is the classy European equivalent of *Catcher in the Rye.*

I mention Arthur Rimbaud because people used to compare me to him, an identification which I enjoyed more than I agreed with. I found my real literary echo in Paul Dombey, the precociously dismal six-year-old hero of Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, whom the adults in the book describe as "old-fashioned." Later when I met William Burroughs, he would sometimes refer to me as "the forty-five-year old seventeen-year-old." Mine was perhaps what they used to call an "old soul," and till I was well on in years, youth eluded me. But things one must work to attain are not soon lost. Young late, young long.

2: Kid Stuff

My parents were both Jewish physicians, my father a pediatrician and my mother a child psychiatrist. I have an elder brother, a younger brother and a younger sister, all of whom seem like healthier, more normal versions of me. I appeared in their midst as an unexpected atavism. Like a member of the Addams family who has accidentally strayed onto the set of the Brady Bunch.

What I most remember from my childhood is television. I woke early to watch the Farm Report and Davey & Goliath on a small black-and-white TV. By the time I was ten I was setting my alarm clock under my pillow to wake myself in the small hours; I'd sneak downstairs to the den to watch the kind of horror movies that were only shown late at night. I observed with particular interest that Doctor Frankenstein had a book called *The Secrets of Life and Death*, which the movie intended to represent the record of his experiments. I looked for this in libraries, and no amount of vain searches through card catalogs or exasperating interviews with reference librarians could convince me it didn't exist. I read Mary Shelley's book before my years numbered in double digits, and copied down as clues the books she gave as inspirations for Victor Frankenstein: Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa. I would later learn Latin in part to read their works. I was resolved to find *The Secrets of Life and Death*. I still am.

At school I was pretty much ignored by my teachers, except for the ones who disliked my intelligence. My second-grade teacher wrote this comment on my report card, "Jacob is the worst student in my class. All he does is sit in the back of the room reading the encyclopedia." I daydreamed in school or read a book angled up just inside my desk. I never did well because I never paid attention to what was going on. Why should I have? The teachers were always explaining the same thing over again to the dullest kid in the class, who wasn't listening anyway.

3: Parents

Because of this academic disaffection, I was always in trouble at home. My father was a gigantic man, easily six feet tall and powerfully built. I remember as a little boy playing in my parents' bedroom and examining his shoes on the floor of his closet. I was horrified by the size of them. I felt like a character in a fairy tale who stumbles into the home of an ogre who's out ogreing, and slowly realizes this is not a safe place to be, that it's not by chance that the soup-pot's big enough for a child to bathe in!

My father had been an air force captain and was an MD. He was very big and always angry, larger than life and twice as scary. He believed in corporal punishment, which he inflicted without inhibition. All that physical discipline made me, as it tends to, a sexual masochist, just like the English schoolboys of yesteryear who acquired a taste for the rod along with the Latin classics. Also, I grew up "gender fluid," as they say today. I found it easier to identify with my mother than with my father, the wrathful god. You could say my oedipal conflict was resolved by the psychic equivalent of a non-competition clause.

My mother was in the first class of women to be admitted to Harvard Medical School. They were told that this was just an experiment, and they might want to have a back-up plan if it didn't work out!

As a child, I thought my mother the most refined and elegant woman in the world. And indeed, compared to the mothers of my schoolmates, she was a nonpareil of education and sophistication, Boston and Harvard incarnate. She dressed with conservative good taste, favoring simple, well-cut shift dresses with a string of pearls or a small pendant. Her handbags were Coach—back then a standard of understated high quality, not just a fetishized brand name.

She was remarkably cold.

4: Precocity

In early youth I was considering two career plans. Either I would be a fire man or the strong man in a circus. I had a red toy fire-truck, which gave me a certain amount of hands-on experience with the one vocation. Regarding my second choice, strong man, I had the advantage of access to a large beach towel with leopard spots which I would wrap around myself toga-style for my exhibitions of strength. These latter consisted of hoisting aloft a broomstick with deep groans and trembling arms. My grandparents in particular were impressed by these performances. I had a book on Greek myths which showed Hercules wearing the skin of the Nemean lion, so I knew that animal prints were the way to go.

When I was in sixth grade, we studied France in social studies. I distinguished myself with an oral report on Napoleon. I had been fascinated by him ever since I saw the David painting of him crossing the alps, which was for a time relentlessly reproduced in ads for Courvoisier ("the brandy of Napoleon"). I included in the report an extensive assessment of his medical condition, which I had learned about in an article in one of my father's more culturally and historically oriented doctor magazines. I went into gleeful detail about his autopsy report, the traces of arsenic found in locks of his hair which had been preserved as mementos after his death (was he slowly poisoned by his British captors?) and the possibility that he suffered from Froelich's Syndrome, a hormonal imbalance, which may cause in males diminution of the genitals, accumulation of fat at the hips and buttocks, and the development of breasts. You may imagine my sixth-grade teacher's dismay and annoyance as I showed the class cognac ads and quoted the emperor's comment to his personal physician, *See Doctor, what lovely arms, what smooth white skin without a single hair! What rounded breasts — any beauty would be proud of a bosom like mine.*

5: Barbarism

It may or may not be a pity that I was given no real education as a child. The serious learning of languages and mathematics which occupied my mature years could have been more effectively and usefully accomplished when I was young. But I think I also gained much by being ignored. People who are raised to culture remain in awe of it all their lives, and have the greatest difficulty in playing freely with it. It's as though they can't distinguish between the statue and the pedestal: everything has to stay in place and not be shifted into a context that might clash. And the people I've known, usually musicians, whose precocious talent was recognized and who were raised with elaborate care like hothouse flowers, tend to be brittle and little-souled. I was raised in a kind of affluent barbarism, where kitsch and culture were barely distinguished. I read *Hamlet* when I was ten because I'd seen the "alas poor Yorick" skull-soliloquy parodied in *New Yorker* cartoons, and I figured that the play would be a kind of owner's manual to Halloween. I got a Folger Library edition of it from the local library, and I remember finding it wasn't such hard going, once I realized (somewhere in act two) that the facing page notes were clarifications of the text, and not some kind of strange modernist counterpoint to it. I discovered Tchaikovsky because his 1812 overture was used in a TV ad for acne cream, with the amusing title "the twelve to eighteen overture." I scurried about the vast trash landscape of popular culture delightedly collecting what seemed to me weird debris, like a barbarian sacking an overrun Roman city.

II: Runaway

1: The Englewood School for Boys

"Rabinowitz, you faggot!"

That fairly sums my middle school experience. I was twelve, newly enrolled in the seventh grade at the Englewood School for Boys, and was suddenly vastly unpopular. I wasn't specifically being accused of being a homosexual. "A faggot" back then might simply be a foolish or unlikable person.

This was 1971. There were no Gay-Straight alliances in high schools, homos were still homos and wore green on Thursdays to let each other know. The only ones you ever saw on television were the sad hilarious fag Paul Lynde on *Hollywood Squares*, or the blood-curdlingly coy Liberace at his white piano. And now I was suddenly and publicly a faggot. Which seemed to me delirious, because I hadn't even reached puberty and had rather sketchy ideas about sex in general, gay or straight.

My father had explained to me the facts of life in terrifying detail a few years before. The occasion of this revelation was as follows.

My father was a doctor, and before that he'd been an industrial chemist, and he was still a ham radio enthusiast — he had a small radio tower in the back yard. He loved to explain any sort of science thing, and I knew I could often get out of trouble if I asked him a question like "What's the difference between AC and DC current?" or "Is speed the same thing as velocity?" We always had paper napkins at the dining room table, and he had a pocket protector full of pens. If I had been involved in some mischief that my mother meant to report to him, I could sidestep much unpleasantness by posing a science problem. He would happily blacken napkin after napkin with diagrams to explain whatever it was.

One night my mother had to be away, and my father read me my usual bedtime story. Still unwilling to go gently into that good night, I had a sudden inspiration.

"Dad, where do babies come from?" The eyes of my pediatrician father lit up, and he vanished with a "be right back." He returned with tall stack of paper table napkins, and the explanation began.

When my mother came home, he was still at it. It was actually fascinating, but my ten-year-old mind could only follow these disclosures so far. For years I was convinced that you had to go to a hospital if you wanted to have sex. It was all so complicated, that I couldn't imagine anyone making

fertilization occur without a doctor's supervision. And anyway, birth took place in a hospital, so why not the rest?

But to return to my schooldays. I wasn't quite sure what a faggot was — though, to be candid, I found the topic *extremely* interesting. But I surely didn't like the subject of my most private speculations becoming my badge of public opprobrium.

The previous year, I had been in the sixth grade, which meant I was at the very top of the social ladder of the public elementary school. I was one of the "big kids." I had known all my classmates since childhood, and everyone there was more or less accepted. Not everyone liked everyone, but we were still children and none of us had had to figure out where we fit into any social scheme. We were as hierarchically undecided as we were sexually immature. And that makes a certain terrible sense. Before sex, there's nothing to compete for, except such occasional windfalls as cupcakes, and the adults made sure everyone got an equal share of such. Utopia.

No one had told me anything about the misery of the middle school years. For all children, this is the time when they painfully learn the rules of social interaction, where they actually stand in terms of social rank, who will be their friends, who are above their station. They discover with cruel clarity what are their talents and their assets: their looks, their athletic ability, their academic prowess. I had none of these.

It is interesting that no one *does* explain this to young adolescents. Middle school is always a nasty surprise. I can only assume that most children learn the new rules of life without thinking, and preserve no clear memory of what they absorbed back then by a sort of painful year-long social osmosis. This has been a continuous motif in my life. I fail to grasp societal expectations which strike me as stupid. I reject the obvious explanation, because I am looking for something more. Similarly, on standardized tests I have always scored below my actual ability because I see the actual range of meanings in the poorly phrased questions, and puzzle over possibilities that would never occur to one who read more superficially. In short, I have consistently failed to understand how little is being asked of me.

But it is through the lessons which are learned in this period of adolescence that one develops a personality strong enough to nudge one's way into the group. To linger shyly at the margins is to make oneself an outsider, a target, an outcast. The theorizing of Emile Durkheim would here find its most appropriate evidence. He thought all social structures exist to maintain the boundaries of the closed group. Makes you wonder what kind of a time Durkheim had in middle school.

I was shy, introspective, and (though I say it myself who shouldn't) almost unnaturally intelligent. I hated sports, I loved classical music. There was no way I would been well accepted, introduced as a stranger into the rough and tumble society of twelve-year-old boys.

My reaction was to retreat ever deeper into the world of books. At the time I greatly admired Tolkien, and went through his trilogy a number of times. A more recent reading has validated my boyhood taste. It's not the story, but his ability to reproduce the style of medieval epics such as *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland*, and his frankly Pagan, very poetic nature mysticism, that give his works their enduring merit. Not great literature, but it's awfully good as a fantasy novel.

The course work failed to engage me. I'd already been bored out of my skull for six years in elementary school, in which I sat at my desk surreptitiously reading a book or day-dreaming. It was more interesting to ignore the teacher's unsurprising monologues and, when called on, to guess where we were and improvise a response. This method allowed me to get in considerable reading, and provided a certain amount of gambler's excitement, as I scrambled to conceal my inattention.

By the time I entered seventh grade I had been trained to regard school as the place where I would be ignored, where the main task was to avoid utter stupefaction. I was also profoundly resentful at having been routinely punished for my mediocre academic performance in a classroom where compliance, not excellence, was rewarded. So I took an unconscious and vindictive pleasure in academic non-cooperation.

The private school curriculum was a little more demanding than what I was used to, but I found I could squeak by with B's here equally well. Intellectually, it was just as dreary as the school rooms I knew. Socially, I was ostracized and picked on. Under this new adversity I soldiered on, furious but at a loss for what to do about it. I had found myself marooned in a hostile world.

2: Guy Nickson

I did make a few friends, all of them older. One was Guy Nickson, in his senior year when I arrived. Guy edited the student newspaper. He had long hair, and wore a bowler hat and a Norfolk jacket. I thought him the most brilliant and elegantly dressed man I'd ever met — which, at that point in my career, he assuredly was. I hung around the office of the newspaper in my free periods, and often spoke with him. He was a genuinely kind and friendly person, and didn't feel that talking to a seventh grader was beneath his dignity. I intrigued him by my precocity and occasionally witty phrases, and he must have been flattered by my interest in all he said.

Guy, who was then in his senior year, had discovered Nietzsche in ninth grade, and this had been a decisive encounter. Nietzsche provided Guy with his first tools for independent thought. He became a bit obsessed with Nietzsche, as people who understand him tend to on first encounter, and through Guy I came to know the great thinker as well. Guy opened to me a world of writers and music I knew nothing of before. Baudelaire, Aleister Crowley, Peter Weiss (author of *Marat/Sade*), and by association de Sade were now on my reading list. I was genuinely hungry for knowledge. My conversations with Guy were the very opposite of the classroom experience. I was spoken to individually, not ignored; my intelligence was appreciated rather than resented (as it generally was by teachers who realized that, boy that I was, I was smarter than they). And the information I was getting was genuinely interesting: real and sometimes shocking ideas. A far cry from the neutered literary anthologies we had in English class.

I met Guy in 1971. The sixties had barely ended, and we still lived in a climate where extraordinary ideas and exotic insights were a path to intellectual credibility. People were adventurous in their ideas as in their clothing. At the time I was a very conservative little boy, with straight-legged pants, short hair and patriotic politics. The oldest students at the school mostly had hair down to their collars, wore bell-bottoms and were listening to Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and *The Doors*. Every town had a "head shop" selling marijuana paraphernalia and black-light posters. Guy was my first point of contact with this hip and sophisticated world, immensely larger and more fascinating than anything I had seen.

I was interested in drugs as well. I had a class in physiology and one of our large projects that year was to write a twenty-page report on drugs. This was easily the only assignment I had that year that captured my interest. My essay ended up sixty pages long.

3: Rebellion is Possible

That summer I went back to *Holiday Trails*, a camp in New Hampshire which I had been attending for several years, where they taught me to ride horses and shoot a rifle. I was back with kids I knew well, who were very glad to see me, since they considered me an entertaining fellow. I was age-wise, in the middle rank of the campers there, so I had some social status and, being an "old timer," knew my way around.

All year I had, by way of armoring, made myself more rigidly who I'd been as a sixth grader. Mine was a personality molded very much by my parents' expectations. I still trusted that they were essentially right about everything. I figured that being more like what they wanted me to be, would be the course of prudence and safety. I became even more of a strait-laced nerd than I was by nature, figuring that this would place me beyond any reasonable criticism.

At camp, I could drop the mask, and I did so with a vengeance. I had picked up some sophistication now, after a year of socializing with Guy and his friends at the student newspaper office, and I showed off my new worldliness. I was the one who had the pack of cigarettes to smoke surreptitiously in the woods. (We didn't inhale yet, we just puffed at them. We didn't even fully understand you were *supposed* to inhale).

I had a girlfriend that summer, after a fashion. The other boys were very interested in "dating" the girls at the camp, who had separate bunk-houses and activities, but whom we met at dances and the like. I couldn't quite fathom what the boys were after, none of us had reached puberty yet. But somehow there was pressure to dance with girls, and see if you could get one to be your "girlfriend."

I had been a bit interested in girls in my last year at elementary school, and had had a crush on one girl, Christine Andrews, whose father produced a daytime soap opera. She was a very pretty blonde, and as I later learned, every boy in my class had a crush on her. But this was no more than a distant, unspoken infatuation. As far as I could tell, girls were very strange, silly shrill beings, who giggled inanely and fluttered and flocked together like birds. I was curious about them, but my few attempts to join in their conversations had met with the same success that Alberich encountered when he attempted to get friendly with the Rhine maidens. The shimmering, golden-haired nixies fled the ugly, hook-nosed dwarf with hilarious affected dread.

So I was a bit non-plussed by this fascination with dating. But since having no girlfriend was a bit of a social liability, I paid court to a tomboyish

girl named Jerri who was much bigger than me, who was in fact a touch overweight, whom no one else wanted to date. It seemed a perfect arrangement. We both thought it was pretty funny, and it made us fit in socially.

This pleasant intermission between school years came to an abrupt end when I broke my leg. I was in one of the girls' bunks, visiting Jerri, with some of the other twelve-year-old Romeos, and the counselor came in. I leaped out the window: it was only three feet to the ground. But another boy, who was supposed to be holding the window screen open for me, let it drop. The screen was in a wooden frame, hinged at the top, opening inwards, and when it fell one of my legs was still inside while the rest of me was going groundwards without. My leg was pinned upon the windowsill, neatly snapping both leg bones a bit below the knee.

I had decorated the cuffs of my blue-jeans with star-shaped metal studs — giving them, I thought, a rather Peter Max look. This was the foundation of my only photographically documented fashion triumph. At the hospital they scissored open the side of my jeans to slide them up over the break for the x-ray. The metal studs produced a halo of stars above the break, like the asterisms of pain one sees hovering over the head of a bonked cartoon character.

I went home in a cast, and spent the next few months on crutches.

The next year at school saw me entirely changed. I was no better liked by my classmates, but I now abandoned all conformity to parental expectation. Being a pint-sized conservative had only exacerbated my isolation. It was the early seventies, and teenage rebellion was still in the air. I was now interested in what drugs and rock and roll had to offer as a way of defining a more successful identity, and of expressing my frustration with the way things had gone. By Spring I was off my crutches, and exploring the wider world.

Drugs weren't yet a problem for me. Getting them was. I wanted desperately to try marijuana and, if possible, LSD, but no one would sell to me. I was after all only thirteen. I stole (of course) from a bookstore a copy of Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book*, which was a great revelation to me. I immediately adopted his politics of rebellion. I equated my personal early-adolescent misery and alienation with his critique of society, and vented my anger and frustration on the world — generally in the form of petty theft along the lines Hoffman suggested.

A band I admired then, *The Doors,* had taken its name from the famous lines,

> "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."

which put me on to the works of Blake, and though at that time I only read such of his writings as had been adopted by the hippies as psychedelic scriptures. (Basically, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.) I was seriously impressed.

I started hitch-hiking into New York City. This was easy enough to do, since the school was only a few miles from the Washington Bridge. From the Bridge terminal I hopped the turnstile to get onto the subway, and from there I was exploring the city. I began with the Museum of Natural History. I'd been there on school trips in years past, and I wanted a better look. I had all of a thirteen-year-old's fascination with dinosaur bones and exotic minerals. It was a convenient place to pinch a free lunch, too. I would go into the cafeteria at its most crowded, get on the long slow-moving line with my tray, and eat nearly everything on it before I got to the register. I soon discovered it was not even necessary to pay for the single remaining item. So great was the chaos there, even on a weekday, due to visits from school groups, that I could simply park my nearly empty tray on a table and walk briskly out, as though I had recognized someone I was hurrying off to greet.

But my ultimate destination was always Greenwich Village. It was the Spring of 1972. The Fillmore East had closed the previous summer, but its marquee was still there. The *Electric Circus* had closed last September, but its sign was up for a while yet. It was recognizably the same West Village I had seen in the pages of *Life* magazine, in articles about hippies and the counterculture. I focused on the *East Side Bookshop* on Saint Mark's place (long preceding the famous Saint Mark's Bookshop) with its collection of underground comics and small press books. I paid for what I got here, since this was in my eyes a legitimate business, not a corporate monstrosity. Here it was I discovered Zap Comics, and got volumes by the Marquis de Sade in the fat, inexpensive paperback Grove Press editions.

There was also a second-hand record store around the corner from the *Gem Spa* on Saint Mark's Place, where I could affordably indulge my taste for rock and roll, which I'm sorry to say was awful. *Steppenwolf*, *The Moody Blues*, *Black Sabbath*, *Procul Harum*. It's embarrassing to recall what I listened to. I was also much taken with the rock operas *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Tommy.* The only bright spot among all this dim listening was the Frank Zappa double album *200 Motels,* which included some of his modernist classical pastiches. Not that they were very good, but they did give me an idea of what real music sounded like, and were my first faint foretaste of Arnold

Schoenberg. I listened to the fourth side of the double album, with the dissonant passages, over and over, fascinated.

I decided that what I wanted to be was an underground cartoonist, and attempted to compass this end by devoutly copying images from the works of artists I admired. This actually worked up to a point, since much of graphic rendering is the deployment of stylized representations for whatever one is drawing. You don't figure out from scratch how to draw a tree or a car every time you look at one: you generally have a repertory of abstract squiggles which will look like what you intend. Visual shorthand which the eye reads as a representation.

What I really needed to have done if I wanted to be a graphic artist, was draw from nature all day long, and develop my own sense of how to give form to my imaginings. Discover my own vocabulary of visual tricks. But by pure imitation I was soon able to make plausible and highly offensive images of sex and bloodshed. This contented me and persuaded me that I was indeed born to be an artist.

4: A. J. Weberman

At this time, I met A. J. Weberman, the Yippie leader, Dylanologist and Garbologist. I knew something about him from the alternative newspaper *The East Village Other* which, by the time I encountered it, would struggle on for a further and final year and a half. I had been drawn to this by its underground cartoon content: it had showcased the work of Spain Rodriguez (*Trashman*) and Gilbert Shelton (*Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*) when the underground comics mini-industry was just beginning. Till its end, the *Other* ran covers that looked like rude psychedelic posters. I learned something about A. J. from its pages, looked up his phone number, called him and told him I was an admirer of his work, could I meet him? He invited me over to his place, at 6 Bleeker Street. I suppose I impressed him with my newfound radicalism. I had read Hoffman's *Revolution for the Hell of It*, and that book's title pretty much expressed my attitude. I just asked question after question and listened and listened.

A. J. was quite an interesting person. He was obsessed with Bob Dylan, and wrote a concordance to Dylan's lyrics which he felt enabled him to interpret the political messages and personal confessions underlying the seemingly sophomoric and gibberish texts. I asked trenchant questions, and declared myself satisfied by A. J.'s explanations. His lexical research and interpretations were quite ingenious.

A. J. watched Dylan turn his protest-singer celebrity into purely conventional selfish rock stardom, and he felt betrayed. He hadn't actually been betrayed: Dylan never had any high principles to turn his back on.

While A. J.'s insight here was true, but strangely askew, his methods of proving it were askew but strangely true. He supported his analysis of Dylan's "changed" politics by going through Dylan's garbage, analyzing the man's life and opinions on the basis of what he threw away. In effect, A. J. was an archaeologist of the present. He also made an Archimbaldo-like collage portrait of the man from his trash. He went on to do similar analytic pictures of celebrated political and cultural figures, frankensteining their likenesses out of their rubbish.

A. J. was, and is, a truly fascinating and original man, but with more insight and daring than intellectual discipline or judgment. He had shoulder-length frizzy hair, wore aviator glasses, had a round slightly pudgy face, and affected a thigh-length leather jacket.

At this time he lived with a woman named Ann Duncan; I don't recall whether they were married. Ann was a painter who had done a series of large, somewhat naive paintings which she called *Great Moments in Rock*.

There was one of Jim Morrison exposing himself onstage in Florida, Janis Joplin dying of an overdose, Bob Dylan shooting up. (It was one of A. J.'s contentions that Dylan had secretly become a junkie.)

This was an exciting time for Weberman. He had become friends with John and Yoko, who agreed with A. J.'s critique of rock music's turn from countercultural force to entertainment industry. The media stars of the Yippie movement, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, were in the final flush of their success. In a few years, Rubin would turn into a wealthy investor in *Apple*, and Hoffman would make a less successful venture into capitalism: he got arrested for dealing cocaine. In 1972, A. J. was already highly critical of both, and foresaw them abandoning the revolution which young people in the sixties supposed was imminent.

It may simply be that A. J. was predisposed to see everyone as in the process of betraying their earlier principles. Which could be paranoia on A. J.'s part, or a reasonable expectation of how people are liable to act.

A. J. was also obsessed with the JFK assassination, and thought the Watergate burglars had been involved in it. I cannot pronounce upon the merits of his theories, because even then politics interested me not at all, and I paid only polite attention to A. J.'s talk on this topic.

Yet I, by virtue of my long hair, pot-smoking and shoplifting passed as political. Real politics hadn't much to do with the Yippies. Their opposition to Nixon and the Vietnam War had no keen sense of history, involved no ideological acrobatics. The main article of faith was marijuana, which was viewed as radicalism incarnate, the "red tincture" of political legitimacy.

The Yippie smoke-ins provided my first exposure to grass, which I took to with great enthusiasm. I was already smoking cigarettes, and had been drunk as often as I could get someone of age to buy me a six-pack, so neither smoking nor mild intoxication presented any great surprises. I remember that at this time marijuana had a purely positive, pain-killing effect on me. It was fun, it took my mind off my problems, it made everything seem pretty interesting. Since I was still pre-pubescent, I hadn't yet embarked on the sea of self-doubts that is real adolescence, so I didn't experience the "paranoia" grass later produced in me.

There was still, left over from the sixties, a confusion between the personal and the political. What you chose to wear, the drugs you chose to take, were viewed as meaningful symbolic actions. And, since there were real social and legal consequences for nonconformity on these heads, one can see how such conclusions could be drawn.

But the phrase "symbolic action" is in fact an oxymoron. "Street theater" is still theater, and taking it to the street is not really "taking it to the street." A. J., in common with many more eminent leaders of his generation, was

further misled by media attention. He was interviewed on TV, he was asked to write an article on Garbology for *Esquire* magazine. Even his girlfriend Ann had her paintings reproduced in one of the first issues of American *Oui. (Oui* had been the French equivalent of *Playboy. Playboy* purchased the American rights, and went to press with *Oui* as an edgier version of itself in 1972.) Ann, posing shirtless in front of her rock and roll icons, appeared on a page of cultural reportage.

As far as A. J. could see, he was on his way up. Little did he realize this *was* his fifteen minutes of fame, and that the media was presenting him, not as a counter-culture celebrity, but as an amusing kook. This explains in part A. J.'s acceptance of my appearance. I was, as far as he could tell, a fan. He regarded my appearance much as Noah might have viewed the first weighty raindrops.

A. J. rented cheaply the entire building at Six Bleeker Street, and on the wall of one of the loft floors was a huge portrait of Mao printed on cloth. When I asked A. J. about Mao, he showed me his *Little Red Book.* As soon as A. J. bought his copy, he'd ripped out the parchment paper page that protected the author's portrait and used it to roll a joint. There ended his engagement with the book's contents.

I went into Manhattan to hang out with A. J. and the Yippies just about every other weekend. Sometimes I would just come in for the day, and sometimes I would sleep on his floor. He was awfully kind to take me in like that. He knew I was at daggers drawn with my parents. He befriended me with a noble generosity, courage and intelligence such as I have rarely encountered since. He viewed the nuclear family as intrinsically oppressive, and gave me the help he felt was owed a comrade. I was quick to reciprocate insofar as I could. Having mastered the lessons of *Steal This Book*, I was rather an accomplished shoplifter, and would make trips to the supermarket, returning with pilfered steaks which I had deftly whisked under my field jacket and kept in place under my arms. More than once I provided dinner to a van full of Yippies by telling them to pull in to a McDonald's at the busiest hour. I would go to the register and tell the harried clerk my big brother had just placed a large order, which I would give in detail. "But when we got back to the car we were missing the twelve cheeseburgers." Between my childlike appearance (though I was thirteen I could have passed for ten) and my placement at the head of a long impatient line, I was immediately handed the bag, and returned in triumph to my friends. My long hair didn't raise any suspicion. It would be years before I needed to shave. People usually took me for a girl.

I was in a lot of trouble at home for my weekend disappearances, my now long hair, and the underground comics and rolling papers that were discovered in my room. My father reacted with anger, threats, new rules, searches, and shouting, shouting, shouting. My mother not only went along with this, but often whipped on his anger when it flagged with her shriller expressions of outrage. My father no longer spanked me, but his tirades were lengthy as they were loud. "You think it's everyone's fault but yours. You think you're something special." Actually, I did.

My father's conduct made a bad situation far worse, and effectively drove me from home. It was awful for me at school, where my now hippie-like appearance inspired the other kids to call me "junkie" as well as "faggot." My most valued friend Guy had gone on to college, I was continuously picked on, "bullied" as they say nowadays. If things are good at home, you can put up with problems at school, and if things are bad at home, you can get by if you feel you fit in at school. If both home and school are a torment, then some real damage gets done.

I remember one night when I was staying over at A. J.'s I told him how miserable I was. I just let it all pour out. No one else was there, we had been talking, smoking pot and listening to records. He really didn't know what to say, or maybe he realized there was nothing he really could say. He just kept lighting joints and we kept smoking them. He really treated me like an adult. When you're with a friend who's really losing it, sometimes the best thing you can do is give them a cigarette or pour them a drink. I know that nowadays it's all supposed to be hugs and talking about your feelings. But A. J. showed his compassion that night with very old-fashioned manliness. He passed his friend the anaesthetic that was ready to hand, and left him some dignity.

5: Must Be Queer

In my second year at the Englewood school I discovered the novels of Hermann Hesse. Hesse had become fairly popular in the sixties, when translations of all his novels were issued by Bantam with psychedelic-looking covers. Hesse served up a mixture of eastern mysticism, jazz-age bohemianism, depth psychology and adolescent gender-confusion. It would overstate the case to call them great literature, but they were for me what *The Bell Jar* was for girls. In fact, what *The Bell Jar* was for me: I read this over and over as well. Hesse *did* introduce me to some of the best aspects of German culture: the drama of ideas, and the highest of high Romanticism. It's no accident that the Germans have written nearly all the good philosophy and all the good music in Europe for the last five hundred years. My later discovery of Hegel, Kant and Schoenberg was favored by my reading of Hesse.

And, by a chance reference on a *Firesign Theatre* album, I learned of, and acquired a copy of Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch*, which seemed to legitimize my ever increasing interest in drugs and homosexuality.

I figured I must be queer, because girls had no interest in me. I didn't realize that being a skinny thirteen-year-old who looked much younger, and spoke with a vocabulary that would have been imposing in a forty-year-old, hardly made me a chick magnet. I simply assumed that there was something wrong with me, that is, that I was a homo.

My intellectualism seemed to confirm this. Americans see cultured people as creepy and weird. The only TV program in America about a family of intellectuals was *The Addams Family*. Their *butler* played the harpsichord, the father practiced yoga, and, as the theme song informed us, "their house is a museum." While the public intellectual is a standard figure of the social landscape in France and Germany, in America such characters appear as the effeminate villains. Think of Doctor Smith in *Lost in Space*.

So being queer was the identity that seemed the best fit. My classmates seemed unanimous on this point. And I was reading the Marquis de Sade, which gave me some rather advanced Enlightenment, if not enlightened, views about sexuality. De Sade himself was outspoken about his preference for men.

Still, this was an awful lot of new territory try and navigate, especially since the theater of operations was still the denuded triangle of a pre-pubescent boy.

Inspired by the Verdi opera *La Traviata*, which had been recommended to me by a sexually ambiguous Latin teacher I much admired, I was very

taken by the romance of tragedy. By now hormonally disposed to take a dramatic view of things, I decided I would commit suicide. I'm not sure how serious I was about this. I remember taking a few slashes at my wrist with a razor blade one evening. After a few light passes, which didn't lay open the radial artery, I had made two wide gory openings in the skin, and I bandaged them up, very proud of myself and to some degree scared. I remember thinking, "You can all just push me so far. I can put a limit to it any time I want."

It was a bit difficult to keep a bandaged wrist a secret. Not everyone bought my story about having slipped while carrying a soda bottle. My parents bullied me into seeing a psychiatrist: the deal was, they would ease up on me if I consented. I finally agreed to it for the sake of peace. I didn't cooperate: I told the shrink right off that I was there under duress and if he went along with it, he was the enemy too. He must have assumed he'd eventually win my trust. He was quite mistaken.

6: First Poems

Like all adolescents, I began writing poetry. Really bad poetry. This I did with a passion I did not at first recognize for the portent it was. Rock and roll lyrics were the first influence on me. I had never really read poetry seriously, nor did I know anyone who did. But music was then important indeed to teenagers. We defined ourselves precisely by what bands we liked. My first poems were very much like what I listened to: gloomy nonsense, enlivened by the occasional play on words. I wrote my own poems in a kind of a rhythmic trance. And of course they rhymed, like the rock lyrics I took as models. The poems were as dark as I could make them. In fact I used the word "dark" a lot to add to the general sense of darkness. Other favorite words were "grotesque," febrile" and "lambent." I was like a novice painter who thinks he can paint a gold ring by using gold paint, who still has to learn the illusion of gold is made with yellow paint with white highlights. But that was the beginning of my poetic career, and the lyric instinct has never left me. Free verse I still consider second best.

I made my first poetic ventures while attending summer camp. The science lab there had ether and chloroform, I availed myself of both, and had ether parties out in the woods with my bunk mates. One of my favorite books growing up was Howard Wilcox Haggard's profusely illustrated *Devils, Drugs and Doctors*, a history of medicine, which contained a fascinating chapter on the discovery of anesthesia. I was particularly impressed by the story of the Scottish physician James Simpson, who, in the eighteen-forties, introduced the use of chloroform in cases of difficult childbirth. This gave rise to furious opposition from religious conservatives, who considered it a defiance of God's sentence on fallen mankind stated in Genesis, "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children." Thanks to this impious man of science, women were now sleeping through their salutary sorrow!

Since the Reformation, the English monarch has been the head of the Church of England, and the controversy was naturally brought before the crown. By great good fortune, the queen of England at this time was a woman. Victoria, as the head of the church, had the Revised Standard Version of the Bible made, in which the phrase "in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children" was changed to "in labor shalt thou bring forth children" — a linguistically legitimate emendation, for in Hebrew, as in many languages, the same word means both "work" and "suffering." Thus there was no longer a Bible for angry Anglicans to thump in disapproval, and Victoria had Simpson knighted.

Simpson had to choose a coat of arms. At a loss for its design and motto, he asked advice of his friend and countryman Sir Walter Scott, who made the suggestion which was in fact adopted, "A wee naked bairn, and underneath it the words *Does your mother know you're out?*"

It's been many years since I read Haggard's book, and time and imagination may have muddled my grasp of the facts, but it helps to paint the scene of me at age thirteen, entertaining my bunk-mates with amusing anecdotes from medical history, while I passed around wads of cotton soaked in ether, followed by sweeter-smelling chloroform like an after-dinner sauterne.

7: Too Gay to Stay

After this halcyon summer I returned to the Englewood school with greatly increased self-confidence. I smoked cigarettes (though occasionally they still turned me green with nausea), I had long hair, I had Yippie friends in NYC, and I was no longer to be intimidated by my parents or teachers or anyone. The bullying from other students had somewhat abated, since I was now a ninth grader, and the other kids had had two years to get used to me. I was still an outsider but now part of the landscape, no longer an intruder to be repelled.

The previous spring I entered puberty, which gave me a new hobby. *The Naked Lunch* was pretty much my Bible in those private devotions in which I meditated on the mysteries of love.

I practically memorized *Naked Lunch*. I knew it so well at one point that if you read me one line from it I could quote the line that followed.

Not that all this literary sophistication translated into any kind of romantic activity. I was terribly embarrassed about being gay. I didn't know anyone my age who was out, and the few obviously gay adults I encountered, usually hitchhiking, seemed pretty creepy. (I'm actually, as I would ultimately discover, bi, but I'll generally be referring to myself as gay as I narrate those times when this was what I considered to be my identity. It will save time, and there's no reason to keep the reader as confused as I was.)

Sexually active or not, puberty put an end to my schooling. Gym class had taken on a new and terrifying meaning then. The year before we didn't even bother wearing the jockstraps they issued to us, and no one bothered taking showers after gym. Now we were turning into funky-smelling adolescents, and the time in the locker-room was like an erotic dream-sequence. It was all swinging dicks, new pubic patches and rowdy gleeful towel-snapping shower-camaraderie. My gender confusion now provided a new and intolerable dimension of stress. What if I got hard amid this unzipped dramatization of Lord of the Flies?

8: As Far As Oregon

In the fall of my ninth-grade year, my Yippie friends were heading to Ohio for a political convention and I went along. I figured that was my ticket out. I had made a few previous attempts to run away hitchhiking, with San Francisco as my intended destination, but had gotten picked up by the police within a day. An underage kid alone on the highway with his thumb out is an open call to cops.

The convention had been convened to write Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin out of the Yippie movement. In 1972 the Yippies were at their height, with a national membership that carried out some apparently serious disruptions of government functions. (All of this was fueled by dissatisfaction with the Vietnam War; when Nixon withdrew the troops a year later, the Yippies were finished as anything but subjects for soft features in magazines.)

Hoffman and Rubin were the sloganeering media faces of the movement, and many, like my friend A. J., believed they no longer spoke for the movement as a whole, but only sought their own celebrity. Now Abbie and Jerry were to be expunged from the rolls. This querulous endeavor was in its way the most legitimating thing the Yippies ever did. Denouncing and excommunicating members is, so far as I can tell, what defines a political movement as serious.

The convention in Ohio seemed a solution to the problems I had at home, at school, and now tenting my pants. Why should I hang around for this? A line from the Janis Joplin song *Me and Bobby McGee* was running through my head: "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

I rode up to Ohio in a VW van full of Yippies, and once there I slept on various floors. There was lots of pot, people were generous and communitarian, and with my highly developed shoplifting skills I usually made some welcome contributions from the local supermarkets. I was wearing a sweatshirt I had improved with a permanent marker. I drew from a photograph a fairly good portrait to go with the slogan "Free Manson!" This was pretty funny on a fourteen-year-old, and made me look tough, or at least puzzling.

One of the attendees had driven all the way from Oregon, and when he drove back west I got a ride with him. I don't remember his name, just that he was a hippie with long blond hair, and he was nice to me. The ride to the west coast was not all that long. We made a few stops en route to visit my driver's friends. The only thing I remember clearly is stealing a new pair of boots when my old Frye's were wearing out. I went to a department store

and asked to see the most expensive pair they had. After pondering these in the mirror, I told the salesman they were beautiful, but I should really have a look at the second-most-expensive pair to be sure I wouldn't be content with less. When he went it back to get the other boots in my size, I walked out. I was very pleased with myself for that one.

The convention in Ohio had been during Thanksgiving, so it was full winter when I got to my friend's commune in the mountains of Oregon. They were hippies. There was no running water. The house was heated with a wood stove. There were no books. It was unbelievably boring. I was stuck there though, since it was winter, and I didn't know how I'd travel down to San Francisco in that weather. Weather in Oregon means rain. Endless unrelenting rain. As for what I'd do in SF, that was unclear. I figured I'd sort it out when I had to.

The great insight I achieved from this adventure, across a land mass considerably wider than Europe, was that *everything was the same.* I'd thought that New Jersey must be a particularly boring and stupid place to live. I was appalled to see that the rest of the country was pretty much the same. The highways, chain stores, cars, the clothing. All one infinite and inescapable New Jersey! A desolating thought! Still, San Francisco appeared in my imagination as a place of pilgrimage, a terminus to what was turning out to be, not a voyage of discovery, but a desert trek. San Francisco must be different.

But then I came down with a kidney stone. I had no idea what it was, just that the pain was incredible. My guess was that my appendix was bursting and that I'd be dead without medical attention. My friends at the little commune drove me to a hospital, and I told them to get lost when I hit the emergency room. I had no fake ID and I figured there'd be trouble if they had to explain their relationship to me.

I told the people at the hospital I was a runaway, gave my real name and information. It wasn't that I was scared and wanted my parents — I really didn't miss them at all. But I didn't want to end up in a juvenile home.

I was diagnosed with a kidney stone, and pumped full of pain killers, which is about all they can do for the condition. It's insanely painful at each motion of the stone which the impeded urine forces down the spasming ureter, till at last it's expelled through the bladder. But it entails no real danger. It's also one of the few conditions which is treated with lots of opiates, so I was for the moment very philosophic about the turn things had taken.

9: Back in Jersey

My parents, who supposed they'd lost me for good, now realized they couldn't force their will on me, and things were peaceful for a while. It was early spring, and they had me go to the local junior high school.

My hippie appearance, and boy-girl early adolescent looks (I still wasn't shaving) made me stand out, but that wasn't all that separated me from the kids my age. There was New Jersey itself. You might think that being in northern New Jersey, a ten-minute drive from Manhattan, there'd be a bit more sophistication. But New Jersey defines itself in contrast to New York, and is rather deliberately backwoods and yokel in its attitudes. The adults who moved to the Jersey suburbs and commuted to NYC to work did nothing to alter things. They spent their days in the city, and came home only to shop and sleep. They had no influence on the state's culture. The Jersey-born are a deliberately ignorant and unsophisticated lot. The few kids I kept in touch with from my early schooling almost never went into Manhattan. They all just wanted their driver's license so they could take the family car out — why? To drive up and down the highways, stopping off at diners and fast-food places to devour plates of french fries and talk about what it would be like when they got out of Jersey.

For me, New York City was always just over the horizon, giving a faint red glare to the night sky like a lurid prophecy. I saw, in the oversized picture-magazine *Life*, features on the hippies and the drug scene and runaways, and I knew that just out of my reach there was a real and exciting existence, which I was missing out on! I think this perpetual cultural teasing may have given me unreasonable expectations of the level on which life could be lived. Had I really been a city kid, I would surely have had more fun and my oddness would have been better tolerated, but I probably would have been merely spoiled by it all, rendered blasé.

For me, NYC was like Tennyson's London. When I read the lines

> Yearning for the large excitement that the coming years would yield,
> Eager-hearted as a boy when first he leaves his father's field,
>
> And at night along the dusky highway near and nearer drawn,
> Sees in heaven the light of London flaring like a dreary dawn;
>
> And his spirit leaps within him to be gone before him then,
> Underneath the light he looks at, in among the throngs of men . . .

I understood exactly what he meant. Every time I got within sight of the city, when I saw the Washington Bridge ahead of me, my heart leapt.

I continued to feel that way about Manhattan for the next forty years, till the speculative market in real estate had inflated the rents to where everything good in Manhattan was driven out.

They graduated me from junior high school, despite my never doing an assignment, since they found the prospect of having to deal with me for another year dispiriting.

That summer I hung around my house and smoked pot with local kids, my few remaining friends from elementary school. I would get high and look at art books: the kind of art books that appealed to a stoned teenager. Symbolism, Pre-Raphaelites, Aubrey Beardsley. I was dipping into Plato now as well as Nietzsche. I had a developing interest in occultism, which led to the discovery of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus.* Here at last was a book that had the feel of Dr Frankenstein's unattainable tome! Marlowe provided me with the reality of magic as Crowley and his ilk only pretended to. For magic power derives from the archetypal imagination. The poetic art *is* the magical art. Marlowe's luxuriant evocations of magic gave me intense, reliable pleasure. I would ever after find enchantment in literature of the English Renaissance.

10: LSD

The next fall my parents sent me off to Solebury, a progressive boarding school just outside New Hope, Pennsylvania. This was nearly a "free school"; if you didn't go to classes, they didn't hound you. They had a very loose and liberal attitude, and figured that kids with problems would sort them out better if they were allowed to find their own equilibrium.

There was no bullying there. I discovered that the incidence of student-on-student cruelty was directly related to how authoritarian the school was. With no senseless pressure from above, the kids just went their own way, and if they didn't like someone they simply avoided or excluded them.

This was a very good arrangement in many ways, but it came far too late for me. I have already noted the program of neglect in the classroom and punishment at home that formed my elementary education. Two years at Englewood, where I was bullied to the point where I was razoring my wrist, hadn't improved my attitude to school. Placing me in this Pennsylvanian utopia and supposing I would now find my own motivation for schoolwork was not a thoughtful plan.

On top of this, I was completely freaked out about my still new and very ambiguous sexuality. Everything I knew about women I had learned from the pictures in my older brother's *Playboy* magazines. Everything I knew about men I had absorbed from *The Naked Lunch*. I was very interested in all of it, in a fazed, scared kind of way. Solebury was co-ed, but none of the girls seemed interested in me, and I certainly didn't know how to approach them. One boy took a shine to me, but he wasn't my type, so nothing came of it. I assumed I was queer, which made me feel funny at best, since this was universally regarded as a shameful or ridiculous condition.

And then there were drugs. I had smoked plenty of grass with my Yippie friends, and dropped acid on my *Wanderjahr* that ended in Oregon. Smoking grass gave me an instant circle of acquaintances and something thrilling and forbidden to do with them. But I was beginning to enjoy grass less and less. Thinking of myself as a queer, I wasn't really at ease in any company. I was afraid I'd give myself away somehow. Also, I hadn't acquired the social skills, the armor-like persona one develops in middle school. The only thing grass added to my social life was a diminution of the boredom. It made my peers seem a lot more interesting. But alas, it made me feel a little *too* interesting.

What I really liked was LSD. I thought it was a genuine exploration of the world of spirits. These were visions of eternity. Eternity looked a great deal like rural Pennsylvania, and I have ever since found its landscape

somewhat magical. Typically I saw patterns and letters embossing themselves on walls and flat surfaces. Colors glowed and textures seemed to flow. A carpeted floor would ripple and shimmer. Landscapes surged, trees seemed to be erupting from the ground. It was very Edvard Munch. (My stoned-out hours with the books on decadent art were really paying off!) Sensations took on such depth and resonance that the seconds seemed to lengthen, the moments expanded to accommodate their greater content. Finally time stopped. Everything I saw appeared in its most significant aspect. I saw people walking to work, washing their cars, standing on line in shops, and all their activities seemed characteristic, defining, archetypal — their images seemed to capture who they were and why they were here on this planet, like the wonderful close-observed vignettes of lived life you read in Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Of course I could not well express this then, but I felt how existence is possessed of grandeur and meaning even in its most trivial details. But after a few hours, all this vanished, and usually left me with a crash hangover from the amphetamine with which the acid had been mixed. Coming down always felt like a fall from grace.

I can see now that I was taking one drug or another every chance I got. In fact I already had a serious drug problem. It occurred to no one, least of all me, that the drugs were one important cause of my academic difficulties. My parents and teachers regarded it all as a moral failing on my part. I was lazy or vicious or "disturbed," and it was up to me to do better. Back then, the term "addiction" applied only to junkies and skid row alcoholics.

At the time, I thought my disinterest in schoolwork was just an intelligent preference. Why should I be concerned with the Monroe Doctrine or Algebra when I was reading philosophy and walking the halls of a psychedelic eternity? The question wasn't rhetorical. I remember saying to one math teacher, "Just tell me why I should care about math, and I will. I really will. Just tell me why I need it or what it's good for." He told me, "Since you're not planning a career in the sciences and you can count your change at the store, there's probably no good reason except that you have to."

Forty years later, I would learn the adequate answer. "Because mathematics is *beautiful*. It's like music or poetry, you need it because it enlarges what it means to be human. It's not *for* something else, it's *for* you. And you, as a human, don't need a purpose, you *are* a purpose. "

I wonder how I would have reacted if I'd been given that answer. I like to think I would have kept my part of the bargain and studied the math.

Eventually they threw me out of Solebury for apparently doing nothing but taking drugs and listening to mediocre rock-and-roll records.

When they threw me out, they had my parents come suddenly up to get me. No warning, and wisely on their part. They'd already tried suspending

me for a week, and I just hitch-hiked to NYC and slept on people's floors till my period of exile was over.

I met my parents in the headmaster's office, I remember greatly annoying my father, who summarized for me my shortcomings as a student. I suppose he meant to show that he was well apprised of what I'd been up to. He was pretty much parroting back what the headmaster and my teachers had just attested to him. I remember replying, "You certainly have a flair for stating the obvious."

At this point my father exploded, and gave me a dressing down for all my deliberate misdeeds. I recall very clearly thinking, "What nonsense. I've never done anything deliberately. I've never thought anything through before I did it." And this was quite true. At that time I was sixteen, and although I did think and was aware of many things, it didn't yet amount to thoughtful self-awareness. I considered my thoughts as factual, it never occurred to me they had a subjective component. I made choices and had preferences, but after the fashion of an intelligent animal.

11: Art School

The next stop after Solebury was Simon's Rock, an art school in Massachusetts. My parents were certainly trying to accommodate me now, I cannot fault either their persistence or their imagination. I had been very interested in art since I was twelve, and this had focused to an ambition to be an underground cartoonist. I had blown soapy water through the nibs of a lot of clogged rapidograph pens in the four years between ages twelve and sixteen, and I thought this was what I really wanted to do. But the art department at Simon's Rock consisted of one man, and he and I didn't get along. He was putting the students through the usual paces: figure drawing, color charts, cutting mats, learning to letter clear as type, drawing the skeleton. I lacked all discipline. I was stoned out of my skull every chance I got. I didn't see the point of the practice. I thought the other students were producing boring crap, that the teacher was producing boring crap, that what I was doing was interesting even if it lacked skill and polish.

I was right that I was more interesting than my teacher or my classmates, but I was wrong about having nothing important to learn from the instructor. The teacher probably realized on some level that I was talented, though he never admitted as much to me. He did however believe with passionate intensity that I was a lazy drugged-out fuck-up. This didn't make for great moments in pedagogy. In fact, he pretty much cured me of my interest in art. After a year of his criticism I broke my brushes and gave it up.

More useful was a seminar I had in Milton. It was taught by a guy with a beard and a PhD. whom we had to address as "doctor." I was truly baffled by this course, which I really did try to succeed at. I knew that Milton wrote at length about Satan, so I was already extremely interested. We were assigned individual poems and we had to make oral reports on them to the group. I couldn't for the life of me figure out how this was to be done. I read the poems. I thought they were beautiful. I understood what they said. I thought they said what they had to say very adequately indeed. I couldn't imagine what more could be added.

I bought four different books of essays on Milton and tried to read them. I could understand what they were saying, though it didn't seem to me very interesting. But I couldn't fathom how I could generate similar material. I met with the teacher and he made suggestions which I similarly found unfathomable. So I never did the assignment. There was always a big jug of screw-top red wine at the Milton seminars, which were held in the evening,

and I would sit there sipping wine and reading the poems, pretty much ignoring the class as I got potted.

I suppose the rest of the students, who actually went to high school, unlike me who just got thrown out of high schools, had learned by rote and osmosis the kind of things they were expected to say about a poem. What was wanted were platitudes. Of course the prof. couldn't have told me he wanted me to parrot back catch-phrases of the kind one hears from English teachers year after year. He didn't consciously realize that was what he was asking for, and if he had, I doubt he would have had the candor to say as much.

If I could go back in time and advise my younger self, as a real teacher might have, I would have asked, "What parts of the poem did you like the best? What parts bored you?" and gone from there to show how one's emotional response to a poem is a guide to what is authentic in it, what the poem is really about. The verse of a great poet is boring if the poet wrote it out of a sense of duty rather than inspiration (like nearly all of Book Three of *Paradise Lost*, where God and Jesus tie up loose ends of Protestant Theology). Or it can be boring because you the reader are missing some important information about what the poet meant. (Thus few people enjoy or even notice the best and most accessible parts of Dante's *Paradiso*, because they're on the lookout for more medieval tortures like the ones they saw in *Inferno* in what's actually an epic of interstellar travel.)

So boredom can be an excellent critical tool. Pleasure is even more effective. Easily the most fun part of book three of *Paradise Lost* comes at the end with the description of the angel in the sun inhabiting an alchemical landscape of living gold — a *tour de force* that indicates Milton's very real interest in Hermeticism.

Science Fiction Dante, alchemical Milton: there's a pair of essay topics that would have set my sixteen-year-old self to writing. But no one was showing me how to dowse a work of literature by taking the pulse of my response.

Another useful way of going about writing a critical essay is to have some ideological lens through which to view the work. If one approaches it as a Freudian, a Feminist, a Catholic, whatever, one immediately has a means of sifting the material, and if the heuristic is well chosen, it really is panning for gold.

It would be years before I learned these techniques independently, so I really hadn't then a hope of writing an adequate oral report. But where the teacher, the school and the system failed me, Milton himself proved to be a magnificent teacher. When I was thrown out of Simon's Rock that spring for doing no work and getting high all the time, I kept my Hughes' edition of

Milton's Complete Poems and Major Prose. I had begun to read it for my own pleasure, and discovered what really great English poetry was. I now had an infallible literary touchstone, by which I could ever after reckon literature aright.

12: Jack Johnson

I had a little circle of friends there at Simon's Rock. One was Jack Johnson, a gangling boy with literary ambitions who had a roll of paper on a hanger suspended above his typewriter, witness to his Kerouacian determination to write without pause, revision or editorial selection, in an untrammeled stream of authentic utterance. He never showed me any of his writing, so I can't tell how successful he was, but he was the most literary person I had so far met. He had a great number of small press books, City Lights, Grove Press, New Directions stuff mostly. The Beat Generation was his main thing, though he knew a lot about the French writers, Genet, Celine and so on. I picked up from him an interest in Ginsburg. Burroughs I already knew well, but it was Jack who explained to me how Burroughs' cut-up technique worked. You took pages out of books, magazines or whatever, cut them into quarters, and mixed them up so a half-line from one section lined up with a half line on another, producing random verbal-collage effects, which were sometimes quite startling.

Jack was also quite interested in drug literature, and he turned me on to Baudelaire's prose via the essay on Hashish translated by Aleister Crowley. Through Jack I learned of Rimbaud and the "alchemy of the word" (new poetic inspiration) achieved by the "deliberate, prolonged disordering of the senses" (drugging oneself silly). Not that I needed literary precedents for my doping. When the school decided they needed to alert us to the dangers of drug abuse, and had us all watch a scare film about its perils, my response was to hang a banner over the entrance to the dorm reading "Abandon All Dope, Ye Who Enter Here."

I was completely entranced by Baudelaire. I didn't know French yet, in fact the only foreign language I had was the Latin I didn't learn at ESB. I was convinced I had no talent for languages and couldn't learn them any more than I could understand math! So I pored over my French decadents in every translation I could get my hands on, and tried desperately to write poetry like theirs. It wasn't very successful, but it was a lot better than my imitations of rock lyrics.

Jack and I would hitch-hike into Boston, which was a long way off from Simon's Rock up in the Berkshires, down the Massachusetts Turnpike the whole length of the state. We headed straight for Cambridge to scour the second-hand bookstores. Jack was a good friend to me, and a far better teacher than any I'd had in my tour of schools. They eventually threw him out of school too, for sundry acts of agitation and dissent, and he went to work for Chavez and the United Farm Workers. He left America for

Amsterdam in dismay when Reagan got elected. There he met a European girl, whom he married, and now he sells antiquarian books somewhere in Scandinavia, a grandfather on a craggy island playing chess with death, watching from afar the sinister cartoon-character antics of President Trump.

13: Becoming Rimbaud

By the time they finally threw me out of Simon's Rock, I had a plan. I would use the Burroughs cut-up technique to write my own *Season in Hell*. I was back at my parents' place in Fair Lawn NJ, had neither work nor school to distract me, so I had the time to write it.

I thought I had a lot to say. Between my awakening though physically unexplored sexuality, and my reading, which now consisted mostly of occultism and avant-garde literature, I thought I had the ingredients to mix up one spicy literary ragout. I diced into the cut-up collage of words a lot of things, but the main ingredients were a cheap gay porn paperback and *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*. Taking Rimbaud's *Season in Hell* as my model, I alternated prose passages with short poems. I would take the most interesting phrases from the cutups and weave them together, editing and adding as necessary to create nearly meaningful prose and rhyming stanzas. It was incoherent, but some of it very evocative. This quatrain gives the general idea:

> When the allowed and heavy mold fades like the victories
> of tender sailors watching an invisible prey,
> and when, returned from marching, melts the radiant trooper
> confused by pageants sadder than military laundry . . .

Once I had finished my forty-page masterpiece, I took what I considered to be my most successful efforts and mailed them to Allen Ginsburg, with a letter calculated to pique his interest. I professed my (sincere) admiration for his work, vaguely described my condition at home as a virtual imprisonment, and hinted, without undue subtlety, at my interest in playing Rimbaud to his Verlaine. I was being a clever little whore. I had read plenty of Balzac novels and decided I would be a *grisette*.

In Balzac's representation, a grisette was an independent young woman with a dreary day job who gained entry into interesting bohemian circles by being something between a prostitute and a mistress. Often grisettes began as artist's models. They were strong-willed, hedonistic, uninhibited girls who felt that they were more than whores because they were doing it not for cash but for art.

And I have no regrets on this head. I'm still strangely smug to have done exactly what many a woman has. It's always fun being a traitor to your sex.

I calculated that my thin boy-girl seventeen-year-old looks were my ticket away from Jersey, high school, minimum wage work and angry parents, to a life in Manhattan in the company of great writers. I was thrilled, but not astonished when Allen wrote back from Naropa, where he was teaching all summer. He thought my poetry was very good. "Really yours? Not stole from history?" he asked. He wanted to meet me when he got back to Manhattan in September and in the meantime could I send him a photograph?

I was quite sure that I was equal to whatever lay ahead. I was a kid from New Jersey, seventeen years old, with no real sophistication. The only life experience I'd had was low-key drug abuse, considerable petty theft, a lot of hitch-hiking, familiarity with hippie radicalism, and getting thrown out of a whole lot of high schools for never going to class. Despite some sundry fumblings with boys and girls — a hippie chick I'd boinked in a sleeping bag somewhere, some guy who gave me a ride whom I allowed to blow me — I was, though not technically a virgin, without any real sexual experience. There was no one to give me any advice: the only hints I had about how to conduct myself were the examples of Rimbaud and the Parisian *grisettes* of a previous century, and Baudelaire's thoughts on Dandyism. I was in so far over my head.

III: Meet the Beats

1: Seducing Allen Ginsberg

After he returned to New York from Naropa in the Autumn of 1976, my seventeen-year-old self met Allen, and we proceeded immediately to indecencies. Which, in retrospect, was probably a good move on my part. Nothing is won by timid martyrs, thrifty gamblers or bashful whores. It was like an audacious and unconsidered opening move in chess. Until your opponent sees the game unfold, he'll assume you have tactics he's never encountered. It gave me a great initial advantage, and allowed me to play way above my grade — at least for a while.

So there I was in bed with Allen Ginsberg, terrorizing him with lies about my erotic sophistication. About how I'd had a pet spider monkey named Lucifer who I made into a sexually aggressive witch's familiar, finally sacrificing him to his namesake. Swinburne was a major if general inspiration for my romantic CV. I wasn't about to tell Allen that I was essentially a virgin with opinions cribbed from de Sade. I was in Manhattan, the capital of the twentieth century, in the bed of a world famous poet. If he found out I was just a rube from the provinces — which I was —what then?

In more practiced hands than mine, innocence would have been a far stronger hand to play than the cool experience I claimed. The scared boy under my fictitiously sophisticated exterior would have been a prize for which I could have exacted a dizzying price. So you see, youth isn't wasted on the young, don't begrudge it. They have nothing else going for them, and the one advantage they have they don't know how to deploy.

My naivete wasn't the only one of my assets I didn't prize at its proper value. Having skipped high school, I felt I had massive gaps in my learning. Little did I realize I was quite well read, at least in the not unimportant areas that interested me. The diligent pursuit of a conventional education would have prevented me from seeking these, and given me nothing in their place except a mediocre grounding in mathematics and a vague dislike of literature.

When it came to occultism, lurid French poetry, and the works of Poe (which I had learned to value via Baudelaire), I had, at seventeen, a depth of acquaintance which would have done credit to a graduate student. I had an excellent memory, and added as a saffron to my conversation quotations and turns of phrase stolen from everyone I'd read, from the *Letters of Lord Chesterfield* to the poetry of Sylvia Plath. I was young, cute, could wield at

will a tangy term or an archaic phrase, and no one knew what to make of me. When it came to sex, I assumed the *mores* of eighteenth-century French libertines were the standard amongst educated urbanites, so I was quite a game little fellow. Not that Allen had any unusual tastes. He was an excellent, sensitive, generous, warm-hearted lover. And exactly that was the problem. I was set on a violent, self-destructive affair, a Rimbaud and Verlaine fiasco.

Allen was remarkably tolerant of everyone's insanity. In fact, he thrived on it, though he didn't want any for himself. He was always the "designated driver," so to speak. He thought he craved a normal, loving, supportive relationship, but sought out comet-like people who lit up the sky as they went down in flames. This dovetailed somewhat with my agenda. I wanted the cover of passion's pyrotechnics if I was going to be the public lover of a bald, pot-bellied fifty-year-old.

If I was going to become Allen's boy wife, I wanted my self-immolation on the altar of his genius to be matched by poetic madness on his part. I wanted to become a legend, not a sad little example. Allen was saintly, sincere and sane. I was by turns charming, petulant, reverent and petty, a wet-dream come true, a greedy *grisette* sullenly allowing herself to be loved.

Back then I thought I was living out Rimbaud's *j'ai vu l'enfer des femmes là-bas*, ("my hell was in part the one that women go through") but there I was as mistaken as Rimbaud. The real female experience, the exultation in being desired, the sheer *hard work* of being a girl, from the moment you paint on a face till you retire for the night safe for a few hours from the scheming of your gender-fellows, "enemy girls"—the authentic she-deviltry of the girls' inferno — I couldn't even have guessed this. I was just a willful, drunken spoiled boy.

I made the classic male assumption that sex *is* everything and *means* nothing. A woman would have thought that sex was a nothing that means everything.

Sleeping with men is perhaps the most trivial part of being a woman—though sleeping with women would appear to be a very essential part of being a real man!

Allen once asked me what I really wanted from him. "Give me a fistful of rubies," I suggested, "or slap me hard enough to give me a bloody nose."

I sneered when he couldn't manage either.

2: Peter Orlovsky

Allen's insane mother had accustomed him to chaotic and self-destructive love-objects. His boyfriend Peter Orlovsky was a parade example. At this time Peter and his girlfriend, Denise, were living with him in the apartment on East Twelfth Street. Although Allen and Peter would be lifelong lovers, and Allen took elaborate care to be sure Peter was provided for after his own demise, they had long since ceased sleeping together. Allen was evidently OK with Peter bringing his woman into the household: he knew from the start that Peter was bi, and had a hippie's confidence in anarchic housekeeping.

Peter was one strange cat. He played banjo and farmed organically and wrote interestingly deranged outsider poetry. He periodically got hold of his main kick, amphetamines, which he'd mix with alcohol, whereupon he went completely off his nut, screaming about the government and breaking furniture till the police had to haul him off to the bin. Most of the time he was sweet-natured and eager to bend your ear with long discourses on the joys of growing persimmons, or sing cheery queasy-making songs about how he much he enjoyed his dildo. A big scary crazy man in overalls, like an absinthe L'il Abner.

3: Genius is Funny

I really did revere Allen for his genius. He taught me how to read poetry, when to take a breath while reciting it, how to put in enough dramatic emphasis to keep it lively without "chewing up the scenery." Though I say it myself who shouldn't, I am a pretty good reciter of verse today, and that's all Allen. At times I'll still deploy one of his signature intonations, especially the way he would sometimes put a smile in his voice to show his own awareness of a particularly brilliant turn of phrase.

"Genius is funny," he once told me. He meant that the choice of words, the detail chosen by a poet, is sometimes so outrageous and unexpected that it makes you laugh. Not because it's knee-slappingly hilarious, but because it shows language playing tricks on itself, using the very limitations of speech to poetry's advantage.

Although we think of language as describing reality adequately, it's really all an audacious shorthand. The mind is constantly connecting the sparse, suggestive words like dots, filling in the blanks, to create a convincing picture. That's how our minds make sense of reality. The eye takes in the whole landscape, but can only focus on one detail at a time. A couple of such details coalesce, and we think we see it all. Poetry makes use of the mind's instinctive need to pull things into a pattern, and those image-yielding minima can be few indeed if they're chosen well enough. The deftness of super-condensed expression makes us laugh with delight at this show of force, this "little that holds much" — like an ant hoisting a huge leaf in its pincers. Think of Gregory Corso describing a chastity belt as "clank underwear," of Sylvia Plath characterizing a certain kind of Englishman as "eyes dulled to a halt beneath a bowler."

Genius is funny. And sometimes so are geniuses. Allen had a magnificent sense of humor, though he himself didn't greatly value it. His ignored 1962 comic masterpiece *Stotras to Kali Destroyer of Illusions* is well worth a careful read. The barest acquaintance with Hindu literature will enable you to appreciate this profound Whitmanic burlesque. Nietzsche's Zarathustra asked, "Who among you can at the same time laugh and be exalted?" Allen was the answer to this challenge.

The Jewish comic gene was always there in Allen, though it was hard to see after Buddhism dropped its thousand-Schopenhauer-weight of pessimism upon it. Still it did glimmer through. I remember taking a bath with him and admiring his beard through which the water trickled silver, making him look like father Neptune. I admired the dripping dignity of those whiskers.

"No need for envy, you've your own beard."

In response to my puzzled look, he indicated my pubic patch.

"That's no beard," I answered.

" 'Tis a beard indeed," he replied, "I've worn it myself."

Allen's wit was nothing short of Shakespearean. And I can boast of having taken a real-time bath with Falstaff.

We didn't much agree about poetry. I was still writing in the Burroughs cut-up style, and attempting to write a poetic drama about Dr. Faustus using this method. I took as my model Marlowe's Faust. In the section where the good Doctor encounters the seven deadly sins, my version of Sloth utters this stanza,

> There shall rise great beds, singing in the mist,
> also vast couches that smell of the ground,
> where mine is the power to hush your roaring organs
> as you lie, full length, filled with shimmering sounds.

Fortunately, this remembered stanza is all that remains of that ill-considered undertaking. I thought of myself as a French Decadent Modernist. I was taking my cues from Tristan Corbière (a minor Symbolist poet much admired by Verlaine and T. S. Eliot.) I was exactly a hundred years behind Allen in terms of aesthetics, and so of course I failed to grasp his poetic agenda when we first got together. I knew he was brilliant, but I heard him, as if were, from far off.

I was still writing like an adolescent. I wanted to stop people in their tracks with the seriousness of my utterance. The wisest thing I ever learned from Allen was the last to really penetrate. Good poetry is serious. Great poetry is funny.

4: It's Not Easy Living with Greatness

Aesthetics apart, one of my basic complaints with the nascent relationship with Allen was that he never had any time. When at home, he was ever at his desk, answering the phone and personally replying to his copious correspondence. Though his sensible and competent secretary, Bob Rosenthal, sifted out and dealt with all the merely monetary and administrative business, Allen answered all fan mail himself, with a fountain pen. He took calls, and solved problems, legal, financial and emotional, for a vast network of friends. He was really a political figure.

This made it trying to walk with him even the three blocks from his apartment to the nearby Polish pirogi palace. He was readily recognized, and never sidestepped a conversation with anyone eager for a little taste of the greatness. This is perhaps a part of the mystery of why he essentially lived his life alone. The existence of a truly public man precludes private relationships. No one with enough personality and intelligence to truly engage Allen's giant mind and great heart would have been content with the scraps of attention left at the end of the day — particularly when the day didn't end till late at night when the last letter was answered. I have since met other people whose lives are similarly consumed by their public, but never quite as much as Allen's was.

Allen didn't need an audience to sustain his self-esteem, he didn't need everyone's permission to feel himself sufficient. Rather, he acted out of a sense of, well, civic responsibility. He felt he owed the full measure of energy to the people who esteemed him and whose admiration had brought him fame. He was public-spirited in a way that may be barely comprehensible in an America where the concept of community has vanished and all are atomized consumers and Facebook friends. Allen was a type that would have been more readily recognizable to Jefferson's contemporaries than to ours. Which made him vastly admirable. But greatness, as much as pettiness, can be difficult to live with.

5: Learning Literature with Allen

Exasperated at having to share his friendship with the American people, I selfishly pleaded his part to him, taking him to task for never having time to read Blake's prophetic books, despite having recorded all of his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Allen knew I meant business when it came to literary learning. I had already made him read me aloud, in bed, all of *Paradise Lost*.

This was not so eccentric as it seems — or at least it didn't seem eccentric to me. The summer before I met Allen I had taken a few courses at the local community college. One was an introduction to world history, from Babylon and Egypt to the twentieth century, and I was astounded to see unrolled before me this great treasure map. I had had no idea what mankind had been up to these last four millennia, or how much human thought was translated and available to be reviewed. There had been no history in elementary school, and only American history courses were offered in high school — though the very phrase "American history" is something of an oxymoron.

My teacher at the community college had turned me on to the Kenneth Clark *Civilisation* series. The library had the whole thing on VHS tapes, which I watched with headphones on a tiny screen, over and over and over. It was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen. Though one can take issue with Clark's European and Renaissance focus, which might appear a bit provincial now — half a century later! — it's still a brilliant work of art history, and many of the episodes, like that on the Gothic, remain unsurpassed by any treatment since in any medium. I got the book and read it like scripture. At the same time, I found in a second-hand bookstore a college English anthology textbook, which covered Beowulf to the Victorians.

So when I took up with Allen, I was discovering everything from the delicate excellence of Andrew Marvell's and Robert Herrick's verse, to Gilbert White's eighteenth-century nature writing. I was taking my cues on literary polish from the Addison and Steele essays, and found a marvel of morbidity in the English poet Thomas Beddoes. I absorbed an entire liberal arts education over my year with Allen, asking his opinion on everything as I went.

Being, perforce, an autodidact, I had no idea of how to go about it. I made physical exhaustion the only limit to my learning. When I decided Sir Thomas Browne was brilliant and important, I acquired his complete works and read them through a few times. I went through the poetry of Dante Rossetti and many another interesting but minor author. I acquired an

astonishing depth of knowledge in certain things, alongside equally amazing gaps.

With Allen Ginsberg as one's private tutor in poetry, the logical curriculum would have been Whitman to Frank O'Hara, with a primary focus on the Beat Generation greats. But what I was after was a grounding in more classical English literature. Allen was of course familiar with this, but had no very profound insights to offer into the intellectual background of anyone from before the twentieth century. So his instruction focused on the most Ginsbergian qualities of those old-time authors I was obsessed with. He gladly and splendidly read aloud for me, and this was my principal delight in his company. He was acutely aware of the flow of breath and intonation behind the lines of verse. For Shakespeare and Milton, this was a sound and revelatory approach. They wrote when poetry was still something to read aloud, not silently scan without so much as a twitch of the lips. Allen also homed in on instances of resonant, condensed expression, and well-observed physical details. I can still hear his "Ahh!" of pleasure when he read Milton's line about God creating insects:

> . . . those wav'd their limber fans
> for wings, and smallest Lineaments exact
> in all the liveries deckt of summer's pride,
> with spots of gold and purple, azure and green . . .

I yet recall how he called my attention to Shakespeare's line from *King John* "Your sword is bright, sir; put it up again," — giving a command with a simple and vivid *image,* a literal pictorial flash.

He likewise admired Blake's very concrete imagining of fantastic anatomy, as in the *Book of Urizen,* where the archetype of Rational Being manifests himself thus:

> A vast spine writhed in torment
> upon the winds; shooting pained
> ribs, like a bending cavern
> and bones of solidness . . .

Allen also showed me how to savor the breathing intonation of the greatest lines of English poetry. For Allen as for Whitman, poetry was something to speak aloud. Though he was more at ease than Whitman with the life indoors, he was just as impatient of library quiet and drawing room decency.

Had I studied the classic English poets in school, I would have written dull abstract critical essays comparing their content to themes from Greek

myths, or, by the end of the twentieth century, subjected them to trendy French pseudo-philosophy. Allen gave me a real craftsman's view of their merits. This wasn't a seminar with Northrop Frye (the 20th century's holy monster of lit-crit erudition) — it was more like learning sculpture, with a chisel in your hand, from Michelangelo. And thus I ended up bed with Allen and Milton. It was the Greek ideal of learning, and I was a genuinely respectful apprentice as often as I was his awful Alcibiades.

I didn't realize then what an unusual perspective on literature I was getting. But I was fascinated, and absorbed the lessons, though it would be years before I learned to apply them in practice. Allen's mature poetry is perhaps the most *substantial* in English. It is so firmly rooted in the natural music of speech, and so supported by observation of key physical details, that it has the heft and balance of a throwing knife. But before I learned how to write like Allen, I learned how to *read* like Allen.

6: Contest of Bards

I persuaded Allen to take two weeks off from his endless itinerary of interviews and readings to hole up in Baltimore and read the complete works of Blake. Baltimore appealed to me as a place of Edgar Poe pilgrimage. The implication was we'd have an uninterrupted erotic idyll as well.

There is an elaborate poetic record of this jaunt, beginning with Allen's poem *Haunting Poe's Baltimore* — a brilliant gift. I led Allen to Poe's grave on Baltimore's West Fayette Street so I could pay my respects. Allen both teased and gratified me with a hilarious hymn to the poet's decomposition.

> The slug rides his skull, black hair twisted in roots of threadbare grass
> Blind mole at heart, caterpillars shudder in his ribcage,
> Intestines wound with garter snakes
> midst dry dust, snake eye & gut sifting through his pelvis . . .

A second Poe themed poem composed to please me describes our visit to Poe's house on Amity street, where I read aloud Poe's poem *For Annie*. Allen writes,

> So I saw a pale youth trembling, speaking rhymes Poe spoke before,
> Till Poe's light rose on the living, and His fire gleamed on the floor . . .

— a very elegant approximation of Poe-era poetic style.

For the next week we were sequestered in a hotel room reading Blake's prophetic books eight hours a day. Allen was making use of Foster Damon's *Blake Dictionary*, and delving into the intellectual content of the arcanely expressed epics. I was just reading them through, understanding what I could, watching the mythic panorama unfold. Two years later, I too would read with Foster Damon's book as my Rosetta stone, as Allen had. But then, while I stupidly perused the epics as though they were hallucinations, Allen laid the framework for his mature understanding of Blake that resulted in his brilliant Naropa lectures.

I had gotten my wish, Allen all to myself, yet the romantic idyll failed to materialize. Was this sheer perverseness on my part? Perhaps. But living like graduate students cramming for exams was perhaps not the best way to

entice Eros. I think a case of champagne might have done more than Blake to get the party started. But Allen was completely uninterested in drugs. The days of his experimentation with pharmaceuticals, and his psychedelic evangelism, were long behind him now. I only ever saw him sip a drink or puff at a joint in a social situation. Though Allen was often at the center of a storm, he was always the calm observant eye of it.

Allen's frustration at our purely platonic Blakation erupted at last in the mini-epic *Contest of Bards*, Allen's account of our entire affair. While I slogged through the Blake, Allen wrote, all one afternoon and all one night. The next morning he had finished his epic, which was supposed to win me. I was dumbstruck. Actually, more dumb than struck. I was eighteen years old and now immortally portraitized. Clobbered by art. A situation a certain number of women have been in over the centuries. I cannot say with certainty that my reaction was analogous to that of Petrarch's Laura or Baudelaire's Jeanne Duval, but I would be surprised if it differed much in kind. I was flattered and baffled and not that interested. And I suppose, men being men, this made me even more fascinating.

I shall not here present a competing account of our affair: Allen's poem cannot be bettered. But it may not be without interest to offer a brief commentary, since now I am ten years older than Allen was then. I recollect my own youthful illusions, and I've gained with age an empathy for Allen's feelings and needs.

Contest of Bards is a stylistic *tour-de-force,* Allen writes much of the poem in a witty, deliberate exaggeration of Blake's idiom. He isn't imitating Blake, he's improvising in his style. But this marvelous artifice is merely a baroque outsider-art frame for the real poem. The work itself is in Allen's candid, Whitmanically detailed, documentary-of-the-heart style.

The story is this. A young poet arrives to reprove an elder bard's unduly prudent betrayal of beauty. He points to a rune carved in the floor of the old bard's sea cave, which he believes is a neo-platonic manifesto of art's transcendent value.

A very careful reading of the rune, writ in close-set rhymes meant to echo Poe's style, will show that it slyly suggests, not nineteenth-century notions of beauty, but rather the Buddhist skepticism of everything: all thought and art is transient and empty like the reality it describes. A truly wicked bit of wit, this! palming Buddhist truths in Poe-like rhymes, slipping them in under the very wing of the Raven! But Buddhism it is despite the high romantic style. As the poem itself editorializes, "the bright rhyme's No Truth" is insight "arisen on a breath from meditation's hour."

The young poet, mistaking the mandate of the rune, demands, "Will you obey my will and follow me through a riot of cities?" Exactly my challenge to re-enact the Rimbaud-Verlaine melodrama for the sake of attaining modern-day *illuminations*.

The old Bard comes back with an orthodox Buddhist response. My proposals were all just beautiful delusions.

> There is no God or Beauty suffering on earth nor starred in nebulous blue heaven, but only
> Dream that floats vast as an Ocean under the moon.

The old bard sees by "a clear light without soul or vanity" that the erotic carnival I had offered was just today's iteration "old lust for . . . vain body'd joy! Blind craving for Bliss of Breast and Loins!" A grasping after bodily delights that could never be satisfactory.

The young bard, skeptical of the elder's professed detachment, puts it to the test. Here Allen condenses the initial, physical phase, of what would be our decades-long friendship, into a long passage of mature romantic tenderness. It's not erotica, but great love poetry, achieving what Whitman might have in his *Calamus* cycle had he had the luxury of uncensored speech — a point Allen himself suggests, ending his account with a Whitmanesque panorama of nationwide everyday life.

I am to this day abashed to have been the subject of such poetry. This is a genuine portrayal of love, as full of warmth and empathy as it is poetically rich and elegant in expression. A gay relationship between youth and age, painted with a deep and realistic humanity such as one sees in Rembrandt's most personal portraits.

The story continues with the youth pressing his demands for romantic riot in shriller, meaner tones. There's an interesting line where the young bard asks the elder to slap his face. This testifies to my final effort to craze Allen into a madder passion "magical, worthy our mutual war through Society & Nations, Bards at large on the planet." I attempted to interest him, to put it delicately, in something more like Swinburne than Blake. I hoped his frustration with my sexual distance could be channeled into something fascinatingly savage. I had had quite enough Songs of Innocence. Bring on those of Experience!

I was seventeen. I didn't want mature and tender love. For me, it didn't count as passion if it didn't leave a bruise. My reflection in the poem says,

> "Now slap my face, I want to Feel! Hard with all your love's strength, coward Bard!"

and my hope for a personal romantic apocalypse is enshrined in the line,

> "Chase the Last Beauty with me till we find the author, even if we enter Death Trance with 'im!"

The old bard is unmoved by the youth's deluded ravings. For him they only underline the verity of old Buddha truths. He gives his decisive critique of the young bard's position in lines that I will have to decipher, as the expression is very condensed:

> . . . rending . . . the globe apart
> in Vanity for what is not, aetherial Death and Life, while Love and sorrow ache
> in the breast of the living moment under living skin, breath thrilled with sigh,
> great Death & Life together One & love but a soul Aware.
> For mind in heart is one with the body, Truth is the depth of that,
> and Poetry the Groan of Body lost in the Grave, for Thought is the love of the earth.

In plainer English, I was ready to make havoc of both our lives ("rending the globe apart") deludedly ("in Vanity for what is not") pursuing phantom truths ("*aetherial* Death and Life"), missing all the depth of real human experience ("while Love and sorrow ache in the breast of the living moment under living skin.")

Love is a rare and chance phenomenon in physical existence, where suffering and death is the norm ("great Life and Death together one"). Consciousness is a purely material and transitory phenomenon, like the body that gives rise to it ("For mind in heart is one with the body").

The overpowering grimness of this assessment of all human thought ("Poetry [is] the Groan of Body lost in the Grave") is the guarantee that it's accurate ("Truth is the depth of that").

The amount of unpacking the passage requires will perhaps gain some sympathy for the position I maintained then, in all my seventeen-year-old certainty, that Allen might have benefited by a slightly fuller and more classical style, the pre-modern *Beaux-Arts* clarity I so admired in Poe and Baudelaire.

The sincerity of Allen's message, the force of his poetic voice are obvious, but perhaps the content would have been transmitted more

effectively to a reader had it not been so tersely and urgently telegraphed. I argued for classical poetics with Allen for that first year we were together. Finally I would see that it was a matter of taste, not of truth.

I mention this literary quibble here because the poem is on one level an attack on the Romantic ideal of beauty that I then made the center of my aesthetics and beliefs. Allen brought the heavy guns of Buddhism to bear against my *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics, with the full force of modernist stream-of-consciousness style, while his poetic concision, sometimes verging on pidgin-English, made every syllable hit its target with extra abruptness.

Allen won the argument. I cannot adequately convey my concession by merely saying *touché.* There was now a smoking crater where I had taken my intellectual stance!

Stylistic matters aside, in this tale of passion I had been cast as the demon Mara, the spirit of passion and erotic attachment who attempts to divert the Buddha from enlightenment. The image is a standard of Buddhist iconography. Mara performs her cooch dance around the cross-legged sage, who touches the earth with one hand, calling on the planet to witness his resistance. I wonder if Allen had that gesture somewhere in his mind when he wrote that final devastating "Poetry the Groan of Body lost in the Grave, for Thought is the love of the earth." Were those last five words his five fingers touching the ground for testimony?

Allen's *Contest of Bards* might be characterized as a Buddhist "Last Temptation of Christ."

There's an epilogue to the poem where Allen pats himself on the back, or rather pats me on the head, with some avuncular advice about "respecting the heart." That was January 1977, a month before I'd turned eighteen. Allen declared victory with such graciousness that forty years would pass before I realized how resoundingly I'd been bested!

To understand my little joust with Allen, and my (in hindsight) inevitable discomfiture, it is necessary to understand Allen's Buddhism as a kind of literary existentialism: atheist (or as he would correct, "non-theist"), materialist, tragic, pragmatic, compassionate and disabused. This "contest of bards," as Allen very correctly called it, was the first of many sparrings between us over the years. It was pretty much what you'd have gotten if you set Baudelaire and Camus at each other's throats. My overly literal adoption of the nineteenth-century Romanticism was easily disarmed by Allen's twentieth-century aesthetics, deepened (or muddied, depending on your point of view) by an admixture of eastern mysticism. I was a silly if winsome

Mephisto, an implausible superstition, a sexual daydream clamoring to be taken seriously. No wonder Allen didn't have any hard feelings about the love affair fizzling. I remember asking him years later if he was disappointed in me then. He said, "Look, when I met you, you were seventeen years old. Everyone was just amazed that you could speak and dress yourself." Fair enough. I was just a kid, he was fifty. He would have had to be a great fool, which he never was, to take seriously the romantic detours of an adolescent.

Allen also told me that with all his ex-lovers he kept up "a friendship, with a certain extra dimension of tenderness." And he was as good as his word. Our friendship lasted till his death, for another twenty years, and what was to come was far more interesting than the initial misadventure.

7: Allen's Buddhism

Allen made a profoundly original hybrid of American Modernism and the great Asian faith whose realism is often hard to distinguish from pessimism.

Allen's Buddhism didn't register with me as religious, since he himself presented it as a non-theistic common-sense philosophy. This struck me as considerably less than candid. In some ways it was, and the fault is worth placing where it belongs.

Those who first fully and authentically introduced Buddhism to America made use of "skillful means" to adapt this rich and complex faith to a far-western audience. D. T. Suzuki in particular, whose formidable powers of understanding and scholarship may be savored in his translation and commentary on the *Lankavatara Sutra* (a text unsurpassed for profundity and difficulty which he makes fascinating and transparent), made Zen appear easy in his more popular and accessible books.

America has always been a welcoming refuge and tolerant home for new and peculiar religions. To be frank, Americans find spiritual and philosophical fads irresistible, always have. Walt Whitman, who was (and meant to be) the archetypal American, embraced every kook ideology available, from Phrenology to Spiritism. Some of his most striking word choices are simply crackpot-science technical terms, the precise meaning of which has been forgotten, e.g., the word "electric" in *I Sing the Body Electric* refers to Mesmeric animal magnetism.

Americans are also staunchly anti-intellectual. The Puritan Pilgrims brought with them a deep suspicion of Catholic subtleties, which broadened over the following American centuries into a general hostility to European sophistication. We often feel, as a people, that education drives all the common sense out of a man, and that a plain downright upright Joe or Jane has an intuitive grasp of anything worth knowing. Thus Suzuki's generous intellectual condescension and Japanese genius for simplicity was taken at appallingly face value, and Buddhism was Americanized into pop psychology and pat aphorisms. This was of course not Allen's Buddhism, but it was frequently the Buddhism of those I encountered around him.

The day we met, Allen taught me how to sit with straight spine and crossed legs, focusing on my breath, disengaging as far as I could from the flow of my thoughts. He was far more interested in sitting me down than in bending me over. His sincere belief, which in retrospect appears laudable, struck me at the time as downright creepy.

I might have liked Buddhism better then, had it been presented as religion. But he claimed it was just an intelligent, skillful way of enhancing

one's awareness. Which left me pretty cold. The dispassionate observation of "ordinary mind" as Allen liked to call it, seemed like a lot of effort to attain nothing special.

Lucien Carr took a rather dim view of Allen's Buddhist antics. He described the Tibetan Buddhist gusto for all things skeletal as "picking your teeth in a boneyard."

For me, Allen's most successful demonstration of Buddhist insight came about one afternoon when I'd made some clever observation, and Allen said to me, "You're brilliant!"

"No," I countered, with a precocious sense of my own limitations, "I sometimes say brilliant things, but I'm actually quite stupid."

"Yes," Allen agreed. I've noticed that just before you say something brilliant, your face relaxes and I can see how stupid you really are."

What Allen was getting at was the underlying luminous mind that shines forth when we let go of all sense of self, the power of Emptiness. Of course I had no idea what Allen meant at the time, but I never forgot his words or the genial tone of his cryptic compliment.

Allen created his own Buddhist aesthetic. Now the whole idea of a Buddhist aesthetic is a little problematic, since Buddhism ought to see the creation of art as merely another intrinsically meaningless activity. But let's not be too fussy about Buddhism's own interior logic and consistency. Cultures that have been heavily influenced by Buddhism have in fact an aesthetic that shows the influence of Buddhism. A well-known example of this is the Japanese *mono no aware*, the sense that the very transience of beautiful things makes the experience of them more poignant.

Allen thought that a Buddhist mind-set was compatible with, and validated by the vivid, ultra-precise observation of physical details, such as we see in the Imagist poems of William Carlos Williams. Allen felt that such uncluttered clarity of observation was the product of an "empty mind," that is, a mind that saw what was really before it, not distracted from the real by its own inner monologue. Allen also believed that the uncensored stream-of-consciousness style that is characteristic of so much modern writing, and which Kerouac exemplified, made effective art out of the intrinsically Buddhist experience of observing one's mind generating thoughts. Such self-scrutiny is especially well learned through meditation, which is *not* concerned with the impossible task of stopping thought—it is the nature of the mind to produce thoughts. Meditation teaches one to simply observe one's thoughts arising, without getting caught up in their flow. It is an exercise that can be very revealing of how the mind works, and is in some ways not unlike the psychological technique of free association.

Now I hadn't figured all this out when I was seventeen. All I got then was that Allen felt that vivid description and psychological awareness were important ingredients of poetry. It seemed to me that naturalistic, psychologically insightful novels such as Flaubert wrote achieved exactly these goals consistently and interestingly. Why be to the trouble of practicing Buddhism, why not just read Flaubert?

Allen's conception of "spontaneous mind" as intrinsically wondrous, which he expressed in the slogan "first thought, best thought," seemed to me inartistic. But I was responding to Allen's Buddhism as my reading had prepared me to, like a nineteenth century Frenchman. If Buddhism were to be pitched to me successfully, it would have to be on the level of Orientalism.

What interested me in Allen's practice was the incense and the *tankas*. With an adolescent's sense of adult vulnerability, I demanded of Allen, "Do you think it's real progress that you've learned to bow down before graven images?

> . . . silver and gold, the work of men's hands.
> They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but
> they see not . . .?"

—giving him the most standard Hebrew critique of polytheism, taken directly from *The Book of Psalms*.

He could have held his ground and maybe even have won me over, had he just said "Yup, crude Paganism, that's what I like!"

But instead he claimed that the images he prostrated himself before in the little shrine corner of his bedroom were just the pictorial form of philosophical abstractions. He supported his point by explaining to me in detail a painting that hung over his bed: the Wheel of Life or *Bhavachakra*, a symbolic representation of the cycle of existence (*samsara).*

The Wheel of Life is the standard icon of Tibetan Buddhism, sort of their Crucifixion. It shows the various levels of deluded existence, from the lowest hells of fire and ice up to the highest heaven of paradisal bliss—a vision of the afterlife that would have held few surprises for Dante. Allen explained all this as metaphorical, and in psychological terms. The inhabitants of the god realm represented millionaires and rock stars who imagined that their possessions and pleasures constituted real happiness. The hells represented neurotic suffering, the undue amplification of life's actual pain by foolish delusions and arrogant assumptions.

All of this was rather personal interpretation from the point of view of traditional Buddhism, which believes the gods and devils and suffering ghosts in hell all exist literally as depicted. I was a little startled to learn that

even the gods were viewed as imprisoned in the wheel of existence, through which all beings cycled, through all the realms in turn. But it makes sense when you bear in mind that Buddhism considers suffering to be the very essence of existence. What I concluded however was that the pessimism of Buddhism was limitlessly audacious.

(It was rather less of a surprise to learn that in Buddhism, as in Christianity and Islam, the burning and freezing hells are reserved for the atonement of truly terrible sins—like homosexuality. This last point was one which Allen tended to pass over. Likewise the Buddhist view of women is less than generous. These last two criticisms are of course superficial: they do not concerns structural or necessary elements of Buddhist belief. Still, they cannot seem entirely superficial to the parties most concerned.)

According to authentic Buddhism, the endless, aimless cycle of rebirths, punctuated by time-outs in the afterworlds shown in the Wheel of Life, demonstrates the endless misery of existence. The goal of spiritual practice was to opt out by choosing self-extinction (*nirvana*). To paraphrase a statement frequently encountered in the Pali canon,

> What do you want, O Buddha?
> I want to go where fire goes when it goes *out*.

I was ignorant of the traditional Indian view of the four elements, in which fire, once extinguished, returns to its latent state, still existent but unexpressed, like the spark implicit in a flint. Thus I was horrified by the seeming sense of the formulation, and considered Buddhism its own refutation. Even if I had fully understood, the Buddhist view of physical existence was not one I was willing to consider.

I was young, and believed I could attain the solid prizes of life. For the two thirds of my existence when I wasn't asleep I could be either happy or distracted. I did not accept that the human predicament, that aging disease and death applied to me—at least not soon enough for me to need to pose questions whose answers I would not like.

It would be many many years before I came to understand what was most unique about Allen's Buddhism, its originality and creativity. I can perhaps be forgiven this failure of awareness, since it was shared by Allen himself, and, so far as I know, this particular veil has not yet been lifted by any of his biographers.

Allen was of course a Jewish Buddhist, and to some extent he Judaized the Buddhism he adopted. This may be seen from two characteristic emphases in Allen's thinking.

First, there is Allen's sense that the most profound level of reality is revealed through *the transience of physical things* — Allen's poem, *Kaddish*, an extended epitaph, makes exactly this point through its explicit content, as it does by its Hebrew title, which just means "holy." The impermanent is the visible face of the eternal, for Judaism as it is for Mahayana Buddhism (though the two faiths arrive at this conclusion by very different paths).

Secondly, there is Allen's moral warmth, which comes to the Jews through from the prophets, and which found so ready an echo in the Buddhist virtue of compassion. This underwent a grandiose a development in the concept of the *bodhisattva*.

The *kaddish* (declaration of holiness) pronounced on impermanence, and the prophetic tradition of active compassion (most familiar to the general reader from the late-antique Jewish prophet Jesus), were structural elements of Allen's Buddhism, and define it as a Jewish-Buddhist collage. Which I admire. I have always been a fan of monstrous hybrids and impossible orchids of thought.

Considered on the basis of its strengths, Allen's Buddhism was a remarkable innovation that joined Jewish cultural emphases to authentic aspects of Buddhism. Allen created a new Buddhist poetics, a promethean and successful synthesis which enabled him to break new ground in poetry to the end of his days.

It is awkward to note now that I profited so little at the time from Allen's Buddhism, but it is a testimony to its depth that the lessons he gave me, so casually and with such generosity, bore impressive fruit in the course of time. I might add that I was then quite young, and needed to define myself before I could engage so formidable a philosophy as Buddhism. Since then I have explored it in the depth it deserves. I found Buddhism's insights worth the trouble of learning Sanskrit. The sutras of Mahayana Buddhism are magnificent mystical and philosophical poetry. If Kant had written science fiction, the result would not have been dissimilar.

The Theravada tradition, preserved in the Pali canon, is an existential philosophy, very much like its grim equivalent Stoicism, both in mood and its profound insights into the human condition. So serious are the questions that early Buddhism raised that Hinduism itself, while officially rejecting Buddhism as a heresy, incorporated many of its core concepts in the great *Bhagavad Gita* — which one might fairly, if a little irreverently, call the belch of Hinduism digesting Buddhism.

8: William Burroughs

Allen introduced me to his circle. Of greatest interest to me was William Burroughs, whose writings I absolutely venerated. A tall, spare, cadaverous man in a well-cut suit which he unfortunately often wore with an embroidered Moroccan vest, his dignified demeanor and laconic speech made him seem imposing, mysterious and deep. The science-fiction themes of his writing added a further layer of glamour. It was easy to imagine him possessing a non-human intelligence, or diplomatically representing a trust of giant insects from another dimension. That would account for the studied, judge-like repose of his features. Rarely did he smile, never did he raise his voice.

The provincialism of New Yorkers! Bill was merely true to his midwestern type, a slow-talking Missouri man, measured in his words, skeptical and unforthcoming, most at ease looking out over his land with a rifle in the crook of his arm, or sipping bourbon on the porch come evening. Look at the map, and ponder the psychic geography of Missouri, right between Kentucky and Kansas, and you'll understand a lot about Burroughs, and for that matter, about his modernist countrymen T. S. Eliot and Donald Judd.

At that time, Burroughs was living in a loft on Prince Street, at the top of a dizzying flight of stairs. The space was a vast semi-finished rectangle, with the bed at one end, at the street-facing window, the kitchen at the other. There was little by way of furniture. A few chairs, a desk for writing, a small coffee table. It would have qualified as spartan, were it not for the cases of vodka that lined the walls nearly all the way around. He had taken payment for some lecture or writing project not in cash but in booze, and he drank his way through it in a little over a year.

He had an orgone accumulator, a metal-lined wood box big enough to sit in comfortably. According to its inventor, Wilhelm Reich, remaining in it enabled one to build up a charge of orgasmic psychic energy. I never saw Bill use it; I think he occasionally occupied it to smoke a joint and rev his head for writing. His very modest array of bookshelves were slenderly stocked: most prominent were the writings of Carlos Castaneda.

After querying Allen to be sure he wouldn't be jealous if I slept with Bill, I did so. The first time was an evening when I was a dinner-guest. I just kind of stayed after everyone else left. We drank his vodka, smoked some grass, and woozily migrated to the bedroom portion of the loft. He sat on the bed, I

sat on the chair. We studied each other. Actually, he studied me. I was pretty high and just zoning in and out.

"We are having a confront," he pronounced deliberately.

"Uh-huh," I riposted. A long pause followed.

"You don't think I'm . . ." his voice trailed off, then returned, ". . . too old?"

"Nope," I lied, and unbuttoned my shirt.

Needless to say, I was welcome at the loft from then on.

Like Bill, I smoked. He favored *Senior Service*, a rich Virginia tobacco non-filter British cigarette, comparable to the more readily available *Players*. He must have developed a taste for them while living in England, where they were common and classy enough for Ian Fleming to put a pack in the pocket of James Bond. I smoked *Gauloise*, liking the darker Turkish and Syrian leaves which gave it a slightly harsh taste and very distinctive smell. The point here is that I smoked like a Parisian cab driver, enthusiastically put away serious amounts of alcohol without discernible effect, smoked grass, was seventeen, had hair down to my shoulders and needed a shave about once a week. I wrote poetry using the cut-up technique and had practically memorized great swatches of Bill's writing. Bill and I were fairly compatible.

Bill would typically spend the day smoking joints in front of his typewriter, tapping away at whatever book or essay he had in hand. He was a tireless full-time writer, a real professional. I made sure to be on my way before he started his day's work, for he liked to be undisturbed, alone at his desk in a cloud of reefer in the big empty space of his loft. And that is an apt emblem of his extremely solitary life, a big empty space between himself and other people, cozy with the constant influx of anesthetics, in the company of the fantasy characters he typed into existence. Come evening he'd cook dinner. He tended to make spicy Moroccan-style stews, and he liked having company over. There'd be plenty of drinking. He held his booze well. He knew how to pace himself, and I never heard him slur. He was a great raconteur, and whenever he had guests to table he'd regularly set the room in a roar with his stories. I wish I could recall any, but this was forty years ago and I was drunk at the time, so those pretty verbal birds have long since flown.

When I met him in 1975, he was sixty-one. The relentless drinking and reefer made him emotionally undemanding, and his natural charm made him easy to be with.

I remember standing in his loft one afternoon, a glass of vodka in my hand, thinking to myself in triumph, "I'm here, I'm in William Burroughs' loft! I've finally arrived!" And that was pretty much the height of my

ambition. I wanted to be with people like him, not people who would be in awe of my abilities, but people for whom my talents, interests and proclivities would pass unremarked, be simply accepted.

Bill and I didn't talk about literature or lofty topics. He thought Castaneda offered genuinely valuable insights into life and magic and metaphysics. He devoured Science Fiction "for the ideas." I once asked him how he could read this kind of thing. He asked me what I reading matter I would suggest instead.

"I don't know. Homer? Chretien de Troyes?"

"You are," he said with a weary shaking of his head, "so *chi chi*."

The expression, which even then only survived in the periphery of gay culture, means "ostentatiously stylish, overly concerned with being chic." To translate for the heterosexual reader, Bill was suggesting that my literary judgments were on a level with one girl sniping at another for carrying last year's purse.

Ideas and literature were not good topics. He was, however, interested in noise. He often remarked on the incessant barking of dog to dog across the blocks in NYC, which you heard all night in summer when the windows stayed open (no one air conditioned a loft).

Another din of interest was the sound of the radiator. Bill had an old one in his Prince street loft that lustily clanked and banged. "Sounds like two dinosaurs fucking," he said. "If I taped an hour of that and mixed it I'd make you a symphony that *would not quit*."

Bill's implicit disdain for modern music was matched by his disdain for modern art, which later translated into the paintings he created by shooting cans of paint in front of canvases.

IV: Boozy Interlude

1: Harry Smith

It was Allen who first brought me to the Chelsea Hotel, which was presently to become the center of my world. There he introduced me to Harry Smith, the film-maker, who lived in room 731. I remember the room number because whenever he gave out his address he said, "Now this is easy to remember: seven planets, three alchemical principles, one God."

Harry was a bizarrely charismatic hunchbacked amphetamine-head who sometimes suggested he was the illegitimate child of Aleister Crowley. He was fifty-two when we met, though he seemed rather older with his full white beard and long greasy drunkard's hair. He didn't like bathing. He said he just applied a damp towel as needed to the "strategic spots." His parents were theosophists, and he told me they'd given him an alchemist's laboratory when he was a child in the hope that he, in his virginal innocence, might bring to fruition "the great work." Alchemy remained a theme throughout his life. As did what Blake called "the self-enjoyings of self-denial." I don't know that he ever had sex. Allen told me that, by his own account, he used to masturbate into milk bottles and save the resultant elixir in a small refrigerator, claiming it was part of his arcane project. "I don't think that's really part of alchemy," Allen opined. "Or at least, not a very important part."

Harry is best known for assembling the 1952 *American Folk Music* anthology on the *Folkways* label. This was a reissuing of classic folk recordings made on 78's, which it occurred to no one else to preserve. He did other ground-breaking anthropologic collecting and recording, notably of string-figures and Native American peyote chants. His great creative work was in experimental animated film. His masterpiece is *Heaven and Earth Magic,* in which the collection of semen motif is omnipresent.

I had no real understanding of Smith's work or importance at the time. But he took quite a shine to me. He concluded our first meeting by wheezing, "This has indeed been a pleasure. Now I think I'll retire to my palatial apartments and masturbate thinking about you." Harry's conversation was peculiarly fascinating. He was perpetually cranked on Benzedrine, the edge of which he mellowed by sipping beer and chain-smoking *Salem* menthol cigarettes. He liked young boys, but due to homosexual self-hate, combined with acute embarrassment about his deformed spine, he never attempted to consummate his desires. Instead he channeled all his erotic energy into either overly intricate artwork or obsessive platonic romances with young men whom he took on as "apprentices," either in film-making or occultism,

whichever proved a better hook. He would lavish paternal affection, remarkable wit, and treasures of curious learning on whoever it was this month, and finally turn on them, with his own special brand of nastiness. I had my whirlwind romance with him. For two months I was a wonder, a prodigy, and he force-fed me amphetamines as one crams a goose destined to yield paté. I remember hiding them under my tongue and dropping them into my shirt pocket. I liked an upper as well as the next fellow, but I didn't wish to match his frantic consumption.

While I was Harry's pet bird, he made tapes of me reading my poetry. I was so taken with him that I wrote a poem in his honor, which I titled "A Requiem for Harry Smith." I recited it at the great New Year's Day reading at the St. Mark's Church. It began,

> Thing of sewers and temples,
> pale in the warm exhaust fumes of your dreams . . .

I remember this stanza from the midst of it:

> Then cold muzzled ghosts ululate to your side
> or with a worse weariness fall utterly behind,
> they probe you with squirming familiar looks
> and the honey of their brains begins to bathe your shame.
> Haggard and immortal their hatred shall probe
> and the vague fears erode you like years of rain.

Still sounds sort of momentous, if you can get past the fact it means nothing at all. But you can perhaps understand how, at age seventeen, writing this kind of Baudelairean surrealist pastiche, I felt I was better than the mediocre modernists who had come to be in the wake of the "San Francisco Poetry Renaissance." It's gibberish, but glimmering through the drivel is a certain knack for condensed expression. There are flecks in that ore. Tiny flecks to be sure, but they sparkle.

Harry rapidly tired of me. He was particularly miffed when he learned I wasn't taking my medicine. I was staying with Harry's assistant, an art student named Joey Alfierez, who had a room on the second floor of the Chelsea. Joey was very interested in me, an admiration which I did not reciprocate, but I wanted to make some return for his hospitality. So I gave him my unswallowed pills. One day when Harry ran out, Joey passed on to the master some of my second-hand stock, and when questioned about their second-hand texture and provenance, he ratted me out. It was all downhill from there.

This was pretty typical for Harry, who finally had a ruinous relationship with everything. He destroyed a not insignificant portion of his own artwork and his ethnographic collections — famously demolishing a vast collection of Eastern European hand-painted Easter eggs. He would beg and wheedle financial support from his friends and admirers, of whom the staunchest was Allen Ginsberg, and promptly blow the whole grant on expensive books and records. In all, I probably made out better being rejected so promptly. When I knew him he was milking Allen and various other benefactors for a projected animated film of the Brecht-Weill opera *Mahagonny*, which he initially seriously intended but which turned into a decade-long boondoggle. I don't think I would have benefited from a long apprenticeship under his spell. He was in his own small way like a deranged Roman emperor, a Caligula of art. It wasn't fun being his enemy, but less trouble than being his friend.

2: Ghosts of the Chelsea Hotel

There were quite a few interesting characters around the Chelsea. There was Stanley Gould, an old-time junkie, who I thought was incredibly cool. He had, as he was only too happy to tell anyone, devoted his entire life to getting high. He'd get stoned on junk or speed or whatever was around and listen to classical music while he made elaborate scribbly amphetamine-crosshatched drawings. I liked hanging out with him. He was sort of an older statesman of intoxication. One of Stanley's junkie buddies was Mason Hoffenberg, who co-wrote *Candy* with Terry Southern. Mason was a distressingly entertaining fellow. One of his verbal sallies has stayed with me all these years: his parody of Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind*. It went

> How many knees would a Negro grow
> if a Negro could grow knees?
> How many Heebs would a Hebrew brew
> if a Hebrew could brew Heebs?
> Tell me how many poles would a Polack lack
> if a Polack could lack poles?
> The answer my Fern, is in a Grecian urn,
> the answer is in a Grecian urn.

Another Chelsea Hotel notable was Jacques Stern, a crazed Frenchman on crutches — he'd suffered from polio in his youth. Gregory Corso ran off with his junkie wife Jocelyn. He was a Rothschild of some sort, and had a lot of money to throw around, which he mostly threw around on drugs.

Jacques was, like Harry, a fantastic raconteur. His amphetamine monologues tended to focus on the drugged-out misdeeds of his latest ex-girlfriend, his crippled condition ("the pity-racket" he called it), his planned grandiose film or publishing projects (which never materialized) and the occult byways of French history (the Albigensian Crusade, the Knights Templar, &c.) He wanted desperately to be part of the artistic world inhabited by Burroughs and Harry Smith, but he was wealthy enough to prevent himself from ever accomplishing much.

Jacques hired me to be his assistant. The pattern with his assistants was he'd give you a couple hundred dollars, tell you how you were going to help realize his utopian social and literary schemes, share a lot of drugs with you, and week by week get nastier and nastier till he finally fired you before the month was out. A surprisingly large number of people at the Chelsea had been Jacques' assistants at one time or another. His instability, and the whirl of drugs and money that surrounded him, made him less a person than an

atmospheric disturbance, which was popularly known as "the Jacques Fracas."

The person whom I was closest to at the Chelsea was Peggy Biderman. She'd been born in New York City in 1926, and lived in the Chelsea since 1965. She was close friends with Harry Smith, Gregory Corso, and Robert Mapplethorpe back when he was a hippy and drawing rather than photographing. He forgot all about her when he moved up in the world. She was on SSI, and supplemented her income by selling clothing on the street. She'd go to Goodwill and get secondhand clothes, wash them, mend them, and spread them out on a blanket on the sidewalk for sale. She knew quality, knew what was trending, and was an incredible salesperson, by turns flattering, wheedling, ominous and funny. The real gift of gab.

The only class of person on whom her verbal magic was without effect was cops. You needed a permit to sell stuff on the sidewalk, and she'd never bothered to get one. So they kept sending her summonses year after year, and summonses for ignoring the summonses. She was what they called, with strange archaism, a "scofflaw." Only she wasn't scoffing. She was scared. She kept all the summonses in a lower dresser drawer. When I knew her it was densely packed. She told me, "sometimes I open that drawer and my blood runs cold."

When I knew her she was divorced, had had a number of subsequent lovers, and now, stout and in her fifties, was retired from the sexual fray. She was drawn to lushes and she collected fags. Being a bit of both, I hit it off with her excellently well. She was very close friends with Jerry Matherly, a gay guy who lived on Christopher Street with his lover, John Bergamini, an academic historian who wrote about the Hapsburgs. She was a regular guest at Jerry's place for dinner parties, and for long weekends at his house on Fire Island.

I liked Jerry, who was from someplace in the south, and had flawless manners and hospitality, and that wonderful self-mocking humor that was then inseparable from urban homosexuality in the old days. Jerry had come to Manhattan with the ambition of becoming a chorus boy. He'd met Peggy when they both worked at the Museum of Modern Art Bookstore. He met a very well off man and settled down in a doorman building on Christopher Street. I remember years later his lover died, and I felt I should pay a condolence call. I sat there on the couch awkwardly trying to say wise and consolatory things. Jerry was baffled. He couldn't imagine what I was getting at. Then finally he twigged.

"John! You've come about John! Would you like to see him? I have him in the next room,"

"No, no," I explained, "not at all necessary." Unfazed, Jerry came back with an oversized ornamental tea-tin. "Look," he said, prying open the lid, as I sputtered in dismay. He pulled out a stainless steel ash canister with a mortuary certificate on it.

"This is what they gave me. Very severe, don't you think? Then on the way home I saw this in a shop window, it has Chinese princesses walking over a bridge with their parasols, and I knew it would be just right for John."

Peggy was warm, kind, an excellent confidante, and the kind of strong, smart larger-than-life female character gay guys are drawn to. The company of such women allows them to bathe in the rays of a confident witty femininity to which a man may aspire to, but never quite achieve. When it comes to being a girl, a girl will always have a lighter touch. A man who wants to be a woman can't consistently hit those notes — typically he'll be somewhat too sharp.

The appeal of gay guys for a woman like Peggy was twofold. Having had a very healthy heterosexual appetite, she liked the society of men, even if it was purely social. And many women find gay men good company: all the fun of a girl, and none of the risk or competition. I didn't realize it at the time, but I matched the pattern perfectly, if accidentally. I now realize that Peggy was in a way the mother my own mother failed to be. Lionlike if she ever felt I was under attack, interested in my creative endeavors, and enthusiastically supportive of any gender identity choice I might make — though at that time I still thought I was passing for straight.

3: Dawn of the Dead Languages

After most of a year in NYC, as the affair with Allen ended, and our decades-long friendship began, I decided I wanted to go back to school. I clearly wasn't the sort to settle suddenly down, move in with Allen, take up Buddhism, and become a contented spouse. The fellows I saw attaching themselves, remora-like, to gay cultural players, made themselves indispensable as Man-Friday personal assistants. This didn't appeal to me. I admired Allen and Bill, but I didn't wish to become anyone's shadow.

I was still living pretty much at home in New Jersey, busing into the city for my adventures. To earn some money, I did some Christmas work at the mall, wrapping poinsettias while Bing Crosby and Dean Martin sang on an endless loop of lite listening. The lyrics of "The Little Drummer Boy," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" and the rest were mercilessly repeated. I hate pop Christmas music to this day, and never forgive artists who decide to do a new and skewed version of a holiday standby — adding their minum of wit to the global pollution.

So there I was molding red foil to potted plants, and roping down the branches of severed evergreens so they'd fit in peoples' cars. On lunch and coffee breaks I was reading about the Crusades. The history course I'd taken at the local community college the previous summer, when I discovered Kenneth Clark, had wakened my interest to the point where I'd earned my first A's in many a year. Now I read everything I could find on the middle ages. On my trips to Manhattan I became a regular visitor of the Cloisters, and the Metropolitan's arms and armor collection. I found among Allen's records a disk of Clement Jannequin, the old Charles Ravier *Ensemble Polyphonique de France* recording, which now sounds pretty staid. But it was recorded in 1960, more than a decade before the early music movement got off the ground. Like the parade armor in the Metropolitan's collection, it was Renaissance, not medieval, but had the same effect of bringing me imaginatively closer to that infinitely exotic world whose elegy Whitman made in *Song of the Exposition*

> . . . that once so mighty world, now void, inanimate, phantom world,
> Embroider'd, dazzling, foreign world, with all its gorgeous legends, myths,
> Its kings and castles proud, its priests and warlike lords and courtly dames,
> Pass'd to its charnel vault, coffin'd with crown and armor on,

Blazon'd with Shakespeare's purple page,
And dirged by Tennyson's sweet sad rhyme.

While Whitman meant to bury it all forever beneath this gorgeous epitaph, he inspired me to try and waken those shades. And what better, more absolute escape could there be from the highways and malls of New Jersey? In much the same spirit Poe set his tales in German castles and Venetian palazzos — eschewing all mention of the hillbilly chivalry of his ante-bellum south.

That summer I took two Latin courses at Columbia University's summer school. My parents were thrilled to see me beginning something that looked like a respectable career trajectory. Allen was enthusiastically supportive of this move, since he venerated the classics even if he didn't particularly read them. His own linguistic attainments were fairly slender. I can't say how good his French was, but I remember going to a Dominican restaurant with him where he ordered for us both in Spanish and the dinner materialized as twelve milkshakes with cheerios in them. No doubt Allen was also relieved to see me turning towards serious learning and moving beyond Rimbaud as a model for life and art.

So there I was at Columbia, in a tiny room in the John Jay Dormitory— my first taste of having my own place in Manhattan. My parents gave me enough pocket money to cover meals and incidental expenses, so I could for the first time explore NYC beholden to no one, able to buy, not steal or mooch, to supply my needs. Allen was away at Naropa, and so I devoted myself completely to the task before me.

I was pretty scared, if truth be told, since I had never before been given course work that was genuinely demanding. We went through all of Latin Grammar in one month, and then read real texts from a literary anthology in the second. I worked very hard, made flash cards with vocabulary and verb paradigms which I studied on the subways, on line at the grocery story, at every open moment. I roved around the city to take breaks from the hours of concentrated study at my desk. I did quite well at the Latin. I wasn't the very top of the summer-school class, though close. I have since observed that the sort of person who does wonderfully well at the apprenticeship tasks never gets far in the real work, or if they do, manage nothing impressive. The art students back at Simon's Rock who did such excellent life studies and cut their mats with never a nick where it oughtn't to be, never made the grade as creators. And the proper little grammarians who took their notes in a tidy hand and got perfect A's in Latin One were gone after Latin Two.

I was stunned to finally have succeeded at something, and this gave me a confidence I'd never felt before. But the real life-changing event was the

second half of the course. I had taken Latin with the intention of reading the Chronicles of the Crusades in the original. I promised myself I'd study the *Gesta Francorum*, ("The Deeds of the Franks,") that fascinating account of daily life on the First Crusade. But then came Cicero and Horace.

I was completely bowled over by the Latin. This requires a little explanation, because Latin literature isn't, on the face of it, all that good. Most of it is in imitation of superior Greek works. The authentically Roman contributions are in history, satire and perversion. It isn't until the middle ages that Latin becomes a language one needs to know first-hand, and then it's for the sake of Aquinas, Spinoza and Descartes.

What moved me so about the mediocre Latin literature was its energy. The Romans were barbarians. The only learned to read by conquering Greeks who taught them what writing was. But whenever a barbarian culture assimilates a civilized one, it brings to the old world an energy and creativity that hasn't been seen for centuries. Although Latin wouldn't come into its own till long after Virgil, its classical productions have a crude sincere power which, for me, put all the other literature I'd seen in the shade. I forgot all about the Crusades. Rimbaud appeared a mere flash in the pan. I would become a classicist!

My teacher for the Latin Two was a fine instructor and a good man, Joseph Solodow. His class imparted to me the level of precision reading required of a philologist. Latin is a complex language, with all sorts of special verb moods and noun inflections that can convey by the change of a single vowel a switch in sense or emphasis which English must supply by an entire phrase. A philologist learns this careful assessment of syntax. He also learns how to pick out the right meaning from a dictionary entry that lists all the varied senses the word has sustained over several hundred years, which means he has to know in advance the work's historical context. He must also be able to recognize the limits of our learning: where the text has been transmitted in too corrupt a form to yield any sense whatever, or where the gaps in our knowledge make it difficult to know which of several senses is to be preferred. Joseph Solodow's careful guidance through Cicero's paragraph-long sentences, and Horace's verses, where it seemed like the goal was to see how many words he could possibly leave out and still make it possible to guess what he was saying—Solodow's instruction initiated me into these mysteries of the Classicist's trade. He was only teaching a summer course at Columbia: he was moving on to Bard College in the fall. He suggested I apply there, and put in a strong recommendation for me — which I needed. From the time preceding that summer at Columbia, all I had by way of academic track record was a G.E.D. and a few courses successfully taken at Bergen Community College in New Jersey.

They accepted me. I set aside my bohemian dreams and set out for Bard to lay the groundwork for a serious career as an historian. So I thought.

4: Bard College

Bard College has a beautiful, wooded Hudson valley campus, affording solitary forested, riverside walks. Many were the hours I spend poetically rambling in the dappled shade or seated by a stream reading Spenser's *Faerie Queen.*

In the years since, Bard's been built up with modern structures to where I can scarcely get my bearings there. But then it was a quiet, soothing locale, conducive to reflection and learning. Conducive, but not much more. In the course of the sixties and early seventies Bard had degenerated into an anything-goes quasi-experimental college with a faculty of interesting but disorganized, and not always qualified, instructors. Some persons of a more conservative disposition referred to Bard as "the little red whore-house on the Hudson."

I came the year Leon Botstein took over, with the cleverly conceived ambition of raising Bard's rank as an academic institution while making it the base for his own orchestral ambitions. With its new musical focus, Bard found friends and benefactors, and won loyal alumni whose checkbook generosity has allowed for its expansion. Botstein showed that classical music can serve a fund-hungry college as well as would a football team.

With nothing to my credit but a GED (General Equivalency Diploma, a surrogate high school diploma earned by passing an exam that requires only a sixth grade education), a few A's from Bergen Community College and Columbia's summer school, I was by any fair standard a second-rate candidate. But Bard was then still a third-rate school, and my parents were able to pay full tuition, so my mentor Joseph Solodow had no difficulty persuading them to take me on.

I already intended to transfer to a better school, so I wasted no time on Bard's required courses. I signed up for courses in history (English, Russian and American), and I was sure to continue Latin with the excellent Solodow: a semester on Ovid, followed by one on Livy. I had decided that summer I was through with drugs—from now on I would just drink. Drinking was legal; I was 18, drinking age in NY state. It seemed adult and sophisticated, and if my indulgence ended in staggering hilarity, well that was the prerogative of a high-spirited college man, was it not? There was a bar downhill from Bard called Adolf's, and there I would go with my classmates, returning woozily by moonlight, dodging trees up the dormward path.

I viewed Bard as a stepping stone, and my fellow students, though nice enough, just weren't that bright. The center of my life was still Manhattan, to

which I returned by train as often as practicable, and my developing friendship with Lucien Carr.

5: Lucien Carr

During my year in Manhattan, Allen had introduced me to one of my life's key figures: Lucien Carr. He was a thin, mustachio'd, handsome hard-boiled newsman, who worked as an editor at United Press International, back when the wire services still provided news to most of the papers in America. Lucien was a friend of Burroughs from boyhood in St. Louis, and had met Allen when both attended Columbia University. His eventful career as a catalyst of the Beat Generation's inmost circle, Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac, took place a quarter century before I arrived on the scene, so I will spare you a second-hand account of matters I was neither witness to nor overly curious about.

At this time, Kerouac meant nothing to me. Though I would later learn his merit, through hearing recordings of him reading his poetry, and via Allen's explanations of, and excerpts from, his writing, I was never impressed enough by what I read to delve more deeply. Lucien was fiercely loyal to Kerouac and considered him a great genius. I simply avoided the whole subject.

Lucien had deliberately retired from the literary scene, and though keenly interested in his friends' work, never put pen to paper himself. Allen always looked on him as a sage and reliable editor, respecting his journalistic experience. He felt that Lucien had an excellent ear for language and an unerring sense of what was inessential and needed cutting. As an editor at UPI, he was famous for the phrase "Lose the first paragraph."

But in truth, Lucien did not really act as a copy editor for his literary friends. He was above all an encourager of others' talent. He was the only journalist I ever met who wasn't secretly writing a book. This was in part because of his other mastering passion: alcohol.

He was a big drunk. He held it well, and was never sloppy, sentimental or incoherent. But he was drunk. At every opportunity. He tippled at work. He had a running tab at the Edison, a bar that no longer exists, near the UPI offices at the Daily News Building. He liked to order a triple vodka "with a splash of Coke."

"Not too much Coke," he would add, "I don't want to ruin my stomach."

Lucien had been the one to introduce Allen to Rimbaud, and with a certain justice Allen was introducing my Rimbaud-like self to him. Though my own literary precocity was hardly a match for the original, I wrote well enough to be taken seriously as a young man with potential. Certainly I was no slouch when it came to boozing. Lucien and I became fast friends. It was he who

loomed largest for me for the next two years of my life. I had admired him at once for his easy, humorous and always slightly wicked banter. Everyone he worked with loved feeding him straight lines to see what entertainingly outrageous rejoinder they'd receive in return.

Lucien had a vast loft on Great Jones Street. It was minimally furnished and nothing had gone into making it presentable beyond a coat of paint on the walls. It was the apartment of an alcoholic. Lucien had bought it for cheap when such things were to be had, and hadn't cared to improve it.

Lucien was a tough-talking journalist of the old school. In his ordinary conversation, Hispanics were Spics, Italians were Guineas, Gays were cocksuckers and Jews were Kikes or Sheenies. (He had the circumspection, even when drunk, never to use these terms in the presence of the minorities mentioned, unless he was really angry.) The ethnic slurs were some kind of weird nineteen-forties male camaraderie thing, to make you feel like you were part of the inner circle where the talk was frank and real and not polite and ladylike.

Lucien had handsome, strong features that stood up, as few men's do, to a full mustache. In a movie he could have played a tough old plainsman, tall and thin, with a Winchester on his shoulder and a dog at his heels, striding across a desolate landscape with grim resilience.

In point of fact, he loved cowboy movies, No doubt it was his identification with such characters that made him psychically project that figure through the body of a haggard, hard-drinking newsman who dressed like a preppie. He wore white shirts and chinos and black oxfords yet somehow he cast the shadow of a man in a duster and boots.

Painting and photography were of small interest to Lucien, although he was long-time friends with the photographer Robert Frank. Music didn't seem significant to him either, though on this subject he made two statements when remain with me. He said there was a time in his life when he really appreciated Wagner. Those monolithic melodies, endlessly repeated, motifs that represented archetypal ideas, were hypnotic and totally absorbing, like having sex when you're really drunk and the Man-Woman opposition seems particularly mythical and all sufficient. I suppose he was thinking of *Tristan*. Lucien is, of course, not the first to note the eroticism of Wagner's music, but I don't think I've heard anyone express it with quite so much *immediacy*.

He also said that when he was drunk and angry sometimes melodies from the Brandenburg Concertos tweedle-deedled shrill and homicidal through his head. He wondered whether there wasn't some blood-inciting quality to flute music. I substantiated his insight with Milton's lines

Anon they rose
in perfect phalanx to the Dorian mode
of flutes or soft recorders, such as raised
to heighth of noblest temper heroes old
arming to battle . . .

But I couldn't help thinking of Lucien's history. Perhaps his comments on Bach contained an unintended echo of that night when twenty-something Lucien stabbed his stalker. Of that whole episode I know no more than the least informed. I never would have been so tasteless as to ask Lucien about it. I did ask Allen just to get a balanced account. But Allen was circumspect and I wasn't lurid-curious, so I've nothing to add to the debate as to just what was or wasn't going on between Lucien and David Kammerer. After all, who cares what Achilles did or didn't get up to with Patroclus? Homer didn't feel it needed a mention. To borrow a line Allen was fond of from Shakespeare's *Troilus*,

I cannot fight upon this argument,
it is too starved a subject for my sword.

What interested Homer was that it was an emotionally intense relationship that ended in terrible violence. And that was the case here. Lucien was assuredly a man whose sexuality was better than monochromatic. I may assert with equal conviction that he was never at ease with this richness in his disposition, witness his hyper-masculine persona, the tough-talking, hard-drinking, handsomely mustachio'd newsman, like a modern urban Wyatt Earp. In fact, with his drooping mustache and combed back hair, Lucien looked rather like the pomaded lawman in the 1888 daguerreotype. He could have easily been cast as the buffalo-hunting, brothel-keeping saloon gambler and marshal of Tombstone.

What seems clear and is worthy of record is that in the fifties homosexuality was viewed with such prejudice that some people would literally kill rather than acknowledge any hint of it in themselves. At least if they were drunk enough and the point were pressed.

When I met Lucien, his wife was a much younger black girl named Sheila, whom he'd met as a waif just off the bus in NYC. Lucien had encouraged her interest in photography, setting up a darkroom for her. He made connections for in in the world of photo journalism, though she didn't very actively pursue them.

Sheila didn't drink much, though she had rather a taste for reefer. She was good to Lucien, long-suffering as the partner of a drunk must be. She

never much cared for me, which I endeavored to counter by being scrupulously pleasant and attentive. Dim as I was socially, I realized that if you want to be friends with a married man you must be on good terms with his wife. But she always viewed me as another of Lucien's inexplicable friends who encouraged his drinking and blithely left the consequences to her.

Lucien had had a series of women, and his relationships with them tended to be complicated. He found breaking up difficult. He told me that he catalyzed the dissolution of one of his marriages by coming home drunk at 3:00 a.m. with a couple of hookers, which got him belabored about the head and shoulders with a fire iron.

His relationship with Sheila had a Jefferson-Hemmings historical resonance to it. The Carr ancestry includes Dabney Carr, who married Jefferson's sister back in 1765. Lucien was amusedly aware of the remote possibility that Sheila might be related to the third president's Afro-American concubine, that there might be a genetic *déjà vu* to their connection.

The traces of Lucien's distinguished ancestry were visible in a few oblique ways. His rumpled preppy clothing was certainly American aristocratic, as was his mother, Marion, whom I met a few times. She had a large apartment overlooking Washington Square park from MacDougal Street, spoke fluent French, read Gibbon in bed by way of sedative, was embarrassed to be seen watching television, and would dismiss her guests at the end of an evening with the phrase "Scram, pals." She was a great lady, with a presence and a politeness I have rarely seen since.

When one considers the matching details of Lucien's and Burroughs' lives, the drinking, the complicated sexual background, the drunken homicides, the gracious manners and dilapidated dignity of these two boyhood friends and sons of St. Louis' aristocracy — it becomes clear that these pillars of the Beat Generation stand parallel on the veranda of a Southern Gothic Manse.

Missouri is in many ways below the psychic Mason-Dixon. St. Louis is on the Mississippi, in a state that borders Kentucky and Tennessee. Missouri has a tradition of schizophrenic conflict. In the pre-dawn of the civil war Missouri's pro-slavery Border Ruffians were fighting free-state Jayhawkers like John Brown all along the border with Kansas. Missouri barely failed to join the Confederacy, and throughout the war hosted the rebel guerrilla insurgencies of Captain Quantrill and the James Brothers. Americans like to think they invented themselves, and up to a point that's true. But creation *ex nihilo* is not within human power, so it behooves us to bear history in mind.

Burroughs and Lucien had more than a little of the outlaw brothers Frank and Jesse in their psychic makeup.

The accounts I have read of Lucien's early years depict him as a madcap, and I don't doubt their truth. He told me once that he used to enjoy ordering a martini in a birdbath glass so he could take a bite out of the rim after downing the gin, then noisily chew the fragments and swallow them down.

The trick is, he explained, to crush the shards between one's molars, keeping the bits away from the tongue. Enamel is easily harder than glass, and will grind the latter small enough to pass through the digestive system with no real ill effect.

When I met Lucien, he was in his early fifties. For the thirty years since the murder and his two-year stint in prison he'd been working quietly at UPI. He felt he'd already lived wildly enough to have nothing more to prove—in fact, he had a certain amount to disprove. Also, his taste of media attention, as the focus of a sensational homosexually themed killing, left him with a lifelong dread of publicity. He was careful to keep in the shadow, even having Allen excise his name from the original dedication to *Howl*.

The Lucien I knew was easy-going and gracious in the best southern tradition. I asked him to look at my writing and make suggestions. He was encouraging, commenting positively if a bit non-committally. He praised the technical skill of the Poe-like effects I strove for. He correctly assessed that I wasn't developed enough as a writer to be seriously criticized or edited. I was writing *juvenilia*, derivative young man's verses. Sometimes, particularly when he was very drunk, he'd thunder at me to write about what I really did and experienced—right then and there, hoping to startle me into some sort of breakthrough. At such moments I always froze up. I hadn't yet the confidence that anything I really experienced counted: it was all so mundane and ordinary. Commutes down from Bard to visit Lucien, my walks through the city looking in shop windows, my worried wonderment about what I would do with my life. None of it seemed as important as Cromwell's battles, poignant as Byron's stanza'd regret, or witty as Thackeray's essays. I felt like I was still standing at the bus-stop of existence, waiting for my real life to arrive. My drinking binges made me *feel* like a poet, but were otherwise unproductive.

I wasn't about to write directly about my pining for adolescent pop stars in the pages of *Tiger Beat,* or my furtive visits to the St. Marks Baths or the Ninth Circle bar, though these were the realest things in my life at that age. Instead I translated my experience into the trite tropes of nineteenth-century poetry, and sat on the gender fence by always writing "you" to avoid the tell-tale "he."

Lucien did his almighty best to shake me up and give me a new perspective. One afternoon when we'd been drinking heavily he took me for a helicopter ride. There was a heliport not that far from the bar local to the UPI office. It must have been about a hundred dollars for a twenty-minute turn in the atmosphere. I recall the thrill of being strapped in while the rotor overhead began its spin, turning into a tremendous din as we lifted off at an extreme angle. I looked out at the sky-scrapers through the clear plastic bubble. Swooping views and precipitous perspectives now answered the sense of meaning and momentum alcohol always gave me.

I remembered the lines from Napoleon's diary where he said he felt he had gone through life "like a fragment of rock hurled into space." The helicopter carried me through a comparable a godlike parabola before I was returned to Elba isle of Manhattan. With a sense of giddy omnipotence I had zoomed with Lucien through NYC's window-glittering flat-topped towers, taking the King Kong perspectives in exultant drunken stride.

"Remember this!" he told me, wishing me to keep it in my heart as a touchstone of how deeply, if only for briefly, one could live. While Allen and Bill had both settled down considerably by the time I met them, Lucien (and Gregory Corso) maintained the wild heart of the Beats. And it was Lucien who has inspired me in all the years since to remain a rebellious hellion. I owe it in part to him that I was never dulled into decency by degrees earned, languages learned or addictions kicked.

Lucien had a fine grim witty sense of death. One summer day I went with him and Sheila out to Coney Island. The wind was up and the waves were white-capped, but I still went wading into the rough waters, figuring that as long as I had the sand solidly under my feet I'd be safe in the waves.

A great mistake. The undertow sucked twelve feet of sand from beneath me, dragging me far under and seaward. When I surfaced I was well out from the beach, and paddling as hard as I could I made no headway, for the next wave sucked me under as well. When next I rose to spit brine and gasp for air, I saw to the right a buoyed rope line which marked off the edge of the swimming area, bracketing now an ever more distant shore. I made for this, paddling parallel to the beach, slowly approaching it despite successive undertows. With only yards to spare I grabbed the rope and held on against the water's force. As often as I surfaced with the floats I took a breath, and slowly pulled myself shorewards in the desperate underwater intervals when I didn't need all my strength just to keep from being tugged off.

When I got to shore I was crawling, vomiting brine. When I reached dry sand, safe from the waves, I lay there sprawling on my stomach, coughing and gasping.

Lucien walked over with Sheila and said, "Look, it's Shelley."

6: Blow the Turtle

During the year at Bard, I improved my Latin and became quite interested in the past. I had a course in English history that filled in the background of Shakespeare, Milton and the King James Bible, which constituted my principal literary study. I acquired from this immersion a familiarity with Blake's references: his prophetic books are full of allusions to these authors, and my understanding of Blake deepened.

I planned to become a professor, and now it seemed to me history was a wider, more interesting field than classics.

I read the above-mentioned English classics obsessively. Stymied sexuality was at the root this studiousness. There was no gay life at Bard, New York City was two hours away by train, I was trapped in my sexless dorm-room for the year, and so I lived like a modern-day Milton, easing my unhappiness and alienating my fellows by keeping to myself and improving my Latin. Milton was similarly prim and disliked when he was at Oxford, where he earned the nickname "the lady of Christ College."

But Milton seems to have succeeded far better than I at being ladylike, as the following excursus into natural history will demonstrate. Along with drinking and serious course work, I found my greatest distraction in long walks along the Hudson in all weathers. One dull January day, as I watched the ice floes drifting downriver, I noticed on the shore a large turtle shell, easily the size of a briefcase. I hoisted my prize and carried it back to the dorm, imagining what an interesting curio it would make once I'd contrived to clean it of its reeking contents.

The reeking contents proved to be a hibernating snapping turtle, which rapidly revived in the warmth of my room. I was delighted by my savage pet: it could snap a pencil in half with its jaws. While experimenting with how best to display it to visitors, I discovered that if I held it by the base of the upper shell, with my fingers just inside the rear leg openings, it would become aroused. Its penis was unexpectedly large, reaching nearly the whole length of the creature. I have since learned that this endowment is common to the whole order of *Testudines*. When you consider that for these beings making love is more a matter of stacking than of mounting, you quickly realize that intimacy is here somewhat figurative. What really counts is reach.

As to why the turtle responded as it did, several explanations are possible. These creatures display when aroused, threatened or just bored. I couldn't resist introducing the turtle to my guests, particularly when I was in my cups. I would sit in my rocking chair, the turtle upended in my lap,

occasionally craning its head back to snap at me, paddling with its clawed and scaly feet, as it rapidly manifested its dark hydraulic cylinder.

This usually brought a pause to the conversation. "Blow the turtle," I would intone in my most hypnotic voice. Since my only guests for an evening tipple were male, this performance was regarded as more amusing than menacing. But inevitably there were humane complaints on behalf of the captive reptile who had become, as it were, my sex slave, and I was obliged to surrender the snapper to the school's ecology center to be tagged and released.

It's a dismal commentary on the school and its students that my year's standout encounter was with a randy terrapin. And Bard was no better contented with me. My intimate relationship with the turtle, along with other inebriated misdeeds, induced the school to tell me I would not be welcome back next year. Fortunately, I had already made other arrangements.

V: What Sex Are I?

1: Love Melancholy

While at Bard, I had applied to several colleges as a transfer student. Columbia was the best of those that accepted me, and thither went I, to be in New York City, and also with a thought to my future employment. Even in 1978 there were grim rumors of a tightening job market for university professors. I thought that a degree from an Ivy League school might prove a critical advantage later on.

I took French at Columbia's summer school that summer and, fatefully, began going regularly to the Ninth Circle, a gay bar on 12th Street that was the principal gathering place for the college-age crowd. Allen had taken me there once: I had noted it, and determined I would explore it further when opportunity allowed. The previous summer I had been too busy learning Latin, and also too scared, to explore my sexuality beyond the occasional foray to the pre-Disney Times Square, where full-color pornographic magazines for every taste were offered for prices well within a student's budget. Bard was too far off to permit me to avail myself of Manhattan's pleasures. Now I was in NYC to stay. I had a room in the dorm for the summer, and planned to take up residency in the Chelsea Hotel for the fall semester. The Chelsea was cheap, if sleazy, and a straight shot uptown on the IRT #-1 subway from 23rd Street to Columbia's gates on 116th.

It may seem strange that I could have had the affair with Allen and remain so shy and skittish about being gay. Though Allen was one of the most celebrated homosexuals on the planet, he was always sensitive to others' need for discretion, and so my involvement with him stayed a private matter. And, paradoxically, it took less courage to send my adolescent quatrains to the most formidable literary talent in America than it did to walk into a gay bar. Allen had shown me the bars and the baths as part of a late-night tour of the Village. It was quite another thing to go to a gay bar alone, accepting responsibility for my actions and how they defined me. I was still determined to keep this a suppressed digression, a bracketed exception, not part of the narrative. I would discover that no amount of furtive sex with strangers makes you feel any better about being gay, or frees you of homosexual self-hate you've learned as early as you did that pink is for girls and blue is for boys.

At the Ninth Circle I fell in love, in so ridiculous, literary, and archaizing a style that it deserves record here. I saw a boy, about my age, across the bar, talking with his friends. He had shoulder-length blond hair, large eyes and

full sensuous lips. He reminded me of a boy I'd had a crush on years ago at summer camp. It seemed there was divinity at work in this encounter, one-sided though it was. It was as though my boyhood crush had materialized before me, grown up and certifiably gay.

He was really quite good-looking, in that Nordic way, and, though I didn't understand this then, far above my station. A strict hierarchy of looks determines a gay bar's sexual exchange rate. (Much later I would learn, by painful slow degrees, that exactly such a hierarchy obtains in the straight world as well.) I was utterly innocent of how dating worked. I had no correct estimate of my own attractiveness. Though I was a fantasy come true to men in their fifties, to other eighteen-year-olds I was at best rather plain. I've always looked younger than I was—at nineteen I could have easily passed for fifteen or sixteen, but that was no great plus except for real chicken-hawks, who were a relative rarity in my age group. Beyond that, I had wavy brown hair that frizzed out when worn long: it really would have looked better cut short than in the shoulder-length style I then affected. I had thin lips, a nose that wasn't especially large but clearly Jewish. Not one of those wee upturned wasp ski-jumps that make it seem as though if you had a strong flashlight and tilted up their chin you could get a good look at their brains. And if you did thus scan the mind of one of the blond boys at the bar, you'd no doubt discover his name was Michael and that he owned a *great many* sweaters.

Well, that wasn't me. I wasn't outright homely, but I was not a real looker, and I was clearly Jewish. Certainly not hot enough to make overtures to a thing of beauty and a goy forever like the blond who now fascinated me. I didn't then realize that my being Jewish was a strike against me. I didn't think I looked Jewish. I didn't feel Jewish. But then again, I didn't feel or identify as five foot seven, yet that I indisputably was. I only began to understand the racial component in the sexual pecking order when I met a guy who dyed his hair blond just so he could increase his chances of sleeping with the master race. His eyebrows and his chest hair gave the lie to his mane—as the saying goes, the rug didn't match the drapes. I don't know how well that strategy worked for him, but I was mortified to see in it a more extreme example of my own demoralized preferences. It was a gay recap of my sixth grade crush on Christine Andrews: once more I saw myself as a dark Semitic dwarf, hopelessly supposing he could someday plant his flag atop mount Jungfrau. Once I realized my unconscious, interiorized racism, I developed a positive erotic aversion to blonds. Though I have slept with many races since, I have ever eschewed the pallid blue-lipped children of the north. I was determined never again to be ashamed of who I was.

But this psychological subtext was one I wouldn't decipher for years. I approached the boy in the bar, we exchanged a few words, he wasn't interested, and that should have been the end. In fact, it should never even have come to words. I would later learn that the bar scene is a game of tag with glances, and that the go-ahead is telegraphed when your eyes meet repeatedly and finally you both let the glance linger for a few seconds. That's the green light of interest, the signal that you may proceed. Since he hadn't returned my stares, of which he was assuredly aware, I had already crossed the line into boorish, stupid or pushy behavior by approaching and greeting.

But not only was I socially naive, my judgment had been corrupted by overindulgence in Shakespeare. I had absorbed the ideology of courtly love with its exaltation of unrequited passion, and its secret presupposition that anyone might eventually succumb to a sufficiently winsome poetic assault. So I went back to the Ninth Circle every Friday and Saturday night to look at him—nowadays this would be called stalking—and I ate less and less since I was determined to waste away for love in the best renaissance melancholic style.

Since I'd sent my verses to Allen two years previously I had tried to write a modernist Dr. Faustus using the Burroughs cut-up technique, and though I filled a notebook with striking phrases and short passages I meant to make use of, it never coalesced into an actual play. Even my master in this style, Burroughs, wrote his novels as straightforward narrative, and only interspersed them with cut-up passages like intermittent spells of delirium. Cut up was a tactic, not a larger strategy.

Finding the limitations of cut-up, I had made a shift from modernist writing to take up the style of Poe and Baudelaire. Part of this was simple self-defense. The power of Allen's personality and poetic voice would have annihilated me had I accepted at once all he had to teach. There were a number of young poets who wrote in a very "school of Ginsburg" way, to Allen's great approval — one of his few artistic weaknesses. A forgivable one: he wrote magnificently, and any poet could benefit by being schooled by Ginsburg. I pointed out that his instruction in poetry was essentially teaching people to write like he did.

"Well," he said with his usual disarming candor, "I *like* the way I write."

I had to laugh. For many a year Allen had out-fenced hostile interviewers by his always unexpected combination of humor and truth.

Now I had an archaizing subject to match my archaizing literary style. Indeed the ultimate subject. It seemed to me that I understood for the first time what life and literature were really about. Love was the only true theme for poetry! Now I wrote with a purpose, to win or at least immortalize a love. The output was not worth preserving, written as it was in the code of

conventional literary ideas and traditional metaphors. But at least it was coherent and more or less readable poetry about my own experiences, Taking Baudelaire as my example, I employed the trite tropes that had been making the air of literature progressively less breathable since Petrarch's time. It was all sunsets, sphinxes, pearls, candles and phantoms, centuries-old recycled clichés. When you read *The Flowers of Evil,* or Byron's *Childe Harold* (which I vastly admired at this time) you will look in vain for a physically observed detail, an authentic spoken turn of phrase, any hint of the vivid contingent existence going on around the poet. And the ideas animating such poetic edifices, built of images mined in libraries, are just as outworn. A weak tea of Neoplatonism, acquired second-hand from Petrarch's imitators! You'd think Allen could have explained this to me. Actually, not. He wasn't an analytical thinker. He was an incredibly sensitive and brilliantly insightful man, but after the manner of a poet.

A poet is, above all, a sensibility. He listens to how his own experiences resonate within. He is entranced by his own associations, and exults in all the other things that any given thing reminds him of. He loves to find hidden connections and unexpected likenesses. He hates to think when he can guess. He looks as though he were lazy when he is actually being attentively patient, observing himself and missing nothing.

"And the poets lie too much," noted Nietzsche, not forgetting to mention that he was himself a poet. The dishonesty of poets is worth an excursus.

Language is thought expressed, which is not quite the same thing as thought, or everyone would say exactly what they meant. A poet's task is to surprise, delight and persuade, so he'll use all sorts of tricks to get his point across, from rhythmic diction, to assonant and alliterating phrases, to unusually complex circumlocutions, to stating matters plainly when you less expect it.

Beyond these merely technical matters, a poet conflates, condenses and telescopes as much meaning as he can into his lines. Many inconsistent levels of sense may meet in a single verse, just as they would in the images of a myth or a dream.

There's nothing analytical about these skills, and in fact the fewer fixed ideas you have the better off you are as a poet. The great favorite poets of any language, like Shakespeare, Goethe and Virgil, generally have nothing much to say. That's why they're so good at saying anything, and, if need be, saying sonorously nothing. The great poets who are real thinkers are in fact thereby limited and far less liked. Aeschylus, Dante and Milton are in this class, and they are far more admired than read.

Allen was a true and a great poet, he possessed in full the above-enumerated *poetic* gifts and skills. But none of these make one a thinker. Rather, they make one a supremely articulate dreamer. There's not a lot of thought behind Allen's *Kaddish* or *Howl*, those amazing torrents of great poetry. And his eventual Buddhism failed to ruin his poetry only because he understood it so idiosyncratically.

Allen knew a lot about literary modernism, but his knowledge was more practical than theoretical. He plotted precisely the genealogy of his style, from Whitman through Williams, and could state exactly what he had learned from them and what he now esteemed. This was the expression of feelings through well-observed visual descriptions. He carried this out with deliberate elimination of superfluous verbiage, and whenever possible in lines that followed the natural scansion of ordinary speech. Thoughts were interesting to Allen in the order in which they occurred, as evidence of the intrinsically interesting shape of consciousness. But abstract ideas connected with logic had no more attraction for Allen than chess or algebra.

Allen's deeper understanding of literary history was essentially limited to the modern. He would have been hard put to say why modernism itself had come about, nor was he very interested in the other arts.

Thus Allen never succeeded in explaining to me why the sort of poetry I was writing was good when Baudelaire wrote it, and bad when I did, except on the head of technical proficiency. Allen said, "I'm going to give you the same advice William Carlos Williams gave me when I was still writing rhyming metaphysical verse like my father's: *In this mode perfection is basic. These poems are not perfect*."

Allen was half-right. The problem wasn't perfection. My productions were of a lapidary, academic correctness. But they lacked authenticity of content. Nor was he much closer to hitting some mark when he dropped the prop of Williams for his critique, and said, "You haven't found your voice."

"Finding your own voice." This was an injunction I encountered from many sides, including from Lucien, but which was never accompanied by any suggestions as to how I might accomplish this marvel. I still think it's a silly thing to say to someone. Where is one supposed to go looking for one's voice? Is it like when you lose your car keys, you need to try and remember what you were doing the last time you had them?

I think that the poetry of one's juvenilia is already in one's own voice—in retrospect it is certainly recognizable as such, the boyish Blake or Tennyson does actually sound like the later authors. A young author *does*, I maintain, write in his own voice. It's just a shrill and squeaky one, and not worth listening to at any length.

But I've left unanswered the main question: why was this artificial style of writing, *in itself,* great from Baudelaire and bad from me? Actually, it was not great from Baudelaire either. Derivative, imitative literature has less intrinsic interest than first-hand real-life writing. With Baudelaire you have to *read through* the literary form to get at the content which it muffles. Yes, Baudelaire's verses were more perfect than the drivel I was coming up with. But his lapidary perfection didn't help. (It rarely does.)

You can see the problem easily in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde,* which is all written in lofty literary style, entirely artificial and deadly dull, while his *Canterbury Tales*, drawn from the life he knew, are as fresh and exciting today as when he penned them.

To be sure, Allen tried to make this point, but unable to think with abstract clarity about these issues, he could only take up specific instances. He went over my poetry line by line, asking that all the vague non-concrete terms be replaced by physical images. "Show, don't tell" he would say. He certainly put this advice into practice in his own work, which is dense with first-hand perception and real detail.

But due to his disinterest in history, Allen "grandfathered" older poets like Baudelaire, entitling them to their styles, which I was faulted for imitating. I don't mean to seriously assail Allen for not being as good a literary critic as he was a poet: I mention this only to explain why I was confused and unpersuaded by his advice to me. He told me *what* I needed to do, that is, draw from life, but it is in my stubborn essence to refuse compliance before I understand *why*.

So I went on writing about my infatuation for a vacuous lad in the Ninth Circle in terms of vampires and ghosts. I will offer one brief excerpt from the writing of this period.

> Our heavy breath subsided. There we lay,
> the sleeping and the dead. You grimly smiled
> and gave me kisses in a solemn way
> as if to seal my fate upon my lips.

Truly proficient, and truly awful. Purest gothic twaddle.

Encumbered as I was by my old-fashioned literary tastes, my acute case of puppy love worsened into a Love Melancholia right out of Elizabethan literature. It was the first great infatuation of my life, the sort of thing people usually experience in high school. Adolescent adoration of an object chosen in part for its very unattainability. I probably should have developed a crush like this much earlier, in high school, but then I didn't actually go to high school. And the necessarily furtive expression of homosexual attachments in

1970's America further inhibited the onset of this very normal, poignant phase of emotional development.

However it came about, I was a late-blooming little flower of evil. A monstrous, impossible Gothic rose nurtured by the verses of Shakespeare and Rimbaud.

I starved. For weeks I lived on coffee, cigarettes, and the occasional piece of bread and butter. I became a sunken-eyed hollow-cheeked armature. At the time I thought, obliquely and incoherently, that I might somehow thereby provoke interest and pity in the object of my desires—as hopeless a fancy as when I imagined I could someday amaze him with my verses. The underlying cause of the anorexia was the common clinical one: to master frightening emotions by bringing the body under control. Perhaps there was even some notion that this asceticism would confer psychic power of some sort, if only the power to write truly moving poetry. The fasting assuredly gave me a strange sense of intoxication.

Thus, a staring starvation, mumbling verses to myself in a caffeinated daze, sick with love, I rented a room at the Chelsea and began my first semester at Columbia.

2: Randolph of Roanoke

Columbia was, on every level, a catastrophe. Being a transfer student, I wasn't given a room in the dorms, and this at a stroke deprived the Columbia experience of most of its value. The reasons to go to a good undergraduate school are only incidentally intellectual. The quality of instruction doesn't differ all that much—particularly nowadays when jobs are so scarce a community college can choose from Harvard PhD's. And in fact, at a top-flight school you'll actually be taught by teaching assistants, and only lectured at by the professors. The people you'll meet in the Ivy League aren't generally smarter than those you'd find at a state school—what they are is richer and more ambitious.

Even the prestige of an Ivy degree is over-rated. If there's demand for your skills, you'll be hired, diploma'd from any old school. The seal on your sheepskin is the parade example of what Byron called "the glory and the nothing of a name." I graduated with degrees from Columbia and Brown, but because the Humanities had been phased out, I was unemployable.

Social connections are the reason to go to a name school. If you get into Harvard, you'll be lifelong friends with people who'll be CEOs and federal judges. And that priceless network of friends is established in freshman year. Even I, socially backward, arrogant and shy, had gotten to know a great many people that first year at Bard. But at Columbia, I didn't even have the option of living on campus. I might as well have gotten my degree through a correspondence course, or its modern equivalent, "distance learning."

When people are thrown together in freshman year, they're open to everyone in the first month as they instinctively gather about themselves a group, a social fortress against their loneliness. To some extent these initial choices are amended in succeeding years, cliques and strata form, new friends are added, embarrassing acquaintances distanced, but essentially, the friends you make freshman year in the dorms are the ones you'll graduate with and keep life-long. Many a marriage evolves from sophomore involvements with someone met as a freshman.

You can observe this in small at a party. The people you meet and chat with when everyone's just arriving are the ones you will be talking to for the rest of the evening. Someone who really means to network will attempt to meet *everyone*, however fleetingly, at first. In the course of the party he can quick-interview them all and be sure of sifting them down to the few worth pursuing.

I was at Columbia as a history major. I didn't appreciate the cracks that had appeared, like geological fault lines, in the edifice of narrative history with its focus on great men and major battles. Having already digressed on the university experience, I afford another excursus on the crisis of historiography. Suffice it to say that I breezed into its fraught and final atmosphere, the "end of history," utterly oblivious, with a certainty about my procedures I had acquired from Macaulay and Trevelyan

At Bard there had been two history professors, one for European and one for American history. The American history teacher had given me an independent study in which I researched John Randolph, a member of the House of Representatives from the time of Jefferson to the ascendancy of John Calhoun. He was a staunch anti-federalist, who never swerved in thirty-four years in Congress from his opposition to any aggrandizement of the central government, however it manifested, from establishment of a standing army to building national roads. He most famously opposed the Yazoo bailout (government compensation to reckless speculators in Georgia land) — which he considered (correctly) the reward of greed at the public expense. He opposed the war of 1812 as a needless foreign entanglement advantageous only to New England shippers carrying out a "circuitous unfair carrying trade" between the parties involved in the war with Napoleon. He likewise stood against the Missouri Compromise as an autocratic interference by Washington in the affairs of states. His dying wish was to be buried facing west, towards Kentucky, so he "could keep an eye on Henry Clay"—a man whom he famously described as "brilliant and evil, shining and stinking like mackerel by moonlight."

Always in the opposition, his vision was of a United States which was more a union of states—small, thrifty, virtuous, innocent of industry, foreign alliances and imperial ambitions. His probity was unquestionable, legendary, and proudly impractical. He was an American Cato. He attempted to defend the America, and particularly, the Virginia of his boyhood, from the future. Looking back, many of his reactionary, anti-progress stands seem strangely prescient. In his utter want of realism he was sometimes startlingly right.

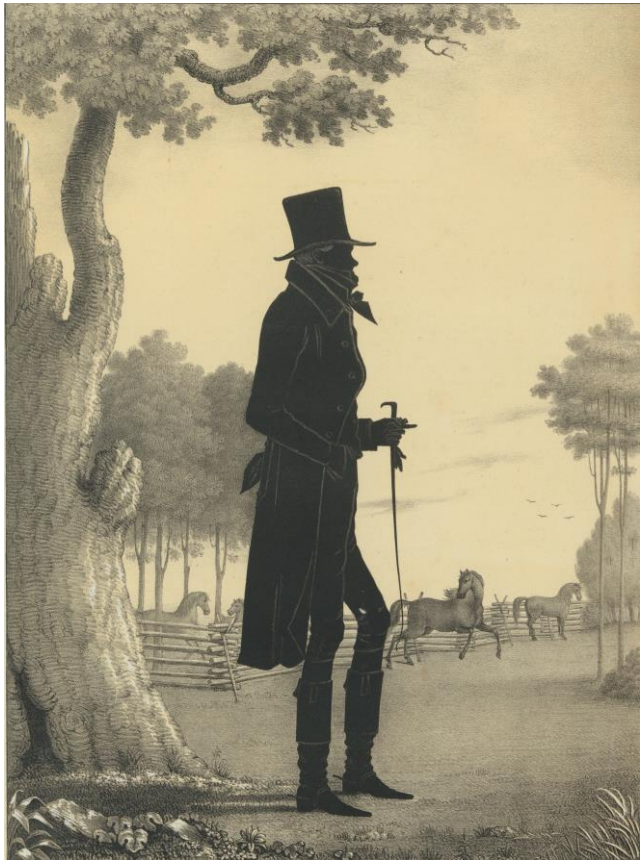
From the point of view of Columbia's history department, among whom I sought a patron for my independent work, Randolph must have seemed an irrelevant eccentric, only deserving disparaging notice for his states' rights creed which eventually inspired Calhoun and the fire-eating secessionists. Hardly an appealing figure to Columbia's left-leaning history faculty: rather, an aristocratic enemy of the people!

Equally unsettling was my enthusiastic account of the particulars of his person. For reasons lost to medical analysis, he never developed sexually, but kept through life the soprano voice, beardless face and androgynous features

of an adolescent. He was tall, skeletally thin, with the shoulder length hair of a 1790's Jacobin and long goblin fingers — he looked like a supermodel, a genderless elongated boy. His made the most of these natural advantages, setting them off with boots, spurs, close-fitting leather breeches and a knee-length blue riding coat. He strode into the House of Representatives with a whip in his hand and his favorite hunting dogs at his heels. Say what you like of his politics, the man knew how to accessorize!

Randolph's being seemed expressed by two matters of nomenclature. His family estate, (etymology and local history here yield, alas, no light), bore the name "Bizarre." The super-purist political faction he led was called *Tertium Quid*, which we might roughly translate as "third identity."

(*Quid* here isn't just "what," the neuter of *quis*, but the medieval philosophical *quid* that translates the *ti* in Aristotle's *to ti esti*, "what something is," that is, a thing's identity. It's the quid of the rare English word quiddity, meaning "the real nature or essence of a thing.")



1844 silhouette of John Randolph

The lord of Bizarre, the old *Quid* in person, whose Latin moniker seemed to express the "third identity" of his gender ambiguity more poignantly than it did his political independence—this was the figure I was pitching to the faculty of history. No wonder I found no professor to endorse my project, which I envisioned as a historical novella with an edited, annotated selection from Randolph's speeches.

I could not fathom at this time why any real historian would withhold support from my project. Though in hindsight a transfer student from nowhere, with nineteenth-century notions of how history should be written, obsessed with an opium-eating gender-fluid crank who buzzed around Jefferson like an incensed dragonfly—I see now how this would have been a hard sell. It was suggested that I take the conventional courses in the prescribed order, and after I'd collected credits for a few years, perhaps my project would make a master's thesis. Like the dog in the great old Gold Rush ballad *Sweet Betsy from Pike*, all I could do was droop my tail and look wondrously sad.

There ended my ambition to become a professor of history. I have since observed more of this gentry and have noted they tend to be imperious and impatient, as though all that reading about generals and heads of state had somehow persuaded them they had sprouted sets of epaulets and were powers abroad upon the earth.

So now I was adrift again. The ambition to be an historian had been what pulled me together and enabled me to succeed at school when I retired to Bard in disarray from my year in Manhattan. With this ambition I'd learned Latin and worked hard at my books. I was still set on being a poet, but I needed a plausible career as well. Now I had to figure out once more what I would do if I grew up.

3: The Road of Excess

As a transfer student, living at the Chelsea Hotel, I was cut out from easy fellowship with the other students. I missed out on essential information-sharing: which courses were difficult, which professors were bad. I had to learn everything the hard way.

I took up residence in the Chelsea Hotel in the fall of 1978, a few weeks before Sid Vicious did in Nancy Spungen. I had no interest in popular music at the time, and so I had only a peripheral awareness of the whole affair. I would sometimes see Sid loping through the lobby—I only noticed him because of his leopard-spotted vest. Then one morning there was a big crowd and a lot of press outside the hotel, and a detective was knocking at my door, asking me if I'd heard or seen anything that could be relevant to the case.

I had one of the cheaper rooms at the Chelsea; "student rate," the manager, Stanley Bard had told my father when he wrote out the check for my rent. Bard only let out the first two floors of the hotel to junkies and whores, so they wouldn't ride up in the elevators with the better paying guests, who got the upper floor rooms with views. As a student, I was just another kind of indigent, and so ended up on the second floor of the Chelsea, one floor down from the crime scene, utterly oblivious, learning Latin among the junkies.

I was pretty much losing my mind. By November it was clear I was flunking everything in my first semester at Columbia. I was drinking a lot, and my love melancholia had devolved into a lot of casual sex with guys my own age who I picked up at the Ninth Circle and brought back to the Chelsea. I had spun out of control.

I applied for a medical leave of absence, which in retrospect wasn't half the dodge I thought it was at the time. I really was unwell. I was very stressed by my now fully emergent sexuality, my planned academic trajectory had crashed before well aloft, the alcohol I was drinking in increasing quantities to cope with things of course undermined my ability to cope with anything. Booze appears to alleviate the very problems it causes.

My friends at Columbia were the Goldins, Danny and Josh, identical twins, sons of an art teacher there. Josh had already determined on a career in the film industry and took courses that advanced this interest. He ended up in LA as a script doctor, that is, someone who finally re-writes a script that was probably bad to begin with and has become hopelessly muddled through too many inept adjustments. There he remains to this day, earning a living by his considerable literary and cinematic talents. Danny, who began as Josh's

collaborator, eventually tired of the movie business. Danny had always put a lot of himself into his literary work, and tried to enter into his characters and make them real. Seeing his efforts altered to suit the ego-demands of actors and directors, or the commercial intuition of a studio, finally discouraged him enough to make him leave. He went on to become a psychoanalyst, improving people's internal narratives, a far more admirable sort of script doctor.

Danny was particularly interested in literature, took Latin, and did some work as a ghost writer when we were in school. One line from a novel he ghosted for someone or other remains in memory. "Whenever I have boy problems, I bake myself some brownies, and boy, do I have boy problems!" Danny got a kick out of writing in this exaggeratedly conventional style, I imagine as a kind of subtle revenge for the developmental-editing indignities to which a ghost is subjected.

Danny also had a fantastic ability to write parody: I remember these lines from a fake Shakespeare sonnet he wrote,

> Loving too long doth break the back of love
> for pleasure pleasure kills, and so the heart
> dries up like sauce too long upon the stove,
> and lovers too, like love, are torn apart.

I have forgotten the intervening lines, but the sonnet ended

> and like a bug arising from a tomb,
> I crawl forth tired till me bright lust revives.

Danny also compassed the impossible task of writing a parody of Allen Ginsberg, who is at once so free of affectation and so forthcoming with candid personal details, that the traditional tools of mimicry which satire employs are stymied. Yet Danny solved the puzzle with this surreal and evil condensation of Allen's tropes,

> I think of you, father Whitman, naked and blue-lipped in snowfields,
> my father's gray asshole hairs Novembered in yellow twilight,
> FBI CIA cahooting in dismal distance, my fist brain-filled with words!

For my part, I made something of an impression on Danny, A wild drinker with a delirious verbal delivery, my conversation was spiced with quotations from Shakespeare and Poe. I don't believe Danny had ever seen the like. As the months passed, his admiration for my wit was somewhat tempered by dismay at my drinking and the extraordinary beliefs which eventually replaced it when I found AA. Like many people who get sober, I lost all mental ballast when the booze was removed, and the new solutions I found to my existential problems were not necessarily the ones sanity would suggest. I decided, for example, that I was a Christian. A few months later, I came out as Gay. On riper reflection it seemed clear to me that what I really needed to do was join the Israeli army. I don't know, maybe Danny was even *more* impressed by these evolutions. But while I was at Columbia, Danny, Josh and I were inseparable.

We were all three of us deep drinkers, and one of our tricks was go to the frat houses when they were having their seasonal open houses. Josh would hold a tape recorder and a microphone, Danny would introduce himself to the bartender as a reporter for the Columbia Spectator, the student newspaper. Danny asked for corroboration or denial of rumors regarding unusual behavior in the frats. Danny had a natural actor's gift, and assumed a look of grave concern as he asked for specifics, "regarding, for instance, alcohol abuse, sex with animals, pissing on each other."

Of course the bartender and any members within earshot vehemently rejected the suggestions. So vehemently, in fact, that I wonder in retrospect whether Danny's psychologist's intuition hadn't hit upon some raw nerve of truth. The brothers of the frat thus impugned unfailingly suggested other, rival frats, of which such reports were all too likely true.

While this comedy of innocence was taking place, I was behind the bar, whisking unopened bottles of bourbon under my coat.

Columbia in those days was divided socially into four large groups: Jocks, Jews, Preppies and New-Wave hipsters. The Goldins and myself heartily despised these ready-made identities and all who adopted them in place of a personality. We viewed our fellow students as stupid and diligent or stupid and hopeless. Our scorn was patent.

One evening we were on the street known as fraternity row, either to pinch liquor or just to be obnoxious, and some sort of altercation arose between Danny and a human side of beef who was a member of one of the athletically oriented frats. Danny had been amusing himself at the other fellow's expense. When at length the jock realized he had become a source of merriment, he lost his temper. Only his muscular friends restrained him from pummeling Danny. They now exchanged insults, the jock hopelessly

outmatched, but Danny continuing to return taunt for taunt out of a kind of cruel intellectual charity. They had descended to the level of insulting each other's mothers. The jock claimed to have bedded Danny's mother, a privilege, he asserted, that was not unique to him. Danny answered, "I wouldn't even *kiss* your mother—I might get a disease."

At this, the jock struggled mightily to free himself from his buddies' prisoning arms. Realizing he had gone perhaps too far, Danny backpedaled.

"I didn't mean a disease. I meant, like, a really bad cold."

4: Alcoholics Anonymous

That spring term passed boozily too, but my deliberate choice of easy, silly courses, which Danny helped me select, made it manageable. Then in the summer of 1979, when I was twenty, Lucien got sober. Since he was my closest friend and most serious drinking buddy, this was a game changer. Lucien had joined AA. He never pushed it on me; he didn't need to. If Lucien had found something valuable there, I wanted to know what it was.

With your first AA meeting you lose all your innocence about drinking. My own habit had been entirely unexamined. I figured it was grown-up, literary, rebellious, fun, and frowned upon only by squares and spoil-sports. There was no good reason not to raise the glass.

Also, alcohol conferred upon me a quick and violent bliss. Colors became more vivid, my body felt warm, waves of pleasure went through me, food tasted better, conversation sparkled, I was at ease in any company—and indeed, sometimes verbally spellbinding and hilarious.

I hadn't realized the vast damage it had done me. The schoolwork missed, the social opportunities squandered, the embarrassing incidents, the actual danger blithely courted, the emotional maturation that had been bypassed, the self-confidence and social skills I never acquired because I had the elixir that let me run on automatic. I heard at the AA meetings, from a roomful of people, experiences that exactly paralleled my own, which made clear the lack of choice (and originality) in what had seemed to me my most essential exercise of personal freedom.

Most importantly, AA identified, indeed anatomized, a certain kind of attitude. Self-pitying, negative, resentful, arrogant, with abysmal loneliness at the heart of it all. Not that I matched this description to any very visible extent: that would have been pathetic and indeed drawn general censure. But this off-the-rack profile of the alcoholic did accurately describe my interior condition. My interior spoiled child.

AA explained all this by a simplistic psychology that ultimately derives from Paul. All these defects of character are due at root to pride and self-will. The antidote is to cultivate, deliberately and methodically, the virtues of humility, gratitude and selflessness. That's a rather abstract way of putting it.

My version of what happened was that I'd had a very hard go of it, and thus I was more than entitled to a drink. Cheated of all else, none should begrudge me this minor consolation. Indeed, in many ways life had ridden roughshod over me—as it does to everyone. But even if I were really as blameless in the whole transaction as I erroneously supposed, no one can survive the unending contemplation of wrongs received. To live at all, you

have to let go of bygone injuries, *especially* if they were terrible and unmerited, and set your own, positive and unaccidental course. And if the price of this is forgiving those who've injured you, then you have to just pay it. Not that you have to now love the people who've hurt you or cultivate their company. But at a minimum, you have to achieve some kind of detachment. In AA's rather Christian terms, you "let go and let God." Letting go is never easy. There is an instinctive self-preserving panic at the thought. We all instinctively associate letting go with falling.

I recognized in the alcoholic personality as described by AA the very silhouette of the doomed, haunted heroes of Romantic poetry. Byron's and Baudelaire's literary personae were exactly this. My models from romantic poetry, melancholy satans all, had provided a thorough literary education in alcoholic attitudes. Mario Praz's 1933 study of decadent themes in nineteenth-century European literature, *The Romantic Agony* would prove illuminating reading for anyone in recovery, and, rightly understood, could well replace AA's "Big Book." As for me, I had made Praz's book a kind of bible—and the results spoke for themselves.

So much for AA's attempts at psychology. In genuinely psychological terms, alcoholism is simply a symptom of depression. Homogeneous in this particular manifestation, it is manifold and infinitely various in its causes. AA provides a purely symptomatic treatment for these. Its one-size-fits-all Pauline psychology can't address the problems of the individual alcoholic. If alcohol's mere anesthesia appears to you miraculous, you're obviously in a grave psychological pain. The causes of this need to be dealt with in real therapy, not in the random "shares" that go on in "the rooms."

This being said, it should be promptly noted that without such symptomatic relief as AA provides, no good can be expected from even the most excellent therapy. AA offers a way of immediately eliminating the symptom, the drinking, which is in itself sufficiently mischievous to stymie all psychological progress. If you're still full of drugs, you can't begin to determine what you really think or where your problems lie.

AA's greatest strength is perhaps its simplest. Alcoholics, that is, depressives, are terribly lonely people, whose sense of hurt makes them intuitively withdraw from other people to avoid further affronts—though that very withdrawal exacerbates the sense of isolation. AA gives you an instant community, you suddenly have as many friends as you can find time for, and a shared problem that binds you together more surely than any school or workplace could. The terrible inner emptiness is filled by the new community, all of whose members reach eagerly out to you for they too need to keep that emptiness at bay.

And, it must be confessed, the AA program has a vast positive moral value. It teaches you to live to a standard of honesty you didn't imagine possible. It forces you to confront your character defects and try to put them right. It's a moral philosophy, in some ways very like Stoicism—which was itself a major component in the Pauline synthesis. Stoicism is a marvelous creed, though I believe its merits may be more effectively accessed from the pages of Marcus Aurelius than from AA literature or the epistles of Paul.

The spirituality of AA is also an effective and positive good, so far as it goes, though this isn't terribly far. AA tends to consider itself above dogmatic belief, "spiritual" rather than "religious," and that's actually correct. AA offers a low-grade popular mysticism, easy techniques for achieving detachment. It's not what you'd learn from Dante, but it's a huge improvement over the unexamined outright nihilism of the alcoholic who's fallen far enough to need treatment, and in fact it's a more exalted perspective on life than that of most people who aren't alcoholics. Hence the unusual resilience of recovered alcoholics in difficult situations.

My encounter with AA was my first great grappling with the true and huge conundrum of life itself. Clearly it had much to teach me. These aggressively ordinary people could stay sober while I couldn't. Their stories made it clear they were startlingly like me in many ways. Clearly they had *learned* something. AA's "Big Book" was clearly not a great book, despite its scriptural status in AA. But even if it were, a book was a book and whatever it contained could be extracted and summarized.

It was a situation I intuitively knew how to handle. Just like when I was a boy, trapped in a classroom, alienated by repetitive exercises that never addressed my abilities, and sat in the back reading the encyclopedia.

My first theory was that the active ingredient in AA was religion. I had been reading the King James Bible as literature for two years now. Perhaps I should try believing it rather than just exulting in its exotic prospects and surreal poetry? The Old Testament, further off in time and milieu, is quite opaque without a commentary, but the New Testament is not only seemingly clear, but presents itself as a key to all the Old Testament's obscurities.

I believed. I accepted Christ as my personal savior. It was a very strange alteration, not dramatic but profound. I was no longer alone. I talked to Jesus, who, although he never replied, was a patient listener. I became a "God-botherer."

I tried out some of my new Christian ideas, obliquely and tentatively, on Allen. Allen said "What are you, a Jew for Jesus?" It is interesting that Allen, who'd opted for an exotic apostasy, immediately went for my shameful *marano* jugular.

I ran my routine past Bill as well, who, when he got my drift, immediately improvised a routine about Bob Dylan's Born-Again conversion (this had lasted three years, from 1979 to 1981, and thus was current news then). Bill adopted a dense Missouri accent.

"He just labored and labored, and ah tole him, Bob, y'caint *fight* Jesus. He cried in my arms. Cried like a baby."

Since being a new Christian would have been viewed as contemptible or ridiculous by my most esteemed literary friends, I kept mum about it. I tried going to various churches, but the sermons I heard made it clear they weren't even looking for what I had found. I tried reading some classics of Christian mysticism, John of the Cross, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and so on, but the *via negativa*, the path of denial, rejecting the body and world and especially one's own will, wasn't quite what I was looking for. AA already had plenty of self-denial sauced with humility, and though these things were in themselves salubrious, they weren't the great secret of how AA worked. I thought that any spirituality that was really valid should be able to prove itself on my addictions. Wrong again, as I much later learned. Spirituality is one thing, but despite some wondrous overlap, psychology is another.

Thus I sauntered along, puzzling out a path to recovery, taking courses I figured would be easy, at random, with no idea of why I was in college.

The professors were mediocrities, my fellow students were boobs—a conclusion Randolph had reached when *he* attended Columbia in 1788–89. Typical of my disenchantment and how I handled it was a course in masterpieces of European literature. I had to write a paper on Homer, so I took an article on Meissonier (one of Napoleon's kitschier battle-painters, sort of a French Frederic Remington) from an old issue of *Art Forum*, and just changed the names. Where it said Napoleon, I put in Agamemnon, Marshal Ney became Achilles, impressionistic brush-strokes became impressionistic verses. The professor was thrilled at my description of Homer's "fresco-like brightness."

The only memorable insight I absorbed in that art history survey was supplied by a Chinese engineering student. Raised as a Marxist materialist, she listened in mounting indignation as the teacher expatiated on the image of Rodin's *The Thinker*.

"What is he meditating on, what thoughts are revealed by that noble pose of introspection?" she asked the class, hoping to provoke some participation.

Our East Asian comrade could bear it no longer. "He no think nothing!" she cried, "He made of bronze!"

Another art historical moment which is worth rescuing from oblivion was my brief encounter with H. R. Giger, best known for designing the sets

and monsters of the *Alien* film series. I was friends with a German art historian who lived at the Chelsea, Gert Schiff, the great authority on Fuseli. Gert was a tall, good-natured, mustachio'd gay guy who was friends with Peggy Biderman. He had painted the walls of his apartment in the Chelsea a chocolate brown, which gave the rooms weirdly colonic gloom, which was not relieved by the dismal expressionist woodcuts he hung on the walls. Gert was rather a mentor to me, encouraged me in my taste for art history. He knew Giger's Parisian gallerist, Bijan Aalam, and invited me to come along to see an opening of Giger's paintings, at which Giger would be present. The film *Alien* had been released in 1979, it was now 1980, so the show was quite an event. I went with Gert, who brought me along to lunch with the artist. Giger spoke no English, I spoke no German, so we talked in French. I ordered and consumed a plate of *escargot*, snails. These glossy black twists of mollusk meat look exactly like what you'd have gotten if Giger himself had had to design an appetizer. Yet my science-fiction-looking dinner made him squeamish, and he looked on, eyes wide in horror, as I literally gobbled up his aesthetic.

5: First Love, Kind Of

That year I did finally fall in love and have a relationship, brief and defective though it was. I met a boy at the Ninth Circle named Robert Wright. He was a student at Mannes, the music school, and the only really interesting person I ever met in a gay bar. He was my age, handsome in a thin wan way, and he lived on the Upper West Side in the nineties, a longish but not unmanageable walk from where I lived on West 106th Street. This was my first real love, and it was almost reciprocated. He liked me, he was physically attracted to me, but he never had real feelings for me, and after two months it was over. He was nasty, lazy, neurotic and hypersensitive, the kind of hot-house flower one becomes when people treat you as a prodigy from early youth. But he was really, really smart, he fully understood whatever I said, he enjoyed long conversations, and I thought him so intrinsically bright and aware that I believed he'd come around eventually if I loved him enough. I thought that all the elements of a relationship were there: attraction, intelligence, compatibility. The planets had at last aligned.

I loved him. And not just me. Robert was a real whore. He'd have sex with strangers in Riverside Park on the way to visit me and then not be in the mood when I waxed amorous. Eventually even I, besotted as I was, realized he was just no good. The last time I saw him he took umbrage at something or other I said, turned on his heel and walked away. I let him go. I didn't run to catch him up and make it right. I was done. I never saw him again. I'd be amazed if he didn't fall to AIDS, considering his antics and that the plague arrived in NYC the following year.

Robert was very into being gay. It was a complete identity for him, a personal world that went with him. It was as though he were psychically driving some enormous vehicle. There were some turns he wasn't even going to try making, he hated backing up, and he expected people to maneuver around him.

Two things he told me have always stuck with me. He had a melodramatic chain-smoking Russian piano teacher who used to say, in her dense Slavic accent, "Problem is not being woman in this country. Problem is being person on this planet."

And he told me an apocryphal, proverbial story about a music student at a conservatory, whose technique and style were flawless. But something was lacking.

"Feeling. You have nothing to say. You must go and gain experience of the world," said his teacher. So he did. He fought as a mercenary in Africa, he tended the destitute on the streets of Calcutta, saved rainforests, &c. &c.

Finally he returned to his old teacher, sat down at the piano and played. It was magnificent, rich, meaningful, a soul-transforming interpretation!

"Now," said his teacher, "you really have something to say. But I can't do anything with you."

"Why not?"

"Because now you're ugly."

I remember these anecdotes because they encapsulate Robert's bitter, self-defeated wit. He was really a lot of fun in his dreadful way. That's what I loved about him.

My romantic disappointment, trivial in itself, was the catalyst of a general disenchantment. I had barely passed my classes fall semester. Now I didn't even go to class. I meant to sabotage my career at Columbia, which was after all just another school, and schools were evidently still places I was sent because no one knew what to do with me. On my own I'd been assiduously filling my mind with the pinnacle achievements of western art and music. I was listening to Mozart Operas, reading Montaigne in the quaint John Florio translation, getting eyefuls of great art at the Metropolitan Museum and Columbia's Avery Art Library. Now all this Andes of the mind I had been delightedly scaling appeared irrelevant, to me as much as to everyone else in the modern world. I suddenly appreciated my own weakness and insignificance. I was a well-read skinny guy who wrote old-fashioned poetry and cultivated out-of-date opinions. All my friends were forty years older than me and watched in concerned bewilderment as I made a very literary mess of my life. I lived in a dream, defying the world in the name of some nineteenth-century ideal of beauty. I was the last of the Romantics. And I had failed at love.

I didn't yet listen to any modern music—to Robert's bored annoyance. I thought modern art an imposture perpetrated upon the gullibility of a pretentious public, none of whom dared admit that abstract painting meant nothing to them either. I had read Burroughs and Ginsberg and Genet, but their modernist experiments failed to register, I just accepted them as part of the general texture of the writing and more or less read around them.

Now at last I understood Rimbaud's renunciation. I had only too perfectly walked in the footsteps of my master. Like him, I had absorbed the traditions of post-renaissance Western poetry, following it fully into its decadence, where it became a kind of pseudo-religion for the intellectual elite of a society that had lost all faith in organized religion. My foray into Christianity was of a piece with this. The conversions to Catholicism of the decadent writers weren't conversions at all. They were simply upgrades of the same flight from modernity.

Rimbaud had believed in poetry as a valid and effective means of exploring the spirit world. While Baudelaire had attempted to reach the beyond with satanism and hashish, Rimbaud turned to absinthe and homosexual experimenting. While Baudelaire's blasphemies seem silly now to us, who haven't the substrate of belief to appreciate them, Rimbaud's sexually free-wheeling, druggy "alchemy of the word" hits embarrassingly close to home for us who remember the sixties.

At the end, Rimbaud embraced life in the material world, as the real truth which literature had deluded him out of. Being still young and eager for adventure, he tried his hand at gun-running in Africa, a pastime which led to his early end.

I looked now in Rimbaud-like disgust at books. I wanted to burn them. The literalism with which I approached the path of literature, *as if it were a religion*, the confidence that poetry could somehow magically transform my life, was mistaken. The failed affair with Robert seemed to make a lie of Shakespeare's sonnets. From the Bard to Baudelaire, wankers all.

Mine was the same error people fall into when they embrace any religion and expect "results." There *was* wisdom of a life-transforming sort in the culture I now rejected. But to discover what it was, and how to actually use it, I would have to make the long journey of renunciation, and return to it, as if from the dead. I had to win my own understanding of life.

Robert had tried to introduce me to modern classical music. He had rather an easier time of it enlightening me regarding gender politics. He explained, to my interested surprise, that my pretended heterosexuality with everyone important in my life was actually an oppressive and damaging compromise. That I could fall in love and or have my heart broken and never be allowed to mention it to a friend—that was rather worse than unfair. The situation wasn't really ameliorated by having gay friends and gay sex if I had to maintain a schizophrenic sequestration of these aspects of my life. None of this had even occurred to me. Of course I was out with Allen and Bill, who were actually famous for being out, but that did nothing for me. If you're famous, that legitimizes all sorts of things. I was, in my mind, just a fag. Robert was the first private person I'd met who was defiantly out, and his example beckoned with the force of freedom. (I hadn't taken into account that being out at music school wasn't quite the same as being out at Columbia.) Also, I loved him, and passion is defiant. I was ready for this fight, now that I had something to fight for.

Robert extended this insight into a general critique of heterosexual attitudes. I was soon reading de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex.* I discovered feminism, and thrilled with having this point of view, subjected everything

and everyone to its critique. I demanded of Danny Goldin why he didn't mind the assertion that I could drink him under the table but bristled at the suggestion that a woman could manage the same feat. I noted for the first time that all the depictions of women in Shakespeare were thin caricatures. Desdemona was a doormat, Lady Macbeth was allowed to be powerful only by first abandoning womanhood ("spirits of the air unsex me here"). Cleopatra was a cliché flighty irrational woman (though I would later learn, the rendering of her jealous competition with Octavia was spot-on). Gorgeous language covered for these weak depictions. I had become a rabid feminist, mostly in fun, though I did learn in earnest.

This was the second time in my life (the first had been AA, which made me rethink my Byronic persona), when I actually began to think critically, to take a new point of view and re-examine everything through it like a lens. Some things blurred entirely out of sight, while others came into shockingly close focus. It seemed like wonderful fun, but it was far more than that. I was thinking, really thinking! I was twenty-three.

I came out to Peggy. This was no news to her. "Really," she said, "you spend a year as the house-guest of a world-famous homosexual poet thirty years older than you, it wasn't hard to guess." I also asked her about her life, now with the perspective of Feminism. For the first time, I pondered her past with sensitivity. She was a brilliant, independent woman who had early on married and had two children. When being a suburban mom failed to content her utterly, her husband sent her to a psychiatrist who pumped her full of amphetamines to improve her outlook.

When she left her husband and took up an independent life in NYC, living for cheap at the Chelsea and working at the gift-shop of the Museum of Modern Art, she had a series of love affairs, typically men who had too much taste for the bottle. I rather fell into this category myself—Peggy used to refer to me as "kid dipso." "What can I do?" she would say. "I'm drawn to lushes."

Peggy lived a life of independence, which is costly, but money ultimately meant nothing to her. She passed on alimony in return for the full funding of her daughters' college educations. She was a strong and charismatic woman, with thick coils of braided hair heaped on her head. She favored heavy necklaces, and had a dark mole in the center of her forehead making a natural bindi. I don't think I ever saw her in a skirt. She was a bohemian great lady.

I had some apologizing to do for a few occasions over the years when I had disregarded her point of view on various topics, or treated her to certain aphorisms of eighteenth-century misogyny which I had mistaken for wit. Actually, she recalled every instance I was attempting to atone for in detail,

and was able to supplement the list. A very interesting thing about women. The full recollection of slights which one has had to absorb without comment or reaction is common to both sexes. But women retain the fine detail of conversation, while a man is likelier to remember only the general drift and perhaps a striking *bon mot*. It is no accident that the most authentic *hadith* (sayings traditionally attributed to the prophet Mohammad) have an *isnad* (detailed chain of transmission) that goes back to one of the prophet's wives.

I asked Peggy how she had put up with me. She said she put up with a lot from men in general, and she didn't see the point of fighting with me over attitudes I was bound to grow out of.

Young people don't often realize what a mercy it is that people don't take them seriously!

6: Allen Teaches Me to Sight-Write

We didn't realize it at the time, but literature had already been "disappeared." By the late seventies, TV had completely displaced print as the primary entertainment medium. The after-shock of that could be heard in Lucien's complaints about the bite the "talking heads" of the TV news had taken out of print journalism. Poetry was likewise vanishing. There were no literary cafés in Manhattan, no up-and-coming literary journals, no schools of writing clamoring to be heard over the din of the previous generation. If you compare what was happening in *music* and *painting* in NYC in 1981, with the absence of new literary authors, my point is proven beyond any odd example to the contrary that could be cited. (New and important literary authors there assuredly were, *somewhere*, but publishers, whose market was precipitously shrinking, couldn't afford to publish anything but genre fiction and similar low-brow high-sales material.)

And music would follow literature to oblivion, drowned in the tar-pit of the internet. Of course there's still popular music, but this is now pure product. By the end of the seventies the lesson of The Monkees and The Village People had been grasped. The ideal buying demographic is the lowest common denominator. And an auto-tuned supermodel singing about her rivalry with another girl, or a rapper churning out anti-social clichés, will outsell anything original, for the same reasons the big brands at the supermarket closed the local bakery. Anyone who isn't content with ersatz can record their own CD on free shareware and try to be heard over the chatroom din of the internet—good luck with that! The processed "stars" of contemporary pop are of course infinitely replaceable, so there's never a problem with obsolescence. Nothing truly new ever appears, but the succession of "new" artists are always just new enough.

Art continues to exist on a similar but higher-ticket basis. Since art became a speculative commodity, the prices got astronomic, and new artists continue to be *produced*, always with recognizable similarity to one or more of the art stars of the past, the past being the mid twentieth century. The artists are always young, which in business terms means manageable and replaceable.

How this relates to me is that literature had become commercially irrelevant, for the first time since the Dark Ages. Remember, Shakespeare wasn't watched and printed because everyone was terribly smart back in Tudor times. In fact he was rather a minor figure in literature back then. Many a mediocre writer of his time, successful and promptly forgotten, vastly outsold Shakespeare. Like Ben Jonson, who became poet laureate. No

one considered Shakespeare a contender for that honor. Shakespeare's living came from the ample leftovers of a vast banqueting table of popular entertainment.

But in our time, popular entertainment became a science, or perhaps we should call it a technology: reading was displaced by video. And that's one of the reasons why all my friends were thirty years older than me. They were the last of a literary realm that is no more, paragons of the vanished world that ran on print.

Innocent of how vastly things had changed, I went to poetry readings, lots of them, and read my own rhyming love poetry, addressed to a genderless second person singular. I also included some of my new, Christian-themed poetry. The best production of this period was *Doomsday*, which I may mention here because it included my first real learning from Allen.

I wanted to describe the Apocalypse in New York City. It began,

> Dozer on the hard bus terminal bench,
> shaken by the watchful cop, enemy of sleep . . .

I addressed a poetic panorama of insomniacs and night owls, promising the ultimate event: the Last Judgment. I wanted a visual setting for this, but couldn't figure out how to write it.

One evening I was walking with Allen along Eighth Street past Washington Square Park. We stopped at the arch and looked up Fifth Avenue towards the Empire State Building. I saw it like a movie director would, as the perfect setting for the scene I wanted, the descent of the apocalyptic angels with their trumpets. I asked Allen,

"How do you describe this? Where do you start?"

I knew he had a remarkable knack for realistic description, but I hadn't yet been particularly interested in it. It didn't fit in with the aesthetic I had learned from Poe and Baudelaire.

Standing next to Allen, I stared up the street, entranced by its dark-skied electric-lit drama, but without a clue where to begin. Allen told me to close my eyes, open them again, and remember what was the first *detail* that I noticed. The eye takes in the entire landscape, but can only focus on a single feature at a time. It is intuitively drawn to the most interesting one. What is it? We tried this over and over. Soon I didn't need to open and shut my eyes to see my mind selecting what was vivid.

Allen had taught me to observe my mind observing, and that the mind itself automatically gives aesthetically pleasing shape to sensory data by what it prioritizes and how it puts those things in sequence. He had taught

me to uncover the process by which my mind had automatically selected the visible details one by one to build the street scene for me, one which I naively perceived as immediately complete, as just "there." My mental image actually comprised a relatively small number of "minute particulars." The rest of the scene was left as a peripheral blur. The key details, as selected, could be easily transcribed in poetic phrases. When I got home, I wrote down what he'd shown me. My address to the sleepless now continued,

> Beyond those walls of stone one night,
> amid castellated rooftops black
> against the narrow city skies
> aglow with commerce' neon light,
> there, where the Empire State Building flares,
> looming, a mile up Fifth Avenue
> where glides the genteel cab and flat faced bus
> turns corner slow while long legged blondes walk by
> perfumed . . .

The rest of the poem had a few clever touches, like "Open your subway doors, O tomb!" but it was feeble dreaming compared to the lines I had traced with Allen to guide my hand. I did not yet understand the meaning of this poetic wisdom—witness the way I crudely pasted it into my silly itinerary of doomsday. But I had learned to poetically "draw from nature," and in the fullness of time I would comprehend what this technique meant to Allen and what it could mean to me.

This was the beginning of a real poetic understanding between Allen and I. A beginning that could never reach its end. As much as I learned from Allen, however proficient I became at the poetic art, I could never gain his unqualified approval—any more than he had his father's. Because I wrote like his father. My preferred style has always been lyric, metered and rhyming, polished and deliberately artistic. The heroic self-defining deeds of Allen's poetic life have been in *antithesis* to the classical tradition. Allen couldn't fathom how I could learn so much from him and then so perversely misuse my learning. He couldn't appreciate that my relation to him was not of antithesis but of *synthesis*. I was not trying to refute him any more than the flower "refutes" the bud. It was a tension between us never resolved.

7: Brett Rutherford

The poetry readings I attended were usually at the Saint Mark's Church. Sometimes a bar or a café would host one, a practice that never lasted since the open-reading poets never bought drinks or even coffee; in fact sometimes they brought their own with them, in paper cups from a deli down the street. Another place I frequented was Emily Glen's: she hosted a weekly open poetry reading in her apartment in the West Village, and there I met Brett Rutherford, who has remained my close friend ever since. He is the only real poet I ever met at an open reading, and a curious fellow he is.

Brett was born in rural Pennsylvania, somewhat south of Pittsburgh, to parents who had no idea what to make of their brilliant child. The father was early gone, replaced by a stepfather whose relationship with Brett was problematic. The only books in the house were the Sears Catalogue and the Bible. His parents' principal social diversion was tippling in beer gardens.

He left the local college before completing his bachelor's, getting on a bus for San Francisco with a copy of *Leaves of Grass* as his only guide book. His plan was to stay in California long enough to establish residency and then enroll in the University.

Brett went straight for Haight-Ashbury, the long, narrow hippie district alongside the panhandle of Golden Gate Park. Hippies and runaways had made the Haight a colorful if grimy drug-culture utopia. The borders of this region were made vague by Blacks from the neighboring Fillmore ghetto, and by the Hell's Angels, both groups drawn to the Haight by the promise of doped-up, "liberated" hippie chicks. The Angels were actually welcomed, as they formed an unofficial and tolerant police force. The city fathers, of course, viewed this fascinating alternative city with mounting alarm, which became more acute during Brett's time there: the Summer of Love.

Brett's hair, which he wore in a crew cut, was already much receded. He presently discovered that if he let it grow out, it made him look, depending on how carefully he combed it, "like Ben Franklin, or a mental patient." Wishing to fit in despite this minor disadvantage, he wore a vintage army officer's dress coat, a dark blue that might be mistaken for black, with a granny shawl whose blue tint blended into it, and completed the ensemble with beads.

Brett immediately found himself editing an underground newspaper, *The Haight-Ashbury Free Press*, which ran for two issues. (Not a despicable run: the classic psychedelic paper of the period, *The San Francisco Oracle*, only managed twelve issues.) He was the only journalist who dared attend the funeral procession of the Hell's Angel Chocolate George—so named because

of his fondness for chocolate milk. A two-hundred motorcycle entourage accompanied the body which looked, Brett recalls, oddly like a Russian patriarch with his full stiff beard and gleaming motorcycle regalia. The above-ground media were all afraid to attend; the alternative press was also absent, though for more interesting reasons. The radical *Berkeley Barb* looked down on the hippies and all their apolitical works as irrelevant to serious revolutionary action. The hippie paper, the *Oracle*, was too spiritual, or perhaps just too stoned, to busy itself with the Hells Angels. Thus Brett, the only newsman there, acquired serious street cred.

Brett's San Francisco adventure ended when the city fathers decided the time had come to clear out the hippie infestation and gave the police free rein to beat and arrest anything wearing beads. Brett returned to college in Edinboro, Pennsylvania for another two years. The San Francisco adventure had been liberating and harrowing in equal measure.

Brett told me that he had essentially decided his worldview, one based on science fiction, by the age of six, and I believe him. He is a rationalist, a staunch enemy of religion and what he considers crypto-religion, like Marxism or psychoanalysis. I think he might have become open to a broader spectrum of beliefs, but the terrible ending of his journey to the west caused him to retreat to securer ground in more ways than one. Though Brett's mind roved over huge expanses, mastering much of Western classical music and Chinese literature, he only really accepted modernism as regards computer technology. For the rest, the world reached completion in the days of the Dowager Empress of China (whose death in 1912 ended the Qing dynasty). The Romanovs in Russia were the final legitimate government, and the last music really worth listening to was composed by Elgar.

Brett's cosmos is indeed one shaped by science fiction, but bear in mind that science fiction, despite the antecedents its enthusiasts claim, really got its start with Jules Verne in the nineteenth century. Science fiction, like impressionist painting, is a part of *early* modernism and it isn't always all that modern in its content. Brett's interior science fiction universe is a kind of space opera, a high-tech version of the pre-modern world, like the tableaux of *Star Wars* where heroes contend incongruously with light-sabres and pop-Taoism in a world where faster-than-light travel is mastered. So it is in Brett's interior world. The science is futuristic, the digitization of all of culture is a given, but the same fantastic elements known to Poe and Hoffman remain—albeit secularized, their presence explained as mere manifestations of physical laws and life forms not yet fully understood.

I discussed occult phenomena with Brett more than once, and he agreed with me that they have no objective value for us. But while I see them as outward indications of certain spiritual states, Brett's point of view is

clinically scientific. Thus his encounters have more the character of horror fiction than of mystical adventures. (Horror fiction is, as it were, the sub-basement of the SF universe. The identity of the Horror and SF worlds becomes apparent whenever the creatures of the gothic imagination have to be explained: from H. P. Lovecraft to Anne Rice, it all comes down to space aliens.)

Brett told me that there was a swamp at the edge of his college town, Edinboro, in Pennsylvania, reputedly bottomless—the locals used it to conveniently dispose of unwanted cars and refrigerators. The sullen murky waters would close over whatever was entrusted to them, with no trace beyond the first few huge sullen bubbles as they sank. Brett discovered that there was an *entity* that lived in this tarn. He discovered that he could waken it by imagining mathematical shapes, spontaneous geometries that somehow seemed right. These he would use to focus lines of force from his "third eye" area. He would call up the thing, and know he had succeeded, not only by the prickling of hairs on the back of his own neck, but by the terrified flight of small fish, amphibians and birds at the margin of the water as it rose. He didn't do it often, since it had no purpose, but it became an occasional private indulgence, when he wanted to enjoy a good scare. *Then it began to come unsummoned*.

There was a dog in town, a stray befriended by the college students who would feed it pizza crusts and suchlike frat scraps. The canine followed Brett on one of his strolls down to the swamp. It was winter, there was only a narrow path cleared down to the frozen waters. Brett had walked there, preceded by the dog, intending no more than a winter evening stroll. The dog sensed the entity first: the frightened creature flattened its ears to its skull and howled at the frozen waters. A thrill of fear went through Brett as well: the entity was awake and rising. He went as fast as he could back to the town on the icy path, only four blocks' distance. The dog followed behind him, walking backwards, yowling, to keep at bay the thing which it could see and Brett could only sense. Finally, unable to unrun it, Brett turned into a doorway and waited. It didn't pass him by. It paused and waited too. Finally, Brett shouted, "What do you want?" He felt something like an immaterial claw stroke him *through* his face, ice-cold, knife-deep. Then it was gone.

On another occasion, Brett was describing these experiences to some biology majors on the college campus, who expressed skepticism at Brett's account. They demanded a demonstration. Brett demurred, out of very sensible caution, and went on to say that he didn't think his summons would even work at this distance. He'd only called it up when he was right at the swamp. This last observation persuaded the listeners that Brett was telling tall tales. To hear his honesty questioned woke in Brett an indignation

stronger than fear, so he made the attempt. Once more he channeled the vector lines from his pineal gland through his "third eye," focused them through an interlocking puzzle-structure of spontaneous geometries, and shot the focused ray out towards the swamp.

It came. Brett and his friends were at a window overlooking the crowded springtime college quad. They watched the progress of the entity limned in the parting of the people on the grass, slinking away before it *en masse* in an evident if amorphous outline. Begged by the skeptics, Brett put an end to his transmission and the invisible shadow passed.

These were not Brett's only occult adventures, but they will suffice to show that Brett is not your typical limited positivist, the sort who thinks that having no imagination is a scientific virtue. He is alive to the psychic forces and beings around him, but they seem to him generally uninterested in human beings, and quite likely to be malignant if disturbed. This is a view of undiscovered and alternate worlds that owes everything to science fiction and nothing to scripture. Yet, as an author of real poetry and excellent horror novels, that make manifest much of the unseen, Brett has truly psychic insight, which he just doesn't take that seriously. One might say that for Brett, seeing *isn't* believing.

Brett returned to Pennsylvania from the troubles in San Francisco to continue at college, and edit a mimeographed underground newspaper called *The Edinboro Prometheus,* a libertarian anti-war journal. Back in the Keystone State, he recovered his equilibrium and gathered his nerve, like the giant Antaeus whose powers were restored as often as he touched his mother earth. Brett remains in some ways forever the boy from rural Pennsylvania, for whom the wider world will always be somewhat frightening, for whom the periphery of his native village seems the right-sized limit of peregrination, beyond which "there be monsters" — of which his swamp entity is certainly the readiest symbol.

Nonetheless, Brett could not be content to stoop forever under the intellectual low ceiling of small town life. After two years, he left for NYC, arriving just after the Stonewall riots. He immediately involved himself in the printing industry, acquiring a letterpress and setting type by hand, the same way Gutenberg did. He was making chap-books for poets that they could sell themselves for a few dollars at readings. This soon developed into Xeroxed and hand-bound editions, and when computers came into the picture he learned how to use them. I remember seeing him produce elaborate fonts on a dot-matrix printer long before they were standard on word-processing shareware. Brett taught himself the printing trade, got work in it, and was always the first to know about relevant computer developments. He made a nice living explaining it all to printers who had to

upgrade to the more efficient new ways. Eventually all these wondrous advances pretty much eliminated the printing industry, since everything that printers had originally done by hand, then learned to elaborately program, could finally be done instantly on a desktop by anyone.

Brett impressed me by the quality of his poetry when I first heard him at an open reading, and when he and I went out for coffee afterwards, he startled me by criticizing the mixed fonts and careless kerning on the menu. I'd never met anyone like this.

Brett had a loft apartment in the East Twenties, which held in its ample space his remarkable collection of recorded music. Brett has a life-long determination to render himself secure from any such privation of literature and music as he experienced in childhood. Over the years I have watched his collection of music go from LP's to reel-to-reel tapes to CDs to hard drives, the quantity of his holdings increasing at every iteration. At present he trades vast blocs of recorded music with like-minded persons over the internet, and his holdings, all carefully catalogued, are staggering, more than could be listened to in several lifetimes. (As of 2018, he had 100,000 books, 30,000 albums, and 25,000 comics and graphic novels in digital form.) He is spectacularly generous with what he has. I told him I was interested in Beethoven, and he gave me on CDs the complete works of the composer in several different versions.

I met Brett at Emily Glen's. She was a matriarch of the Manhattan open poetry world, had hosted readings since the sixties. By the time I came on the scene, poetry was as over as folk music in Greenwich Village, and readings such as those Glen ran were the last fading echo of what had been. Unaware that I had arrived after the party was over, I came to her readings week after week, in my new sobriety, waiting my turn to read verses. I greatly impressed Brett with a poem about a vampire, one I had written as a Gothic allegory of my infatuation with the blond boy in the Ninth Circle.

The other poets I met on the open mike itinerary ranged from shockingly to ludicrously bad. I recall one fellow who earnestly composed nothing but limericks about the lives of opera composers. But the outpatients and obsessives were the exception, mostly one was treated to polluted streams of consciousness. The only qualifications needed to be a poet here were a loud voice and a shameless mind. The Saint Mark's open readings drew perhaps a hundred and fifty readers weekly, no audience, just aspiring poets, who strolled unabashed out of the premises as soon as they'd voided themselves of their creativity. If you were late to sign up for the reading roster, you would listen to everyone else and finally declaim to an empty room!

I thought perhaps I would do better with the public, who, if not predisposed to poetry, at least didn't suppose themselves poets. I memorized my own poems, a number of poems by Poe, including his 234-line *Tamerlane*, as well as a few speeches from Shakespeare, and went busking. I figured the reception of the Shakespeare and Poe would tell me if my poor success at readings were due to my own slender merits or the philistinism of the crowd. I offered a xeroxed volume of my own poetry for sale.

The interest I awoke was slight. Occasionally I'd draw a crowd of twenty or thirty when I recited in Washington Square Park. More often I'd only attract the attention of passing drunks. It was good performance experience, but finally quite dispiriting. I made this attempt in the beginning of the summer, and by Labor Day I was done with reciting poetry uninvited, indoors or out.

But Brett thought I had great abilities, and he was the first person to tell me so. Allen and Lucien had recognized my potential, but Brett thought I had already arrived. This was a new and agreeable sensation! Brett's liking for my work was rather more than a new instance of his general charity. Brett is the only poet I have met who maintains the old standard of clear expression. Free verse is his only concession to modernism. While the rest of the world, including Allen, had made stream-of-consciousness the ordering principle of their art, Brett's carefully worded and coherent poems always tell a story or make a considered point. Brett and I were and are artistic allies on this head. We agree that the exigencies of *communication* trump all other poetic concerns. Say whatever you like, but say it clearly.

Allen, a genuine modernist, still wrote very clearly. But he had no very clear idea of what he wanted to say. Though Buddhism provided him with an intellectual framework in the last third of his life, he was never able to tell a story in a poem or make a precise point. He always believed that the authenticity of direct uncensored expression made for the strongest, most beautiful poetry. But *narrative* requires a conscious selection: the artistry of storytelling lies in what you leave out. Thus Allen wrote nothing but self-observation, the journalism of a journal. Allen's poetry has no destination, it's an everlasting meander—deliberately so, for he wanted to chronicle the graceful intuitive motions of the mind. Which is fine, if you have the rich sensitivities, poetic gifts and beautiful mind of Allen Ginsberg!

Brett's aesthetics were the antithesis of this. Having grown up by the coal pits amidst a religious stupidity that was deeper and darker still, Brett first clawed his way to light via Ayn Rand and SF. He is a rationalist, laissez-faire capitalist of the first water. He moved to the big city and taught himself a trade without any parents to help him or a school to guide him. In his experience, the deliberate rational application of intelligence and effort

conquer all. Brett really believes only in reason, and dismisses the very existence of the unconscious. He thinks of art as the mind's way of disporting itself, a gentlemanly entertainment of the free intellect. With absolute confidence in his somewhat antiquated values, Brett is able to give narrative form to his fancies as we perplexed modernists cannot. Thus he writes what could be Twilight Zone episodes in verse: his poems are narratives as thought-out and condensed as those in a graphic novel.

His finest literary work is however his nature poetry, in which his clear language, careful observation and joyously disabused Lucretian materialism combine to produce truly beautiful verse, well meriting inclusion in any anthology of serious modern American poets—from which his work is conspicuously absent. A brief example must suffice, from his "Autumn Dragged Screaming" in the collection *Crackers at Midnight*, which tells a Ray Bradbury-like tale of a summer's end dreadfully extended, a harvest-tide that never ends in autumn:

> Sparrows engorged, squirrels spherical
> with acorn overflow,
> eat all and bury nothing.
> And the flowers just keep on,
> well, flowering.
> Only the birches are shivering,
> reading truly the Northern Light,
> the wisping fall of Orionid meteors,
> white trunk flagpoles alert, on edge,
> expectant pencils stuck in the ground.[1]

Brett thus side-steps modernism. Though he lived for thirty years in New York City, he enjoyed its classical concerts and Chinese restaurants while remaining oblivious to its status as the capitol of the twentieth century. The new music and the new art dismayed him as often as he could not ignore them. He mentioned to me running into Andy Warhol a few times—most people did, Andy was out and about a lot. Brett described the pallid artist, with his white wig and pink rosacea'd nose, as presenting the appearance of a man-sized albino possum. A wonderfully vivid description, and particularly revealing. Brett's Lovecraftian take on Andy casts him, like the Edinboro swamp entity, as a monster on the limits of tolerable awareness.

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1 *Autumn Dragged Screaming* in **Crackers at Midnight,** Poet's Press, Pittsburgh PA 2018

I saw a lot of myself in Brett. We made a united front against modernism in poetry. Brett was eleven years older than me. He had long before fully formulated his beliefs, and decided what he was willing to consider and what he would dismiss. I was in synch with him then, less through earned conviction than through ignorance. I had certain vague misgivings about his synthesis. It seemed—incomplete. Too many rules, too many exclusions. He was a real autodidact, with the consequent areas of remarkable knowledge and vast unanticipated gaps. He'd made his own decisions about a few too many things, and gotten too used to having things exactly his way. He was, on the intellectual level, as well as the personal one, a confirmed bachelor. Unlike me, he avoided messy catastrophic attachments, emotional and intellectual.

But if Brett was not cut out to be my teacher, he was an excellent ally and friend. I benefited immensely from his encouragement, and the example of his great enthusiasms: China, Egypt and the classical world. It is no coincidence that, having been Brett's friend for forty years, I find myself to some extent embodying his interests, with a graduate degree in classics and enough Chinese and Egyptian to make translations and original contributions to research in those fields. My affection and respect for Brett made me take him as a standard and exemplar of culture.

8: Melt-Down

Alongside much energetic poetizing, I was also trying my hand at prose. I would get together with Danny and Josh Goldin, my twin-brother pals from Columbia, and we amused ourselves by writing parodic essays and poems which were often disgusting, and in our opinion, always hilarious. I had been experimenting with supernatural fiction, had gotten about ten pages of a vampire novel written, and there gotten stuck. It occurred to me that I might, with the aid of the Goldins, complete it, half-earnest half-parody. They were game, so we got together and demolished case after case of beer as the chapters rolled out. We took turns at the typewriter and we all three improvised the material. It was a New York Jewish comedy writers' room. We had an incredible amount of fun doing it.

I would later flesh out whatever we produced with description and narrative development. The effect of the book was disconcerting. It veered from passages of melodramatic poetic prose, as earnest as they were purple, into explosive demolitions of the scene so carefully set, often confounding the narration with snarky authorial observations and arguments with the characters about how the story should be going.

The book began with a description of the vampire's castle, dark, forbidding and wondrous, in fact a recognizable descendant of Poe's description of the House of Usher, vacant eyelike windows and all—and ended with the anthropomorphic flapping down of its drawbridge to laugh.

Brett was horrified at this sophomoric production. He really liked the purple passages, and believed in the old-fashioned literary modes which I was now sarcastically outgrowing. But he made an interesting argument. He said, "Of course you can make fun of the conventions of narrative. You're superior to them because they're artificial. All art requires that certain allowances be made for its conventions. What you're doing is like making fun of a painting because its images are actually flat and the other side of the canvas is blank. Making fun of art because it isn't reality gets a cheap, easy laugh, but it undoes the reader's interest in going further. Why should he take your work seriously if you don't?"

Here Brett was quite right. The patch-work construction of the novel, with me writing a serious narrative and then making that into a *piñata* with the Goldins was too schizophrenic to succeed. It was a haphazard, uncommitted undertaking, and though it was excellent practice, the results deserved the oblivion they earned.

I showed a few chapters of the novel to Burroughs. He didn't have much to say, beyond, keep at it, every writer has to write a lot of bad prose

before he can manage some that's any good. See where it goes. I recall two of his specific observations though.

Burroughs paused at my transcription of the vampire's Moravian accent.

"What's all this?" he asked, pointing to the eccentric spelling.

I explained what was meant.

"Oh," said Burroughs, in the slow terse plainspoken tones of a Missouri plainsman. "Furriner." (Foreigner). It amused me that the character's being a vampire made no impression: all that registered was him being "not from around here."

Another time he asked what had become of one of the characters he had found somewhat interesting.

"Oh, I killed him a chapter back, I was done with him."

"You killed him. Now he's gone," uttered Burroughs in his best deadpan. "Ha." He paused. "Ha."

Indeed he was right. The characters who populate one's fiction recur, inescapable as the author's own voice.

At this time I was still something of a shoplifter, often boosting new art books from one store to sell to one next to it for liquor money. I was also still very taken with Dickens. One evening I visited Bill after one of my raids. I favored a woolen navy pea jacket since its soft and yielding cloth accommodated books without noticeable bulging, and the military cut make it look smart and trim no matter what ballast I carried.

That night I pulled out my whole haul—perhaps twelve fat Penguin paperback Dickens novels— and piled it on Bill's dining room table, retrieving volumes from down the sleeves, tucked into my pants from behind, pinioned against my sides by my upper arms. Bill examined them, flipped through a few of them, each of them several hundred pages thick, tested their heft, and at last pronounced,

"God! What a wind-bag!"

The only time I heard Bill offer a deeper critique of literature was when I asked him about Lovecraft. This inquiry was indeed in his wheel-house, for what Bill wrote was thematically science fiction. Under the poetic prose, the experimental techniques, the explicit sex, you really have in Burroughs free-form SF, and perhaps his work would be better viewed as an apogee of science fiction rather than a by-way of avant-garde literature. A comparison with P. K. Dick seems to me fairer and more favorable than one with Joyce or Genet. In any event, SF was what he read. Thus it was that he offered this surprisingly engaged critique of H. P. L.

"His stories all start 'Not under torture would I reveal what I saw that night,' and when you get to the end and he finally shows you his unspeakable horror, what is it? A bunch of giant worms writhing in Jell-O."

(Brett offered a similar view of this Lovecraftian trope, which he referred to as "the thing in the final paragraph.")

It was now Spring of 1980, and I couldn't go on with Columbia. I had pretty much quit drinking, but now I had a kind of crisis of belief. To be sure it was precipitated by the failure of my affair with Robert, but that was only the catalyst. Enough cracks had appeared in my worldview for it all to collapse. I'd rapidly ingested a number of unrelated ideologies. The AA analysis of the addictive personality, the Pauline schema of salvation, and feminism were now jostling one another in the ruins of my romantic poet ideology of excess, intoxication and deliberate doom.

As for my beliefs, they weren't very clearly articulated, but there was a coherent core to what I thought. Rimbaud's "disordering of the senses" and Baudelaire's "get drunk!" which I had followed so literally were attempts to "break on through to the other side." Implicitly, I believed there *was* an "other side" to break through to, and that poetry was the means of reaching it. Whether I took Prospero or Paul as my guide, this was the itinerary.

But it hadn't work out. You might say that my life was ruined by the Bible and Shakespeare. I had failed at love. I hadn't conquered New York with my poetry. I hated everything I was supposed to be learning at college. There was nothing backing it all up. Love, learning, literature: ludicrous. I had been suckered by other people's hypocritical homage to a bunch of fancy abstractions.

I resolved to begin understanding things anew. To see what people really *did* respect and believe in, since what they told me was worthwhile was obviously not what counted in the world. I needed to find out what was *real*. This was my authentic Rimbaud moment. At last I understood his final injunction: *one must be absolutely modern.* I attempted to reconstruct my universe out of the most basic certainties, to find the axiomatic facts of experience. I turned to the *physical* world for the irreducibly real. It was indisputably *there*. No more would I be a weakling blinkered by books. I trusted only what I could touch.

What was real? Power, money, sex. What made history? Whatever produced the maximum noise and smoke: battles, factories. Force appeared to be the ordering principle of reality. I still believed, perhaps incredibly, in poetry. I was after all a poet, this was what I did, and perhaps the only thing that I could do supremely well. It was what I *had* to do. I determined to create a new and true poetry that would compel by its expression of what

was real. (It somehow didn't occur to me that the retention of my poetic ambition was antithetical to my determination to master practical reality.)

All existence was obviously doomed and apparently futile. What actually had a legitimate claim to my attention, here in this oasis of chaos and boredom in the midst of the infinite non-being that had preceded and would follow my existence? Sex and death, orgasm and annihilation! I took a very biological view of life: the human form appeared to me a complex edifice entirely at the service of the genitals: all thought was a misdirecting digression from the dirty joke of existence.

I thought of some of Burroughs' utterances. He had told me we were no more responsible for our actions than rats in a maze. When I asked him about love (he had, in his youth, hacked off the top joint of one of his pinky fingers to make a Van Gogh point to some boy he had a crush on), he told me that romance was the product of sexual repression and refined sentimentality. Burroughs' response to this ultimately unfunny view of the human condition was to drug himself silly for the greater part of his adult life. I had already learned too much from AA to feel that Bill had any existential wisdom to impart. AA had taught me that choosing drugs is an act of self-pity. And from Nietzsche I had learned to regard all pessimism as the most mediocre of insights.

(Speaking of human responsibility, Allen told me he thought human beings were only one third responsible for what happened to them. Forty years later, having seen what a role luck plays in worldly success, Allen's estimate still sounds to me about right.)

Nietzsche became my primary guide through the new world of the real. I had been reading Nietzsche off and on for years, since Guy Nickson introduced me to him back in high school. I had always admired his startling pronouncements, but had been unable to find the center from which his insights radiated. Now I had experienced a leveling of all my moral and cultural beliefs which paralleled his. He had foreseen the cultural and moral chaos of the early twentieth century. Where Rimbaud ended, Nietzsche began. I had, a hundred years later, caught up with it. His poetic, inconsistent, at times mystical philosophy provided me with a universal critique of the vaguely defined and comforting beliefs that actually sustain western civilization, from spirituality to patriotism to democracy. Of course Nietzsche, rigorously read, quickly put paid to my amateur Christianity.

Nietzsche set a standard for unflinching psychological insight and rational integrity. Once he drew and proved a conclusion, he let that conclusion draw him wheresoever, no matter how uncomfortable the consequences. Nietzsche taught me how to *think*, and my scholarly style owes everything to him. My preferred mode is his: the literary sermon,

fervent and urgent, joyfully wicked, the goal being always to say in a paragraph what anyone else would say in a book.

I still had use for Ovid and Homer and ancient epic generally: their childlike fascination with sex and death seemed to me to go to the very heart of the matter. But I now turned my attention to more current epic events. I began reading *The London Economist* every week, to get an understanding of what was actually happening in the world. Economics were clearly what was happening. I started reading Galbraith and Marx. (The latter I absorbed through popularizations: the turgid fake-Hegelian style and the personal pettiness of his own writings defeated me.) And just for fun, I read some Freud. I was assembling an intellectual arsenal.

So what was worth doing in an existence that appeared to be a kind of metaphysical shoving match? It was finally the Bhagavad Gita that provided a new overall intellectual framework for me. I made a highly selective adaptation of its philosophy and meditative techniques.

Though it would be years before I read Shakespeare again, I did find a new way to use the Bible. Reading it now in a modern translation with footnotes explaining the historical context, I found, like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, that the book contained unsuspected pleasures. The Book of Judges was a violent, anarchistic history of sorties, skirmishes and vendettas that matched the Arabic *Seven Odes* and the Icelandic Eddas for serene beauty, casual mayhem and terse ironic wit. Clearly, the Hebrew Bible was no mere superseded prologue to the New Testament! I well appreciated Nietzsche's observation that the latter had been appended to the former like a Rococo chapel built onto the side of one of the monoliths of Stonehenge!

9: Athlete of the Spirit

I made myself a personal yoga out of what I'd learned from AA, the Gita, Freud and Nietzsche. I found it easy to stay off alcohol, and indeed to quit smoking, since I now had a battery of sophisticated methods, from (Freudian) observation of my nearly unconscious train of thought leading up to urges to smoke or drink, to yogic visualizations and meditations ("the self stilled in Self like a lamp in a windless place . . . withdrawn from the constituents of nature like a tortoise withdrawing its limbs into its shell . . . the senses are busied with their proper objects, what has that to do with me?") I became a cult unto myself, as I tried to become what the Gita calls an "athlete of the spirit." It was strenuous, but effective.

I started working out, I took a class in Ta Kwon Do, and though I never made any real progress at this, I did learn some useful basic athlete attitudes at the dojo. The no excuses, push yourself, pain is gain platitudes of the gym struck me as full of pragmatic wisdom. The martial arts training didn't last more than a year. I was in it because I wanted to become some kind of spiritual warrior, a *kshatriya* like Arjuna and the Pandavas. One day I was in the stinky locker room thinking my thoughts, and listening to middle-class guys bitching about their ex-wives, and realized these people had nothing in common with me. They might call it a dojo, but it was nothing more than an overpriced gym-class. I could just as well pump iron, wear out my running shoes and work up a sweat on my own.

I made myself a well-toned, though by no means muscular, body. This seemed to me amazing. I had been terribly thin, nearly emaciated. I had smoked, and took a girlish pride in my gauntness. I don't know how bad I looked, but I do recall one summer day going to the newsstand in a light t-shirt, shorts and flip-flops. The black kid at the register took one look at me and said, "Put some clothes over you, you nasty little thing!" Well, now I had meat on my bones, and no longer looked like a chicken not worth stewing.

In Nietzsche's psychology of the will I recognized something I'd encountered countless times in AA. The main act of the therapeutic event that is an AA meeting is the narrative, the "drunk-a-logue," someone's story of their drinking career. At the heart of this tale is always the moment when the drinker hit bottom, had an experience so painful, humiliating or frightening that it made them teachable, willing to entertain any proposal that offered an escape.

In the meetings, they always said, "don't compare, identify." Pay no attention to the outward ways in which the speaker's history differs from your own, just empathize. If you did this, the meeting worked its magic, and

by the time you left you had handily defeated the craving for drink for another day.

When we want to control ourselves, to stop some particular behavior, to not over-eat, smoke, drink, lose our temper, whatever, we tend to go about it in the way most opposed to one that will succeed. We fixate on the activity in question, think deliberately about what we must *not* do. Just as your car will automatically drift in the direction the driver is looking, the will directs itself to the object of contemplation. That which is forbidden, fixedly considered, becomes irresistible.

Or else we focus on the benefits we expect to get from our abstinence. But these are so tentative and imaginary that they cannot outbid what immediate gratification offers. The present evils of one's craving and discomfort outweigh any hypothetical future good.

What one needs to do is concentrate on the *worst possible consequences* of one's present course of action. To visualize the moment when you've totally run out of road. For the alcoholic, it's understanding you really *don't* know where you'll end up if you take that drink, that you can't control it or stop after only so much, that you *will* end up wrecking your car or behaving so badly you lose your marriage, hemorrhage from your esophagus—fill in your own image of helpless fear. Only the most vivid present sense of powerless desperation will do. When you shudder with dread, that's when the will kicks in. If it's tobacco you're trying to quit, picture that morning cough, that permanent sore throat, that desperate gasping after you run for the bus—find your panic-inducing image. If you can't come up with that, you're not ready to quit.

Willing liberates, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra explains in his chapter "On Redemption." But what is willing?

Not for nothing does "will" compose the future tense in English! The will doesn't function in reverse. You can't will to *not do* something, any more than you can will something into being undone. Psychologically, the idea is already the deed: by the time you imagine yourself not doing some action, you've already imagined yourself having done it. To bring the will into play, you need to focus on something new and future, and you can only do that effectively when you use some fearful image as a springboard. Once you've touched on terror you are ready to will your success, to picture the restored relationships or physical well-being that will be the outcome of your not drinking and feel your drive toward them as a liberation. The will is not just a kind of deliberate desire, it's mental reflex that is designed to answer threats. If you can't picture to yourself the threat, you cannot engage the will. Once the will is engaged, the outcome of your self-control doesn't seem just a pallid imaginary good.

The positive will transforms the present and redeems the past by making the pain of what already is the very engine of new actions. The will is steered by fear. So powerful a steed is only directed by the spur and the whip of terror! With a spring into freedom you now decide and choose differently, and the decision thus made is binding. The will has been focused and now it leads.

I saw room after room of alcoholics hear each other's stories and re-experience the great initial victory, the "conversion experience," the initiatory near-death in which they found the power to do what was impossible for them so long as it remained a vague someday wish. They focused the will. Like a method actor, you access a memory to play a role. The analogy with the actor's art is dimly and peripherally sensed by AA, witness their catch-phrase "fake it till you make it."

So, with meditation techniques, Nietzschean psychology, and a radical change in my physical habits, I easily succeeded in putting myself beyond the immediate power of the compulsion to drink and smoke. This did not however address the underlying unhappiness that kept me in such pain that anesthesia seemed to me a glorious prospect. Some of this was psychological, and would take many years to unravel. Some of this was imposed upon me by outside circumstances, such as the wicked stupidity of our society which has no place for a poet or a scholar. This latter level of analysis, which is political, AA carefully eschews, which is why it is so welcome in prisons and the workplace.

Nietzsche led me his to Greek precursor, Heraclitus, the fifth-century BC Greek pre-Socratic philosopher who believed that conflict and opposition were the basis of reality. Heraclitus' complete surviving works, a short collection of aphorisms which one could read through in twenty minutes, were available in a beautiful translation by Ezra Pound's friend Guy Davenport. I recognized in Heraclitus a world-view very similar to that I'd encountered in de Sade in the Grove Press translations I'd read as a boy, and found anew in Krishna's theophany in the Gita. I acquired De Sade's major works in French, which I read with ease by now, for the first time appreciating his remarkable humor. I was not now interested in the sexual acrobatics, but the philosophical passages which occupied as much space as the erotica. De Sade's concept of Nature operating in an ambiance of Crime was a deliberately shocking version of Heraclitus view—though direct influence is out of the question. Evidently certain conclusions are universal when one tries to create a purely materialist metaphysics. Oddly enough, Poe's late excursus into philosophical writing, *Eureka*, presented a complementary theory of power.

Ensorceled by Nietzsche and a number of more exotic but concording authors, I had succeeded, in nineteen-eighty, in becoming an early twentieth-century intellectual, which is not so mean a feat. I had covered the fifty years from the death of Poe to 1900 in less than a year. Probably Nietzsche and his Will to Power so appealed to me because I saw myself as particularly weak, effeminate and powerless. A philosophy which made it possible to imagine myself as on a par with the heroes of the Iliad and the Mahabharata had obvious appeal. In a way it was like when I was a small boy, terrified of my gigantic angry father, and imagined that when I grew up I would become a fireman or the strong man in a circus.

That semester I decided I was through with school. I never even went to the finals, When the dean called me in, very concerned, to ask me what was wrong—a year before, in my initial semester, I'd withdrawn with a medical leave. Now I bluntly told him I had sabotaged my own classes since it was all completely meaningless.

Very wisely, he decided I should take a year off from school and hold down a job. If I could manage that, he'd consider readmitting me if I wished.

I was delighted. I wanted to work, to earn some money—money at least was real, after the limited provisional manner of things in human experience. I got a job in a book bindery. We printed up bound volumes of business deals, contracts and such. I worked on an assembly line, gluing pieces of cardboard to the cloth of the cover, folding down the fabric, then running it through rollers make sure the materials adhered. That's all I did, over and over, for eight hours a day. This was reality with a vengeance! The reality of wage slavery under capitalism, dehumanizing repetitive industrial work: an experience significant enough to make it into the poetry I was writing at the time:

> Every night he left the factory in a daze,
> heavily-slowly going home.
> Resigned, he ate, went to bed, easily
> sinking beneath the wave of sleep.
>
> He worked on the assembly line
> and all his days were trances
> and through his nightly dreams
> flowed the conveyor belt.
> His hands twitched through the automatic patterns,
> his ears retained the hum of the machines.

I thought about philosophy as I worked on the line. I would become so excited by my ideas that I began to work faster and faster, till the completed covers stacked up higher and higher to my right. Which made the worker at the next station look bad. I counteracted this by taking frequent breaks in the bathroom, where I'd read the Gita or the Upanishads for fifteen minutes to get a good passage to ponder. I did a lot of thinking in that long, garage-like building amid the din of machinery. I got a reputation as a good worker who suffered from stomach problems.

There were two Italian-American girls there who took care of stamping the titles onto the volumes. They were dating two Italian-American cousins, both of whom were named Anthony, who were known as "the Ant-nees." One of them was fond of saying to his girlfriend, "You are a pain in my left nut, prosperity to my right."

The other workers were mostly middle-aged women, a few men who operated the heavy machinery, one of whom was a drunk, who got well swozzled at the Christmas party with everyone's blessing. The foreman was a man named Sal, whom the workers privately referred to as "the Slime." He quite disliked me and addressed me as "college boy."

It was then that, for the first time, I took an interest in popular music. I thought this would help me to take the rhythmic pulse of the times in which I lived. I began listening to Punk and New Wave. The artist who meant the most to me was Iggy Pop. I was in fullest reaction now against anything formal, florid or conventional, I wanted art that was urgent and authentic, which only expressed what absolutely had to be said. Iggy seemed to me to speak with a new truth. My favorite album of his was the live one, *Metallic K.O.*, on which I loved best the songs *Gimme Danger* and the cover of *Louie Louie*.

In a similar spirit, I began listening to the composers of the second Viennese school, particularly Webern, whose brief, lapidary compositions epitomized the epigrammatic perfection, the pitiless concision, I felt necessary to get to the heart of any matter. Here was Heraclitan music!

10: "Cured" of Homosexuality

At this time I began to reconsider my sexuality. I was reading Freud, and through him I discovered the unconscious, the subliminal determinism that underlies our conscious decisions and colors our emotional responses.

This example of Freudian insight stands out in memory. One morning I had quarreled with my father on the ride to the book factory. He drove me. Since the whole focus of my life till then had been NYC, I hadn't yet learned to drive. Later that day I heard on the radio that someone had shot President Reagan. Despite my contempt for this shabby actor who shilled for a politics of naked greed, I was nearly in tears.

I soon realized that the president, like any authority figure (policeman, priest, teacher &c.) was an object to whom one unconsciously transfers feelings towards one's parents. I was very angry with my father, and the attack on the national father figure seemed the realization of my unconscious violent impulses towards my actual father. It seemed, to my unconscious, as though my rage had had a magical efficacy. The tears in my eyes were at once repentance for my impulses, and a means of distancing myself from that guilt, a demonstration of innocence. I was sorry I had caused this, and my repentance exculpated me, showed I was not the sort of person who ever *could have* caused it. Such illogical logic, made of self-contradicting layers, is a parade example of the magical, "primary process" thinking of the unconscious.

Whatever you may think of Freud's theories—which he presented as tentative, scientific hypotheses, to be revised in the light of new evidence, not as dogmas—whatever you think of psychoanalysis, Freud's discovery and description of the unconscious puts him on a level with Newton as an explorer of reality.

I tentatively accepted the Freudian model, according to which a change of sexual orientation might be possible. (That this was not so in fact, I would discover.) I had come out to my mother in the ecstatic early optimism of my relationship with Robert. Her initial reaction was, "Don't tell your father—it would kill him."

She, a practicing child psychiatrist, had begged me to see a therapist to change my gender preference. I recall telling her, a bit wickedly, "Look at it this way. There'll never be another woman." At that time I had rejected the idea of having my sexuality "treated." But after the wreck of the relationship with Robert, and weary of my forays into Manhattan on Friday nights to pick up guys at the Ninth Circle, I began seriously considering whether my homosexuality wasn't another way in which I had been misled and

thwarted—was being gay the physical equivalent of the romantic tactics I'd learned from Elizabethan poetry? Had John Dowland sung the dirge of my masculinity? When I finished my year at the factory and was readmitted to Columbia, I decided I wanted to give it a go. My mother found me a therapist, George Hecht, a graduate of the New York Analytic Institute, which had been founded in 1911, the oldest and most prestigious in the US. He was a brilliant man with a record of success in such cases.

I had read Brenner's textbook, *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, a far more useful introduction to the developed body of Freudian theory than Freud's individual, brilliant, but closely-focused monographs. I had learned that all men are instinctively aroused by the genitals of the opposite sex, as indeed by that of their own sex. According to Freud, we are all intrinsically bisexual.

What made for homosexuality was the anxiety caused by heterosexual attraction. This was obviously true. If there were no underlying engagement, a gay man would contemplate a vagina with indifference, not distaste. So, I was already potentially straight! It would just be a matter of unbending the kinks in my spirit.

In fact, I was already rather more than halfway home. I was not exclusively homosexual, but bi. I was attracted to women as well, and had had a few fumbling, bumbling sexual encounters with them over the years. It had never worked out, for a number of reasons I would learn later, among which these are perhaps worth noting.

In my experience, women choose men in the context of a social structure such as of school or workplace. And at particular stages in life, such as sophomore year in college, or in their late thirties, when they get divorced from that guy they met in sophomore year. Those who don't get paired during one of these two great seasons generally fail to do so for some very good reason. Switching colleges at sophomore year reduced my chances to a fragment.

Also, the women tend to be a bit more pragmatic than men, less romantic (or if you like, less deluded) when it comes to choosing partners. They select men who seemed plausible. I did not then realize I failed on this head, having no particular assets or prospects. I wasn't an athlete or a whiz in the computer lab, I wasn't *en route* to law or medical school.

Then there's the weirdness I personally added to the situation. A drifter in and out of schools, with a drinking problem and an obsession with poetry, recently improved by an obsession with philosophy, was hardly a dating prospect. Also, I'm sort of effeminate. I naturally identified more with my well-bred, soft-spoken and cultivated mother than with my towering and at times ogre-like father. I took on to some extent my mother's speech patterns and mannerisms, so I immediately read as gay. Sophisticated language, clear

diction and correct grammar make me fit the bill of the over-intellectual gay screen villain, like Doctor Praetorius in *The Bride of Frankenstein* or Doctor Smith in *Lost in Space*. I speak as someone who has read more words than I have heard pronounced, with a diction and delivery acquired from Dickens and Shakespeare. I used to tell people that my parents were very well off, and were able to send me to school in the nineteenth century. Or else I would sadly confide that I had been badly frightened by a British novelist while a child. I sound a bit theatrical to the common ear. Though I can, with a backward effort of mind, "talk normal," my ordinary speech is much as you find it on this page. Many people suppose I'm English. They assume that clear enunciation, good grammar and unscanted vocabulary must be a costly import. I had ended up at the gay bar, to some extent, by default. Women found me unfuckably odd. Guys thought I was somewhat cute, and didn't care about what I had to say, since it was noisy in the bar, quiet in bedroom, and the whole adventure was over by morning. You can't imagine how rarely Nietzsche or the Bhagavad Gita came up in those situations!

Bi, or as they say today, gender fluid, I was. As for making a straight man out of me, that was quite undoable. For me, and I believe, for anyone. Understanding one's psychological programming is a great advantage: thereafter you're rarely blind-sided by your unconscious reactions. But understanding them doesn't make them go away. You can change to some extent what you *do*, but not what you feel. The work I did with Dr. Hecht was extremely valuable for me: it gave me endless hours of practical experience examining my thoughts and actions to see their hidden motivations. This has made me more self-aware, and greatly enhanced my empathic understanding of others. I learned how I had projected some of my experiences with my parents and siblings into new situations. Perhaps most importantly, I learned that psychoanalysis is an art, and that you can't just take Freud's model of the mind and apply it like a map. To study the human mind requires a science of the unique: a well-informed but very flexible approach. And in fact, the “Freudian model” is an extrapolation from Freud made by Freudians. If you read his own works, particularly the later ones, he is far more revolutionary (and entertaining) that most people suppose. He considered, for example, bisexuality to be the normal state of human sexuality, and was well aware that conformity to prevailing social norms could not be equated with mental health.

Though he never mentioned these two last points, Dr. Hecht had a number of pointed observations and aphorisms which have stuck in my mind and which I think worth rescuing from oblivion.

Suffering is the most over-rated of human pastimes.

If you think you're worthless, you'll have no difficulty finding people to treat you that way.

The secret of maturity is diminished expectations.

So, he was actually a very interesting fellow, with the dismal wit that positivist psychology can give rise to in its most intelligent exponents.

I came out, kind of, to my father, at Dr. Hecht's suggestion. He said that my mother's pronouncement, that this disclosure would be my father's death, had escalated the matter to the level of mutual assured destruction. I had emotionally nothing to lose and everything to gain by telling him.

This took place up at their New York State vacation home. I spent the previous night nerving myself up for the disclosure, sleeping hardly at all and eating an entire box of breakfast cereal. The next morning, my father, a ham (amateur, non-commercial radio operator), was upstairs in his radio room. I went up and spoke to him.

He listened to my carefully prepared speech in silence. I told him that I was homosexual, that I had ceased to be such actively, that I was pursuing corrective therapy. Hardly a proud coming-out! Even so, I braced myself for an explosion. After all, when I told him about my alcoholism, it had been met with gale-force anger. When I had gasped out the last of my confession, he replied in even tones,

"I can't say this comes as a great surprise."

In some ways my father's altruism, pragmatism and scientific background made him an amazingly sensible fellow. Too, I had presented my situation as a pathology for which I was pursuing an appropriate treatment. It was not altogether improbable that he would respond with that clinical distance tinged with warm-hearted irony that had so endeared him to his patients. Had I told him I was out and proud, I do not think I would have gotten off so lightly.

Why was I so gay? There were a number of factors. One of the first lessons in psychology is that anything that actually happens is over-determined. It usually takes a number of favoring factors to usher a cause all the way to its effect. Among those I would not be quick to rule out organic ones. For all I know I was born this way. Maybe one day they'll map the brain and find among its fissures the mysterious caverns where dwell the passions.

But, to begin with, Daddy wanted a girl. My father had lost his younger sister when he was ten—his family was so poor they put off sending for the doctor till matters were desperate, and then it was too late. This event was in the highest degree traumatic and significant. It was no coincidence that both he and his brother went on to become physicians. I remember finding a

picture of the little girl who would have been my aunt, in my grandmother's apartment, and asked who she was. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I obtained a vague and unsatisfactory answer. I recall thinking this was a great and serious mystery.

Fifty years later I visited her grave: Iris Rabinowitz, in the Mount Hebron Cemetery in Queens, where she was laid to rest in 1935, when my father was seven. The headstone is unusually fine. Not long after her burial, my father found several hundred dollars under a bus seat. The family used all the money, not a penny of which they could spare, to buy her the finest stone possible, an awesome monument to their pain and regret. This plot in the graveyard of the Yedinitz community of Bessarabia (today Moldova) is the only place in America for which I feel a deep ancestral connection. Everywhere else in America is just somewhere I lived.

My shadowy self-identification with my father's lost sister, as if I could win his love by taking her place, was part of the puzzle. Beyond this, my father was a genuinely frightening man. Usually angry, frequently unpredictable, he was without hesitation or restraint regarding corporal punishment. From the point of view of Oedipal conflict, it will easily be understood how I might have flinched from a development which would have brought me into rivalry with this redoubtable figure. You've heard the phrase "scared straight"? Well, I was scared gay.

That's a rather structural view of the psychic constellation that determined my sexual preference. Dr. Hecht wasn't very interested in this, but rather in my day-to-day interactions with people, and what insight could be drawn from them. For example, I chatted up a girl in one of my classes at Columbia. She made it rather painfully clear that she wasn't interested in me. Then, "out of nowhere" I decided to make an evening foray to the Ninth Circle. Like a girl who has a fight with her boyfriend and then gets tarted up to get plenty of male attention, I was salving my bruised feelings with some unsubtle and immediate validation. Having observed countless instances of my own unconscious at work, I became rather adept at reading the "tells" that gave away my own, and for that matter other people's, inner feelings.

There was much that was mistaken in this "treatment." Principally, it failed to alter my sexual orientation. I am bisexual, so I had no difficulty finding women attractive. The problem was getting women to find *me* attractive, and that was where I needed help. Hecht wasn't much on dating tips.

But I did give it a try. I stopped frequenting gay bars and gave all my romantic attention to the girls in my classes at school. Dreadful art history girls from Barnard who ironed their jeans. Miserable mouseburgers who took classical Greek. Random girls at parties. My experience of heterosexual

dating was a protracted misery. I paid court to them using all my wiles. I asked them about themselves, took an interest in what interested them, was unfailingly amusing, and when I had sufficiently improved our initial acquaintance I asked them out, for coffee, a trip to a museum or the like. I employed these tactics with innocent enthusiasm and wide-eyed hopefulness of a newly-minted heterosexual. To no purpose. I was a complete wash-out. I only got laid only once during that last year I was in NYC, by a girl in one of my classes who promptly spread for me and just as suddenly decided she wanted no further intimacy. Fucked on a whim! Another girl told me, "You'd be better if you didn't try so hard."

Looking back, none of those young ladies were likely to see my merits. They were attractive, ambitious, intelligent enough for an Ivy League school, but really weren't on my wavelength. When I did meet a woman who got me—years later—things proceeded easily and automatically.

Too, intelligent people are simply a harder match. There aren't as many of them, and the greater the mental range, the more there is that can go wrong. I don't cry up my brain power as a matter of vanity, but state it simply as an implacable fact that has cost me dearly. I'm very smart, and I can't be happily matched with someone who doesn't get my jokes. And ordinary people sense the imbalance in our interactions, though they rarely comment on it outright.

To find someone who was smart enough and not hopelessly neurotic, that was a tall order. I think that most ordinary people have less trouble finding a suitable partner, since they tend to want the same boring, conventional things, and although stupidity is often a liability, it seems not to be so much so as high intelligence. Sort of like the way you're less like to be knocked over if you have a lower center of gravity. Smart people tend to find the wrong choice or the chaos potential in situations that the less gifted can handle intuitively.

Also, I didn't understand about putting oneself forward. Here something from summer camp comes to mind. When one of the kids got a box of cookies or a bag of candy sent from home, all the other kids mobbed them, hands out, calling "Give me some, give me some!" The first time I saw it, I was startled at this abject display, and didn't take part in it. And so I got no candy. The next time I swallowed my pride and joined the beggar throng—and got the same as everyone else.

It was perhaps a similar thing with the dating. It wasn't that I was too shy or too proud, I just didn't understand how stupid it was supposed to be. I employed thought, when instinct and intuition would have served me better. When I met someone I was interested in, I would make my peacock mating display of wit and erudition. Even when a girl was interested in my

fireworks, I lacked the instinctive, primate self-assertiveness to make a pass. I was always waiting for some kind of positive response. I didn't have the confidence, the *salesmanship*, required.

It was the same for me in all in social situations. I never realized how much one must put oneself forward. Even at AA meetings, I failed to make friends. I would raise my hand, make my "share," usually something witty, interesting or insightful, and then sit down, expecting that anyone worth knowing would seek me out come coffee time. *I myself* was perpetually on the lookout for signs of intelligent life. But in actuality, people are not usually interested in anyone else's clever monologue. They expect you to come up to them, shake their hand, introduce yourself, remember their name and ask after them. When I finally tried this approach at AA meetings for the first time, half a year ago, I suddenly had many, many acquaintances who were fast becoming friends! I had finally been admitted into the charmed circle of human society! They were morons. I soon tired of the exercise, and retired with a poignant sense of satisfaction that I was now the one rejecting *them*.

Had I had then the social skills I have since acquired, I probably could have persuaded some presentable, unsuitable and moderately intelligent young women to have me, and maintained unsatisfactory relationships of varying lengths. I'm pretty sure I wasn't missing much the way things turned out.

I would finally learn that it doesn't really matter much to me what gender I'm with. What's important is that they be very intelligent, morally sound, and not insane. And first of all, that they actually like me. But for several years, from my return to Columbia in the spring of 1981 to the end of my first year at Brown, I was playing it straight, supposing that being gay added an extra dollop of neurosis to anyone's psyche. So I suffered years of wretched celibacy, as I explored the straight world. I used to have a fantasy about making a documentary about it. The scene would be a gas station late at night, filmed in grainy, film-noir style. A car pulls slowly up to the pump.

"Fill 'er up?"

After the nozzle is placed and the dials are spinning, the attendant walks furtively up to the driver's side window and asks in a whisper,

"You . . . gettin' any?"

The driver looks around to be sure they are unobserved, stretches his right hand through the window, the longest finger aloft on his paw.

"Smell that finger, boy!"

A fey voice-over explains, "These men inhabit a sad twilight world where taste and decorum are things unknown. These men are—heterosexuals."

Cut to: a professor sitting on the corner of his desk. His forward position and relaxed pose make it clear he is going to be especially frank.

"Though the term they favor is 'straight,' these unfortunates are actually very twisted people. But what causes a normal, healthy boy to become a heterosexual?"

The professor takes off his glasses and gestures with them to the shelves behind him.

"We don't know, but these books will tell us. . . ."

11: The Gay Seventies

The New York gay world in the last days before AIDS was pretty damn cool. The bar scene was fast, catty, and hilarious. It was amazingly like the society described by Crébillon fils. I had discovered this scintillating author via the fabulous 1910 eleventh edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, which described him as "the most vicious of French authors, after de Sade." His books were easily found in the Columbia library, unborrowed for more than a century. His father, Crébillon père, wrote tragedies and was a censor to the publishing trade under Louis the Fourteenth. Back then censorship meant cutting out criticism of the government, not snipping the sex. Young Crébillon wrote a series of frothy, sparkling, delightful novels set in his own time, the old regime, just before the French Revolution. His work is much like the novel by his contemporary by Pierre Laclos, familiar today from the film *Dangerous Liasons*—except Crébillon has a light touch and a sense of humor. Crébillon's celebration of libertinism in the *ancien régime* is as shiny, playful and weightless as a soap-bubble, and matches the hilarity and excess of the gay seventies in New York perfectly. Crébillon's characters are all straight, and their language is far more polished, but the mood is just right.

When I tired of the 1970's version of the 1770's playing at the Ninth Circle, I'd go to the Saint Marks' Baths. It was like a luxury spa with pools and steam rooms and saunas and guys stalking about in towels, and an orgy room where a huge central bed area was covered with writhing bodies, like an engraving from a deluxe antique edition of Petronius' *Satyricon*. There was sex anywhere and everywhere, right in the open as much as in secluded nooks, and whenever it took place in plain view you'd soon have a circle of masturbating onlookers, only too glad to become participants. It was like the center panel of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights.* I was twenty-one; my muscles were well toned. Even though I didn't have the face or the fashion sense to draw every eye in a bar, I was a great success here. Most everyone else had a just towel around their waist: I would wear a new (and thus dazzling white) pair of y-front briefs. I still didn't have a movie-star face, but no one was looking that high. I was an underwear ad come to life, and I could have pretty much anyone I liked. Trivial as it may seem, it was extremely instructive, this my first, unconsidered fashion success. I had made a strategically brilliant choice. I wore what no one else was wearing; the white Hanes Y-Fronts had a classic retro appeal, evocative of furtive looks in the high school locker room. A jockstrap would have hit this note more directly, but without the boyish poignancy. Bikini briefs would have read as a bathing suit, missing the eros. Finally, I had chosen something that

drew all attention to my strongest features, my swimmer's build, while enhancing my rather average endowment and distracting from my rather average face. To the male reader, this may seem overly analytic, but this level of calculation and strategy is engaged in every day by women, at least the women who look good.

Though obviously I enjoyed the sex—at that age I was a satyr—the more interesting experience was the feminine triumph of drawing all eyes. Madame de Staël (the brilliant novelist and psychologist from the time of Napoleon) once wrote, with more than her usual insight, "The desire of the man is for the woman, but the desire of the woman is for the desire of the man." In simpler terms, for a man, the laws of conquest require that he physically possess the woman's body. A woman can see her triumph completed in a man's eyes. And precisely that was the victory I enjoyed, as poignantly as I did any actual sex.

The female body is at once the best thing and the worst thing about being a woman. It is physiologically more complex (there's gynecology, but no androcology), and aesthetically more beautiful (Greek statues notwithstanding). Psychologically, a woman identifies her physical appearance with her self more than a man would. So there's always an emotional drama to a woman's presence that is lacking in a male's: with a woman, it's always a performance (the makeup should have tipped you off to that).

Now a woman who is attractive and knows how to dress—well, to paraphrase Marlowe, a god is not so glorious as a girl. In my limited way I enjoyed an authentically female experience, drawing all eyes at the bathhouse. Limited, because I lacked the crowning satisfaction a real woman would have savored: that of making other women feel inadequate.

At the baths, those who liked their pleasure to be less public could rent a cubicle for the night, and this was my usual proceeding. After hours of incredible sex with strangers I'd curl up on my private pallet and read the *Mahabharata* with the muted moans of fucketeers resounding all around me. Finally, I'd set the alarm on my Casio watch so I'd be up in time to go to my morning class in Homer at Columbia.

How often I woke up on Sunday morning after a Ninth Circle night, to totter down the steps from someone's apartment in the East Village, lowering my Ray-Bans to visor the 10:00 a.m. sunlight from my hungover eyes, like a funboy strayed out of a SF sex-dystopia. Such was life in the height of New York's gay decadence just before AIDS hit. By amazing good fortune, I went "straight" just in time to miss infection.

At this time I was experimenting with writing erotic poetry. It's an interesting and open question whether sex is a suitable subject for literature,

and not a problem that arose before the modern age. Archaic societies, despite the European view of them as "naked savages," are actually rather private about sex. Republican Rome was conspicuously decent. The civilizations of Christendom and Islamdom were downright repressed. Not that there was ever a period when people actually had less sex, any more than there was a time when people sneezed less frequently. But there were periods, usually long ones, when people were less at ease, or just less interested, in talking or writing about it.

Only in the modern world has sex been introduced as a subject for serious literature and art. I find that when erotica is done with sufficient artistry, it fails as pornography: it's just too much trouble to read with one hand. And a passage of literary porn in a larger work of literature destroys the context. It produces a vivid effect, but there's no place to go from there: anything that follows will seems dull by the juxtaposition. And anyhow, sex isn't that interesting as a subject, it's so *repetitive.* What's really interesting is the psychology: the tension between what people think they need emotionally, what they really need emotionally, and what they can actually get. *That's* the stuff of theater! The sweaty huffing and puffing is irrelevant to this. Allen wrote what may be the greatest modern erotic poetry I know in his poem "Many Loves" about his relationship with Neal Cassady. Here physical detail and psychological insight interweave in a profound and poignant way. But it isn't a sex scene, it's a nude.

This excerpt from a poem I wrote at the time, might be appropriate here. It was the first poem I ever wrote that candidly described my romantic experiences.

> They lay, wetness cool on genitals,
> sprawled, each hearing other's breath
> against weird luxurious silence.
> Jake's cock basked on his thigh. The boy
> put his head on Jake's shoulder, sated, closed his eyes.
> Through the open window they heard the barking
> and response of dog to dog across the blocks.
>
> Monday morning. Six o'clock.
> Claude lay in bed pretending to sleep,
> watching Jake dress to leave.
>
> Dawnlight. He shook his red curls from his eyes,
> pulled the Levis up over his thighs,
> tucked in the t-shirt, buckled his belt.

Quietly the boy took a bathrobe,
followed down the hall,
went out and stared after Jake up the street.

As the door slowly closed behind him
something fell into place inside him
as he stood there on the outside
and he noticed his bare feet were cold.

I showed this composition to Allen, as I continued to with all my poems whenever I wrote one I was particularly proud of. I supposed that eventually I would win his unqualified approval. By this time, having finally arrived at modernism by my own perplexed path, my poetics were fully in accord with his, and his instruction was extremely collegial. He made a very valuable correction in the last line. Originally it had read "and he noticed it was cold." Allen suggested the concrete image, the bare feet, which gave the ending a solid finality. Without this detail, the line just weakly trailed off into abstraction.

VI: Hakim Bey

1: Peter Lamborn Wilson

About the time I "woke to the world," that is when I went down in flames on entering the atmosphere of the modernity, Charles Potter, my old French teacher from Columbia, with whom I was on friendly terms, told me he had someone to introduce me to. This was Peter Lamborn Wilson, who was one of Potter's old friends from when they'd both attended Columbia. Potter finished his degree and went on to study medieval French literature in Europe. Peter had dropped out of Columbia and made the "Journey to the East"—looking for enlightenment in India. He finally wandered into Iran where he was able to talk his way into a job at Tehran's only English-language newspaper, largely on the strength of his native, literary English. Other qualification needed he none. He parlayed this into a place in the court of the Shah, friendship with the Empress, and a central role in the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. The Shah wanted to cast the mantle of culture over his tyranny, and funded all sorts of interesting projects.

Peter spent years in Iran, during which he converted to Islam and seriously pursued the Sufi path under the direction of a traditionalist spiritual master. Peter's life there was a decade-long oriental adventure, during which he enjoyed the hashish and caviar that can be had so cheaply on the shores of the Caspian Sea, collected magnificent rugs (which he shipped steadily back to America to be stored) and explored traditional mystical Islam, sitting cross-legged on fine rugs, sipping sweet tea and smoking with the Sufis.

Peter is gay, and his turn to Islam was in part an attempt to cure himself of his condition with the help of Allah. It was not a great success. I speak this sympathetically, since I undertook a similar project, though in the ambiance of Jewish New York intellectualism, the "church of Freud," rather than in the shadow of the Koran.

Over the centuries there have been countless defections from Western Christianity to Islam, and almost none in the opposite direction. Whence this eagerness to "turn Turk?" A part of the appeal of Islam for the West has always been its comparative tolerance of homosexuality. Though this is forbidden in the Koran, it is so, like wine, in a somewhat ambiguous way. In fact, wine and boys are promised as rewards to be enjoyed in heaven, the latter being appealingly described in one of the *surahs* as "pale youths, scattered like pearls across the lawns of paradise." Despite periods of

reformist rigor, homosexuality (and for that matter drinking) has generally been regarded in the Islamic world as a minor and somewhat amusing sin, much as adultery is in the West. One may see this from even a desultory reading of the medieval Arabic classic, *The Arabian Nights*, where wine freely flows and boys promptly comply. In fact, Sufism includes among its more arcane byways a platonic meditation on beautiful youths, the "contemplation of the unbearded." The reader of Yehuda Halevi's poetry from Islamic Spain will be well familiar with the romantic praise of adolescent boys, who are described as "gazelles"—as common and conventional a trope in context as the nymphs and shepherds of Elizabethan poetry.

Islam never had Christianity's ambivalence towards material existence and the body, so it was more tolerant of sex in general. Chastity was not considered a virtue. ("There's no monkery in Islam" is a saying attributed to the Prophet.) The puritanism of present day Islamic fundamentalism is the *rigor mortis* of a religion already dead under the onslaught of modernism—exactly the confrontation that produced the Puritans and the "reign of the saints" in seventeenth-century England. This situation, "the faith purified into a caricature of itself," in Peter's phrase, is late, anomalous and terminal.

While Peter was in Iran, the forces of religious puritanism were held in check by the Shah, and Peter was able to enjoy the last hours of "decadence" before the neo-barbarians took control. Not that Peter was getting laid. The permissiveness of the old Islamic world was certainly off limits to him. A convert to any religion is always held to a higher standard of observance. I mentioned the ambiguity of Islamic attitudes to homosexuality only as a factor which made this religion unconsciously more appealing to Peter, and which would fascinate and preoccupy him, in a totally intellectual and inhibited way, for years.

I met Peter when he had just returned from Iran. He had made a timely flight from the already begun revolution, and now rented a room in an apartment on the corner of 107th Street and Amsterdam, a situation which he referred to a "Major Hoople's Boarding House" (after a comic from the twenties about a boarding house full of eccentric types). The lease-holder of the apartment was a crank who brought home all sorts of junk and broken machinery from the street. The living room was impassible with dusty, unidentifiable and certainly non-functional equipment. He was quite litigious and had legally changed his name to "Joe Friendly" in the expectation that this would produce a mollifying effect on judges and juries. I only saw Joe once or twice in passing, a tall man, casually dressed, with an enormous beard. The other resident, besides Peter, was an alcoholic who lay in bed, the door to his tiny room open, coughing sepulchrally when he

wasn't in a deathlike stupor. He usually lay outstretched on the bed, with glazed eyes and a gray crewcut, looking at nothing.

Peter was easily the most fascinating person I had ever met. I use the term fascinating quite precisely. He had the ability to charm anyone. When he addressed you he showed a pleased attention, and in conversation he asked far more questions than he answered, and seemed genuinely interested in all your particulars, difficulties, and events. Though he spoke of his own ideas, reading and adventures, very entertainingly and at length, it was always in response to something you had said, in amplification of whatever topic interested you. He had a way of making it seem as though he included you in his plans, that he looked on you as an equal and ally. I've never seen anyone who didn't promptly capitulate to Peter's charm, and he used it on everyone. He seemed to be more interested in you than he was in himself, and no one could resist this. And it wasn't insincere. Nor was it something he had any control over. There are persons who need very much to be liked by everyone, who develop this brilliant sociability. Charisma is a gift, but like all gifts, it comes at a price.

He was amazingly unforthcoming about himself. He never really opened his heart or told his troubles. And not just to me. He was of an old and distinguished family, and traced his ancestors back to the Mayflower, so I think this was some sort of aristocratic white guy thing.

Once Peter had gotten his bearings in New York, he held continuous court, and has to this day an unending stream of visitors. This is rather less of an achievement when you reckon in how uncritical his friendship is. Though he fully appreciates intelligence and expertise, and can hold his own in conversation with anyone on any subject (so vast and curious is his reading and his experience), he is equally content with the company of utter fools.

In part, Peter is a classic gay male type, of whom Brett and Harry Smith are likewise exemplars. Masters of monologue. They can go on illimitably, and if you never pipe up they will. They're brilliant and fascinating, whether they're telling you rare facts from Beethoven's biography or what awful thing they saw on the way to the grocery store. I think the origin of this condition is bachelorhood. You live alone long enough, and you start talking to yourself, perhaps not aloud, but you do by imperceptible degrees become your own company. In my day, being gay and smart was plenty isolating for an adolescent to begin with: you were on the outside of life from middle school on. Then instead of having escalating series of involvements that ended with a long-term relationship, you had casual sex, or more likely no sex at all, until you were out on your own as an adult, and by then you were well used to going to museums or operas or restaurants with yourself as

your only company. The interior monologue develops into the exterior monologue, and thus you arrive at the Quentin Crisp-like persona, assuming you have the gray matter to carry it off.

I'm not entirely exempt from this condition, as this present feat of nattering attests. I found the talent particularly handy as a teacher. There are times when you have half an hour left on a Friday afternoon, you're as tired of the lesson as the kids are, and though they can be extremely entertaining if you draw them out, it takes effort and attention to keep them on topic and prevent them from just talking to each other in private knots instead of making it a class-wide dialogue. So I've sometimes just told stories about myself, suitably edited of course. It can be quite entertaining for me to see what I'll say next—and a bit of a tight-rope walk as well, since I'm addressing a roomful of adolescents and I have to make sure I say nothing that will come back to bite me if repeated to Mom and Dad over dinner.

So, I do kind of "get" the tendency to monologue. I think I missed out on fully developing this myself because I was too interested in seeing what I could learn. A precondition of monologorrhea is the belief you already know everything. And also at a critical moment in my life's journey, I found myself with a woman, and no conversation with a member of that gender will be entirely one-sided!

Peter didn't know *everything,* but he sure knew a lot of it, and want of self-confidence was not one of his failings. What balanced out Peter's verbosity was a particular personality type which I have seen in a number of iterations. For convenience I will call this the Don Juan persona. Such persons *cannot* be alone. They positively require the company and approbation of others. It is a disposition common among actors. Al Jolson and Marilyn Monroe seem to have been particularly extreme examples of this special desperation.

The secret of pleasing is the desire to please. The practice is really as simple as asking people about their favorite subject, themselves, and then staying on topic by talking about things they're involved with. If you're not obviously trying to get into their pants or part them from their funds, this will always work. Finesse will come with practice, but you really can't do it too crudely. Peter was very, *very* good.

He could devote himself to professional sociability while working full-time as a writer since his father had fixed him up with a trust fund which gave him enough to get by on, albeit with a narrow margin. His father, Douglas Wilson, was a retired army man, a desk general who had risen through the ranks of military bureaucracy, and was quite well off. Peter was his only child. A cultivated man, whose passion was proof-reading, and who had supervised *inter alia* critical editions of Chaucer and Emerson, Peter's

father was entirely sympathetic to Peter's literary career, and never pushed him towards conventional employment.

I met Douglas on a number of occasions. I made the mistake of trying to draw him out on Chaucer, discussing the *Knight's Tale* with him. He was utterly flummoxed. Though he had read every line of Chaucer with, as it were, a magnifying glass, what really interested him was the punctuation and orthography. He was breathtakingly dull. He had had a go at being an English professor, but had been so colorless, his supervisor suggested he grow a big mustache to give himself some personality. Though he was offended at the time, he did take the suggestion. When I met him he was a great tall substantial man with a bald head and a handlebar mustache. He looked every inch the retired general.

I met Peter's mother as well. She was a retired high school English teacher, and she'd divorced from her husband, never to remarry, when Peter was a boy. She lived down in Maryland, a warm and cordial hostess, and an excellent adventurous cook. On one of our visits she splendidly prepared muskrat which she'd purchased from a local hunter with a roadside stand.

Peter supplemented his income by dealing pot on a small scale, enough to keep himself supplied and cover occasional luxuries and nonessential expenses. He was stoned for the entire time I knew him. It was only a few years ago that a medical condition finally required him to cut out grass and cigarettes. But for the first thirty years of our friendship he moved in a fog of reefer smoke, a bearded Jove ensconced in his happy personal cloudbank. I recently asked him about what he remembered of our early acquaintance, his first years back in Manhattan. He demurred. At first I thought it was perhaps some Waspy diffidence about discussing himself directly, but I finally concluded that all that grass had prevented him from coding all the events into memory. I have rather the same difficulty regarding the periods when I was drinking. That's the one thing they always forget to tell you about drugs. They steal your memory.

When Potter introduced us, Peter had been out of America for more than a decade. He had missed Punk and arrived at the beginning of the greed-is-good Reagan eighties. The connections he had made for the advancement of his literary career were in Iran, and London, where he'd spent four years on the Saudi's nickel, on retainer to organize an Islamic cultural festival that never got off the ground. Happily for him, he was in London when Khomeini took over. When Peter arrived in New York, he was at loose ends and desperate to network. I was still at Columbia, never integrated into, and still disconnected from, student life, and desperately lonely.

Peter was going through a spiritual crisis. Long before the revolution in Iran, major cracks had appeared in Peter's cosmos. He had attempted to fully enter into traditional Islam, and in half-modern Tehran, this was still not impossible. The motivation was, originally, a sincere quest for enlightenment, the authentic spiritual hunger that gave the sixties in America its nobility. Peter had joined a Sufi order, and accepted the guidance of a *pir* (spiritual master), but the exotic charm wore off and then began the wearisome work of keeping the faith—which Peter described to me as "protecting our common failures of awareness."

Sufi practice hadn't freed Peter from desire either. (In the words of the Gita, "As a man's nature is, so must he be. How could repression help?") And Peter finally concluded, quite reasonably, that the problem wasn't the quality of his faith, but the faith itself.

Peter gave considerable attention to the interesting antinomian heresies that had arisen within Islam. Particularly the Assassins, a heretical Shiite sect whose use of hashish in their devotions gave them their name. Peter was also fascinated by Caliph Hakim, the eleventh-century Ismaili lord of Egypt who, depending on who you ask, was either the mad Caligula of medieval Islam or a Shiite messiah. I needn't go into detail on these interesting topics, for Peter himself has done so in a number of books. For our purposes it will suffice to say that these extreme mystics believed that the disclosures of the apocalypse and the rewards of paradise were to be enjoyed, or at least tasted, now. The initiates felt this insight entitled them to take their pleasures as a defiant sacrament—a program which was rendered even more effective if those pleasures were in fact prohibited by the religious law. No doubt Peter was to some degree aware of how prurient was his interest in these themes, but on the other hand historical research into thousand-year-old heresies doesn't amount to much of a sin.

Peter was impelled to deep reflection and bold decision by his experience of mystical Islam, which transfigured Peter's reality, but not his sexuality. And he was shaken, even shaken awake, by the fall of Iran, which had landed him in a Manhattan rented room, like a man awoken from a long exotic dream. It was all sort of parallel to my crisis precipitated by the failure of the affair with Robert, when I was casting off the traces of Neoplatonism and traditional Western culture in favor of a new and radical magical materialism.

We only really reconsider our course when things utterly fail to work. It seems probable that we'd keep all our illusions and pass our lives in sweet stupidities if only everything went smoothly on and on.

2: TAZ

Shaken from without as much as he was troubled from within, Peter determined to make no further payments to the immensely overpaid account of contrition for his sexual disposition. He thought out his liberation in terms of the theology and symbolism of mystical Islam. Meanwhile I was trying to think my way to reality with Nietzsche and de Sade. The really important thing we had in common was that we were both poets and were looking for a new poetic vision, one that could express what was meaningful and real in our experience, after having put vast energy into trying to live in archaizing dreams. Whether we blamed Omar Khayyám or Baudelaire, we had both been blinkered by books and wandered blind till we were well lost.

Our conversations were endless. Typically I'd be in his tiny, tobacco-cloudy room, talking to him from seven in the evening till five the next morning. It was a real intellectual romance. I'd never met anyone who knew so much, or was so willing to talk, and also to listen!

We both viewed writing as a tool for psychic exploration, and both wanted to bring it into play as we explored the new world of the physical, and now permissible, in the wake of our respective personal liberations, his from sexual repression, mine from a no less crippling cultural traditionalism, which amounted to the same thing in many ways. Even though I was getting spectacularly laid, I kept that whole side of my life entirely secret from any but my closest friends, and certainly never wrote poetry about any of it.

Peter had censored his sexuality and his drug use from his poems, and narrowed his range of permissible topics to literary and conventional ones. He gave me his book of verse, *Winter Calligraphy*, which greatly impressed me. I no longer have my copy to refer to, but I recall it as owing a lot to Ezra Pound and Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat* Orientalism. Elegant and repressed. I had word-painted myself into a similar corner with the Baudelaireanism that had commanded my energies and for some time provided the pattern for my life.

Now, we both agreed, the only poetry worth writing was that which expressed matters so urgent, important and meaningful that we couldn't *not* write it. No more pretty verses and elaborate artistry! We wanted poetry that was as powerful as pornography, and if it in fact *was* pornography, be it so!

Having set aside my old-fashioned notions of what was properly poetic subject matter, I wanted to do away with all the transitional, framing material that makes up a story, and have it be nothing but "the good parts." I took as my model Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, only instead of just having the characters shift shape, the setting morphed as well. Contexts dissolved and

transmuted as each narrative structure was annihilated by its own ever-amplifying content. The hero would be propelled from scene to scene by a series of poetic explosions. The scenes transformed, with dreamlike transitions reminiscent of Buster-Keaton, I would let the content create the form and the order.

The result was *Blurred Person Singular*, which I thought of as an omnisexual science-fiction epic poem and map of the world. I had meant it to be my *Hamlet*. It was actually more like *Titus Andronicus.* It had maximum sexual and violent content, by turns offensive and hilarious, though one would be hard put to say where it was going or why. The best of it was the energy and enthusiasm, the sheer puppy-play of genius released, yipping and barking and chasing its own tail.

Peter began by writing prose poetry that dealt frankly with his gay interests, and though personally significant, this was not a course he long pursued, nor the one that gained him fame under the name Hakim Bey. I will consider his poetico-political writings in some detail, but first the stage must be set.

In our forays around Manhattan Peter would stop at all the shops that carried zines. Usually these were hip music stores that, in addition to CDs and cassettes of obscure punk and indie bands, carried a small selection of books on weird sex, weird politics and weird religion, a taste exemplified by RE/Search magazine, founded by V. Vale in 1980. The writings of William Burroughs and J. G. Ballard, sado-masochism and body modification, anarchism and neo-Paganism, these were the sorts of things that interested hip, aware twenty-somethings in the eighties. Zines were tiny handmade magazines, usually three 8.5x11 xeroxed pages folded over and saddle-stitched to make a booklet, circulating in well under a thousand copies, on whatever curious topic interested the publisher. The genre had developed out of punk rock fanzines. In 1982, Mike Gunderloy began publication of *Factsheet Five*, which was three-sentence abstracts of all the zines people sent him, listing price and address. *Factsheet Five* rapidly became the nerve-center of the zine scene, which lasted through the eighties, and was done in, like the rest of independent print, by the rise of the Internet.

In the early eighties, real estate was on its way to becoming the speculative commodity it is today, and Manhattan, like all the "destination cities" in America was losing its hip neighborhoods to gentrification, becoming a live-in mall for out-of-town yuppies. I had noted this peripherally. Lucien had picked up his loft on Great Jones Street, a few blocks south of Cooper Square, for a song at the end of the seventies. By the mid-eighties, when UPI's change of headquarters moved him to Washington, he sold it for a huge profit. When I applied to grad schools, I didn't even

consider one in NYC. I couldn't afford anything there except movies and cheap Cuban-Chinese restaurants. The bohemias of America were disappearing, a process that wouldn't be completed till around 2010. But even then, forty years ago, you couldn't just move to NYC, get a part-time job washing dishes, and live in the Village to pursue your art. You needed full work and had to share an apartment with several other people.

But the ever-less-expensive Xerox machines, which every office and most homes now had, and the US mail, which was then dead cheap and still the best in the world, made for a new bohemia by mail.

While print had been the world's primary entertainment medium, from roughly 1850 to 1950, it had sustained a certain amount of eccentric, literary publishing on its periphery. Grove Press, City Lights and the like, who had made the success of Ginsberg and Burroughs possible. I grew up thinking that this was an institution, a necessary part of society. It was more like a colorful patch of weeds that thrives at the edge of a uniform and cultivated field, which is the actual "cash crop." As print yielded its market share to TV, avant-garde and small press publishing got starved out, though it did survive, barely, into the nineties, on the last crumbs to fall from the shrinking mainstream table.

In the early nineties, the Internet existed, but was accessible only through the old DOS shell, just lines of glowing green type, half of them code, on a dull screen. No easy interface, no mouse to click. You needed a dictionary of commands to use it, so it wasn't much of a contender.

I watched puzzled as Peter went to those hip stores and dug through cardboard boxes stuffed with tiny, badly produced, blurry illiterate zines. I couldn't imagine what the interest was. Peter intuited that there was something important happening there. He obviously didn't understand that this was the last hurrah for literary print: no one did. In those days, the people involved in the zine scene imagined that it was a kind of literary off-off-Broadway, that success here could translate into a contract with a "real" publisher. But however he viewed it, he did view it, while everyone else walked on by.

Peter was buying the zines that had interesting literary and political content. He himself had done considerable reading and maintained a sincere interest in Anarchism and radical politics. Mild political dissatisfaction was the mood of the time among Generation X, the twenty-somethings of the eighties. Twenty-somethings are a particularly significant age group, because they're old enough to be living independently, but not so old that they realize they have to settle down if they want retirement plans that don't include suicide. They're still open to new ideas, full of hope, willing to take risks, and can afford a few experiments and failures. Reagan had been elected

president, and would remain so for two terms. Classic punk was over, new wave and other derivatives were on the rise.

I was from the tail of the Baby Boom generation; I was born in 1958 when Eisenhower was president, so I was more of an observer than a participant in Generation X. My childhood was the sixties, not the seventies. From my perspective, it looks as though Gen X came up after the 1960's party was over, to find they'd been left the flat beer and pizza crusts. The hippies had disappeared, many of them having morphed into yuppie entrepreneurs, adding an additional sting to the sense of betrayal and defrauding. The feeling of malaise expressed itself primarily by various shades of irony, typically retro fashion and mild transgression. Betty Page was in many ways the poster girl for Generation X.

They defined themselves in contrast to the hippies, generally despising the "peace and love" naiveté of their predecessors whose wide eyes (with their THC-dilated pupils) now appeared vacant and cartoonlike. There was of course a good deal of unacknowledged continuity, and the cultural interests of the eighties, sexual, political and spiritual were (in hindsight) recognizably hand-me-downs from 1960s. The enthusiasm for general sexual liberation had turned into a fascination with S&M; communal utopianism had skewed towards anarchism; far-eastern enlightenment and occultism had been replaced with "joke religions" like the Church of the Subgenius and Discordianism, which allowed one all the fun of running around in robes while giving piety a shrewd tweak.

This was the context in which Peter began writing essays, *communiqés* as he liked to call them, under the pen name Hakim Bey, which he mailed out to friends and the publishers of the zines he liked. Originally it was just a way of joining in the general conversation. His own preoccupations serendipitously matched the Gen X/ Zine scene tastes, so his mailouts were immediately popular, and regarded as copyright-free syndicated columns ready for anyone to paste into their xeroxed zine for instant cred and content.

Finding an enthusiastic audience for what were then halfway between prose poems and political manifestos, Peter plunged in, and gave them what they wanted, backpedaling the gay content and pushing the anarchism and the jocose religiosity of the Moorish Orthodox Church (of which more below). Soon he had enough for a book. I talked Peter up, and introduced him, to Brett Rutherford, who by then had moved across the Hudson to cheaper Weehauken NJ. Between my recommendation, the interest Peter's work was starting to generate, Peter's personal magnetism and the exotic qualities of his writing, Brett was easily persuaded to published a deluxe oversized book of Peter's Hakim Bey screeds, hand-bound, in opulent William Morris-like style. I suggested the cover illustration, a "chaotic" form

sketched by Odilon Redon. Thus *Chaos, The Broadsheets of Ontological Anarchism* first came to print. Brett viewed the whole thing as kind of a brilliant literary hoax. Pseudo-politics dressed up in nineteenth-century Orientalism, a (marijuana) smoke-and-mirrors phantasmagoria, presenting fabulous and false mystical visions tinged with gay decadence, all of it rendered nearly believable by genuine poetry and philosophy jargon shamelessly combined. Brett's edition was a labor of humor and love: he deliberately crafted a suitably grandiose setting for this dazzling paste gem, which he regarded as a literary jape. Brett's assessment was not incorrect, though it did not do full justice to Peter's achievement, nor would it account for the popular success of this work, which in its expanded edition from Autonomedia, *TAZ, The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, was taken quite seriously by Gen X and to some extent the Millennials.

The main thing Peter promulged was Anarchism, which he made at once wider and shallower than it had ever been. He extended the definition of Anarchism to include everything from Taoism to old-time grog drinking pirates to seventeenth-century religious radicals (Ranters, Diggers) to racial and economic groups in America (like New Jersey's "Jackson Whites") who were so marginalized geographically and economically as to fall below the radar of societal control. And Peter defined resistance in such general terms that playing hookey from school or gold-bricking on the job ranked as revolutionary actions. It's pretty easy to see that this would play well to white middle-class slackers, who Peter thus empowered to imagine themselves as politically engaged *and* as on an equal footing with fetishized minorities.

Which leads us to Peter's Moorish Orthodox Church. This was based on the Moorish Science Temple, a fanciful African-American version of Islam founded around the turn of the century. It was a make-pretend religion, with "scriptures" borrowed from Levi Dowling's 1908 *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus,* appropriated unaltered, save that every occurrence of the word "God" was replaced by "Allah," and republished as *The Circle Seven Koran.* Farrakhan's Nation of Islam arose from one of the splinter groups that formed when the Moorish Science Temple dissolved with the death of its founder, Noble Drew Ali, in 1929.

Peter had invented the Moorish Orthodox Church as a kind of private joke and pot-smoking club back in the sixties when he was at Columbia. Rents were so cheap back then that he was able to rent a storefront on the Upper West Side, which he dubbed *The Moorish Science Reading Room*, with facetious reference to the "reading rooms" of Christian Science. Here he and his friends burned their incense, hung their posters, smoked weed, and talked about mysticism and politics. Peter revived the Moorish Orthodox

Church when he became a zines celebrity, presenting it as a joke in earnest. It was a win-win-win proposition. It made fun of religion, it allowed the moral "validation" of make-believe identification with impoverished African Americans, and it was a vehicle for Peter's insights into Islamic mysticism.

Another matter worth noting was Peter's never-abandoned opposition to the internet. He didn't foresee any of its actual dangers: the appropriation of private information by governments and corporations, the manipulation of news by the medium that had replaced print journalism, its role in eliminating small "brick and mortar" businesses in favor of monopolistic giants like Amazon, the death-blow it administered to literary publishing.

Peter has never operated so much as a cell phone, so his view of the Internet was, in a negative sense, science fiction. He warned that the Internet would further the atomization and alienation of people into discrete consumers, everyone experiencing life at second-hand through the screen. The computer age, he claimed, offered a gnostic false heaven, where even sex would be experienced without the messy complication of emotion or physical contact, an afterworld of pure image, rarefied into desire desiring itself! This prophecy bore no relationship to the facts, where the sex and shopping were realized so effectively over the internet as to replace shopping malls and pickup bars. The atomizing effect of the internet on "the social" was no more than that of the xerox machine. If we look for what destroyed the local community, we needn't hunt further than the automobile and the speculative market in real estate. I mention Peter's failures of prophecy here because Peter wrote about the digital age with such passionate obscurity that he was viewed by many as an authority on the age of cyberspace. Amazingly few of his admirers realized he was a luddite *opponent* of the digital. Difficult books, such as Peter wrote, though they may sell, aren't usually read. Just having them makes people feel smart.

There is much in Peter's writing that is of very substantial value. His accounts of travel through India and central Asia are mesmerizing. His writing on the mystical byways of Islam are accurate, insightful and explore in depth subjects the academics don't dare to even discuss. His witty, sophisticated and scathing critiques of popular culture, from cop movies to food fads, are worthy of Mencken. But these things weren't what put him on the map or gained him a decade of limited fame.

And then came the internet, covering the planet like a shallow sea. Unlike Peter, I view it as an entirely neutral tool. I believe it is our society of capitalism triumphant that has turned the Net into a global shopping mall. In the democracy of the dollar, what sells to the greatest number dominates. The result is a utopia of the utterly ordinary, producing a cultural erosion as

dramatic as the melting of the ice-caps. The Internet speeded things up, but it was old-fashioned greed and stupidity that set the agenda.

Nowadays Peter's success would be quite unimaginable. If Peter debut'd his writings in a blog right now, I doubt he would have been heard from. Today Islam, even mystical Islam, is viewed as anything but cool, and "culturally appropriating" the pathos of an African-American pseudo-religion, would surely be a non-starter. But for the slackers of the eighties, the Moorish Orthodox Church and Peter's screeds seemed the clever expression of many an unarticulated longing.

It's no great feat to coldly dissect it now, thirty years later, and to do so gives a misleading impression of how aware anyone, most of all Peter, was of what he was doing. I was impressed and non-plussed; his reading public was awed by the kaleidoscope of his writings. He himself was quite baffled though very pleased by his burgeoning micro-celebrity. Now let's go back to 1981, to that tiny smoke-filled Upper West Side room with the manual typewriter and SF books and fanzines piled high on the floor, where Peter was creating Hakim Bey.

3: Klingsor

Peter was working his way free of the constraints of orthodox Islam like a butterfly wriggling out of its chrysalis. The analogy is more precise and less flattering than might seem. There was an awful lot of squirming involved before he raised his drying wings in a display you might mistake for a psychedelic sunrise. Peter took a position that has been commonly adopted by mystics of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These faiths, which embrace historical time as a kind of dour opaque ongoing disclosure of God's will, all look forward to the Apocalypse as the ultimate restoration of the miraculous to everyday life. But for the mystic, Doomsday has, in some sense, already arrived. He sees the sacred implicit within the secular, the last judgment in every decision, the one-ness in the many, in Blake's phrase, "the ocean in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour."

Living, on one level, in a post-apocalyptic world, the mystic finds the rules and constraints that order temporal existence are no longer valid. He has passed beyond attachment to the fruits of action, no longer has any corrupting interest in success or failure. His soul is fully realized and autonomous, he sees *reality* without any subjective coloring, which puts him "beyond good and evil." Perhaps the best account of this attainment is western literature is in Dante's *Purgatorio*, where he reaches the Garden of Eden atop Mount Purgatory, which I translate:

When we'd run up the stairs to its highest step,
Virgil fixed upon me his eyes and said,

"I brought you this far with what skill and insight
I had: be guided from now on
by your own pleasure, go where you feel drawn.

You've left behind the steep and narrow path.
See, the sun shines before you
on tender meadows, sweet flowers, little groves
of pleasant shade, which this unplanted land
spontaneously creates.

Until the glad appearance of her whose lovely eyes,
once, beseeching and tearful, sent me to you,
wander here, rest whenever, wherever you wish,
unhurried at last.

Await no further word or sign from me,
permitting this, ordaining that;
your own judgment now is healthy, correct
and free. The only error possible now
is for you not to do what you think best.

I crown and consecrate you
emperor of who you are,
by divine right, a law unto yourself."

Living in an esoteric apocalypse, whatever pleasures, illicit or otherwise, we can get, are the legitimate rewards of the just—and arguably more fully deserved if acquired by stealth and at risk, in defiance of the demonic "powers of this world."

Peter viewed his personal mystical liberation in political terms as well, and expressed it as a new sort of Anarchism. I cannot here enter into a detailed critique of Peter's political thinking, where my purpose is only to offer some details of its origins, which I was on hand to witness. The key insight I have is that Peter's approach was, at first, *mystical.* Mysticism is private and interior and amoral. The extroverted opposite of mysticism would be *prophecy*, which is extremely political and very concerned with right and wrong.

Peter came to his realizations, personal and political, from the context of Sufism, from mystical practice. This "privatized" his political thinking, and resulted in his rejection of long-term social action in favor of limited and personal, brief and private ("temporary, autonomous") activity. There is merit in his position. Without an interior transformation, what we used to call "consciousness raising," resistance cannot begin. But without concerted outward action, interior realizations, whatever their intrinsic merit, are politically insignificant.

At the beginning, Peter was engaged in a genuinely mystical adventure. Where this finally led him will be discussed in its place, but his original Chaos Broadsheets were sincerely meant. Peter was really and sincerely religious. He began on the antinomian path with awe and trepidation, unsure whether he'd be halo'd or struck down.

I looked with amazement on Peter's writings. They had fervor, they were genuine, they contained in their confusing profusion authentic messages from the beyond, a somewhat garbled but unquestionably veracious record of renegade illumination. Nietzschean materialist that I was, mine was not a crude reductionism, I was no positivist. I regarded Peter's mystical terminology as I

did the accounts of the gods in Homer: as a florid and poetic but accurate description of reality.

Peter's vision of every day as the Day of Judgment, with heaven and hell entirely imminent here, was balanced on the razor's edge of piety and blasphemy. Was he declaring the presence of God in all things, or was he vulgarizing spiritual terms to gussy up his every whim and want? Or both? In the Talmud there's a tale of four sages who were allowed to enter Paradise while still alive, that is, they were granted an unfiltered vision of God. One of them died, one went mad, one became a scoffing nihilist, and one "entered in peace and departed in peace," that is, he kept his interior balance—and in fact became a saint. In Jewish tradition, these are the four possible outcomes of a direct encounter with God. Peter was neither dead nor mad; had he become a saint or a scoffer?

In my opinion, he really had acquired *baraka* (holiness) during his decade of Sufi practice. And now he succumbed to one of the classic pitfalls of the spiritual path. Since Peter was very fond of the Arthurian legends, particularly during his early, poet period, I will take a likeness from that cycle. The Grail knight, Klingsor, best known from Wagner's *Parzival*, succumbs to the sensual temptations that beset those on the quest, and in exchange for physical gratifications becomes a black magician. Then he makes a career out of luring others from the spiritual path with his garden of illicit delights. This is admittedly a rather melodramatic description of Peter's case, but one which does justice to a certain aspect of his character. I loved him for his spirituality, which still shone about him when he returned from Iran, and I watched with dismay and disappointment as this dissipated over the years, till there was nothing left of that young man who dropped out of college for a mystical journey to India, the knight on the quest of the Holy Grail, the *chevalier* of the Holy Spirit, who rejoiced my soul by his mere existence, proving that such adventures and such adventurers were possible in our world.

4: In the Shadow of Columbia's Library

For my part, I introduced Peter to my New York, the cafés of the Village that were open latest and left you undisturbed for hours at your table to sip your espresso and talk and smoke. My favorite was Di Roberti's, on First Avenue near Twelfth Street, with black-and-white tiled walls and floors, and a few unrepaired bullet holes by the booth where Louie the Fish bought it back in the forties.

The fare at Di Roberti's was unsubtle but wonderful Sicilian pastry. Around Easter the window would be filled with marzipan lambs, each holding its cross-banner in the crook of its foreleg. In the wall-covering front mirrors of that brightly lit pastry-shop you saw a miniature infinity of toy-like pink identical animals, a vista of childhood delight, multiplied into a likeness of candied eternity.

They also had *Poppe di Monaca* ("Nun's Breasts"), the round dome-like cakes, filled with marzipan, topped with a cherry and glazed with white icing, through which the cherry showed, erect and roseate, an angelic and delectable nipple.

I tried to share with Peter the things that interested me, De Sade, Heraclitus and so on, but the only one he really took to was Nietzsche, whom he'd somehow missed out on. Peter treated Nietzsche like a chocolate-box full of ideas to be sampled.

He took a similar view of my conversation. When I look over the pages of TAZ I see a number verbatim phrases I can confidently claim, but I cannot say that he borrowed any of my ideas. Those didn't really register.

I was the great beneficiary in our friendship. Peter taught me about Islamic civilization, a vast gap in my education, as it is in that of most westerners to this day. This ignorance forms a particularly appalling chasm, since Middle Eastern politics are now part of ours. Islamdom covered twice the territory (it extended from Spain to India) and lasted twice as long as the Roman empire, and was responsible for such international intellectual projects as medieval philosophy and medicine, modern algebra and chess. Algebra was created when the Arab mathematicians combined Greek geometry and the Indian concept of zero with their own system of writing numbers, which is the one we use today. Chess was an Indian board game not much better than checkers before Moslem merchants carried it across continents.

Typically Peter and I would talk all night. At five the next morning. I would go home to sleep, and then walk up to the Columbia library to get the books he'd mentioned. Thus I obtained a truly splendid education at Columbia, without Columbia's assistance. It was in effect a graduate tutorial in Islamic

civilization from an expert whose knowledge had come from living in the midst of it.

Peter was also the first to tell me about Gnosticism—the antinomian heresy that beset early Christianity. This was just then becoming a modish subject due to Elaine Pagel's vulgarization, the best-selling 1979 *Gnostic Gospels.* At about this time Gnosticism was also trickling into the popular culture via the last novels of P. K. Dick: *The Divine Invasion, Valis,* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*. Later on gnosticism would tinge such hits as *The Da Vinci Code* and the movie *The Matrix.* But when I met Peter, Gnosticism was still a topic largely unknown to anyone outside of academia and, on a deeper level, such it really remains. Although a few people have cashed in on it, it has largely been by citing the rediscovered gnostic scriptures to appeal to anti-Catholic feeling—never a bad bet in a Protestant country. The idea here is that the evil Catholic Church has been hiding the true scriptures so as to protect its monopoly. This ploy has been selling books since Gutenberg printed Luther's Bible. It's literally the oldest game in publishing.

Real knowledge of Gnosticism remains an esoteric rarity, and the book Peter referred me to, Hans Jonas' 1958 *The Gnostic Religion,* remains the most valuable study of the subject available, though interested persons should now also acquire Bentley Layton's splendid 1987 *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations*, which has for the first time made the primary documents accessible to the non-specialist.

Peter was interested in Gnosticism for the same reason he embraced Islamic heresy, because it was a source of hoary authorities and tragic antecedents to legitimize his homosexuality and anarchism. He had invested far too much of his life in the spiritual path to reject religion wholesale, to be simply irreverently gay and atheistically anarchist. That might do if your only exposure to religion was a crude fundamentalism, but Peter was deeply read in mystical literature, and had considerable experience of spiritual practice.

The Christian gnostics offered a kind of liberation, but because of Christianity's underlying ambivalence to material existence, their ventures into sacred sex and strange politics took a particularly blasphemous form. In fact, a kind of satanism. They regarded the god of the Old Testament with his list of prohibitions as the evil, stupid overlord of the physical world only, who had invented sexual morality as a further fetter upon the spirit. Thus gnosticism has always had a certain appeal for Christendom's sexual dissidents. This excerpt from the Nag Hammadi hymn *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, will give an idea. Here the spirit of Holy Wisdom says

For I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.

With scriptures like this, it's pretty easy to see how you could have whatever quantity or character of sex you please and still end up holier than the pope!

Peter wasn't particularly attracted to the Gnostic path; "gloomy libertines" was how he described them. But he found in them an instructive parallel to Islamic heresies, which offered pretty much the same validation of this-worldly pleasure and total individual freedom, but without the melodrama. The dualism that underlies the Islamic version of gnosticism is largely neutralized by the stricter monotheism of Islam.

Dualism may be a term too concise to be clear. It's the notion that matter and spirit are opposed principles, forever at war in the cosmos, as light versus darkness, good versus evil, &c. Peter explained to me that, whatever gnosticism's metaphysical shortcomings—the fact it defines the material world as evil—its dualist ideology provides a splendid tension for a novel's plotline. Peter was particularly interested in how this appeared in science fiction: here P. K. Dick is the parade example. I would extend Peter's insight to say that dualism is the only, though crucial, Christian element in Tolkien's otherwise pagan *Lord of the Rings*, and that the entire genre of detective novel can be viewed as a secularized version of the same plot structure. The archetype of Saint Michael (the patron saint of police officers) fighting the Antichrist is always somewhere present in the *roman policier.*

It was through Peter that I rediscovered science fiction. I'd read a certain amount of it while a teenager, but had figured it was one of those childish things one puts away when one becomes a man. Peter made a quite compelling, though somewhat self-serving argument that SF was the modern "literature of ideas," comparable to the didactic poetry of old, like Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura,* the great first-century BC epic poem about physics. I wasn't, and am not, persuaded that the alternate futures and imaginary worlds of this particular genre fiction are really dealing with serious questions. Not even to the same degree as the satiric fantasy *Gulliver's Travels*—at least they have not done so yet, to my knowledge. Yet Peter's insight is to this degree valid: science fiction would be ideally suited to presenting philosophic concepts in narrative form. At present, its exponents seem satisfied if now and then they can propound a grotesque moral conundrum.

Peter would go through bales of SF novels, and refer me to the very best of what he found. In this manner I read a number of intensely enjoyable books which would have otherwise eluded me. Dick's *Divine Invasion* was a

particular favorite, as was Gibson's *Neuromancer*, both of which I read several times. I recall trying to interest Brett in this latter. I thought the opening line was rather grabby: "The sky was the color of TV tuned to a dead channel." Brett, profoundly unimpressed, responded with,

"I suppose that's the cyberspace equivalent of *it was a dark and stormy night*."

Both of these books dealt with gnosticism. *Divine Invasion* did so very literally, incorporating the myth of a mental breakdown in the godhead which caused the emanation of our universe. *Neuromancer*, with its visions of cyberspace as a disembodied network of twinkling information extending through the black non-space of pure consciousness, gave a very up-to-date version of the traditional, disembodied heaven of Christianity.

Peter was my psychopomp through all this literature, from Arabic and Persian classics to SF. He had read seemingly everything and could discuss it all in intelligent detail. There was no one teaching at Columbia remotely comparable to him in breadth of knowledge or literary sensitivity. Though Allen and Bill were immeasurably better writers, compared to Peter's, their literary culture was limited and provincial. I'm not being a bitch: compared to Peter's range and agility, just about anyone looked limited and provincial. It was thanks to Peter that my cultural compass points included Confucius, the Tale of Genji, the Mahabharata and Rumi. Peter was the whole silk route (which he'd in fact traveled in person as much as through books.)

Peter also introduced me to food. My parents had taught me nothing about cooking or dining beyond some rather out-of-date table manners. As a boy, I couldn't leave before the formal end of the meal without saying "may I please be excused."

My mother didn't really cook. Her culinary accomplishments were almost encompassed by meat-loaf and tuna-noodle casserole. My father's only participation in dining was grilling steaks. Were it not for our ethnicity, which vouchsafed us delicatessen food once a week, I would never have guessed that food could be good.

Peter introduced me to real dining, which I maintain is usually the same as cheap dining. I haven't yet been to an expensive restaurant where the food was really tastier than the fare in a good inexpensive one, be it an ethnic establishment or a plain old American diner. There's no earthly reason to ever pay fifty dollars a plate, unless someone else is paying, and even then, it's a bore to be beholden while someone literally shoves their success down your throat.

With Peter I learned to frequent the Cuban-Chinese places that were then so common on the Upper West Side near Columbia. I learned how excellent

even an ordinary dish of rice and beans can be, and what delight there is in a simple cup of coffee, when it's Café Bustelo made in an espresso machine and topped with steamed milk to make a *café con leche*. Henceforth it was with a grimace that I sipped the thin bitter stuff Americans like, which even they have to excuse with copious doses of sugar and cream. I ate roast goat and oxtail soup, *chicharrones de pollo*, deep-fried morsels of chicken, and crispy sweet fried sweet plantains. All of it cheap, all of it excellent, and always served in a relaxed and courteous atmosphere without a trace of "attitude."

On our forays into Chinatown we usually ended up at Lin's Garden on Bayard Street. This magnificent hole-in-the-wall closed around 1990. It was famous for its deliciously greasy *chow fun* (broad rice noodles) which were served with the meat of your choice mixed in. Best of all was the duck chow fun. To my amazement Peter would order half a roast duck on the side to eat along with his. I'd never seen anyone consume such quantities of admittedly savory but quite rich avian fat. Although I never followed Peter as far as he led into gourmandise, it was a revelation to me that fat wasn't bad. I'd grown up carefully trimming the white from the strips of steak on my plate. Now I realize this had been the carnivore equivalent of scraping all the butter from your toast.

Peter also opened to me the world of *botanicas*. These are shops that sell religious and magical supplies to practitioners of Santeria, which is West African paganism syncretized with Roman Catholicism. Santeria is the universal folk religion of Latino communities in America. It's the Spanish and Portuguese equivalent of Voodoo, and no doubt very similar to the popular Catholicism of Europe in the Dark Ages, in its mixture of scriptural religion and uneffaced paganism.

Santeria flourishes throughout the Americas, and is in fact a highly evolved initiatory religion, with its own music, mythology and ecstatic rites. In 1980 few but professional anthropologists had even heard of it, despite there being a botanica on every block in the Hispanic areas of Manhattan. Peter's apartment, on 107th and Amsterdam, was right on the border of a large Dominican community, and he had a botanica literally on his doorstep.

With Peter I explored these stores, full of holy cards and plastic statues of saints, as well as herbs, tinctures, novena candles in their tall glass jars wrapped with bright labels printed with Spanish prayers for every purpose, from gaining the favor of one's guardian angel to winning a court case. Among the standard catholic statues were some genuinely odd-looking ones, like Chango, the seated Santeria Zeus, a crowned, bejeweled but mostly naked human figure with shiny ebony skin and a delirious grin, like an occult Uncle Ben. He is identified with Saint Barbara, who holds a sword and

a communion cup, in which the Santeros see a symbol of the mortar and pestle with which Chango produces thunder as he grinds out lightning. A storm appears above a castle in the background of St. Barbara's image, and this seals the identification. An image of Barbara may thus be used for prayers and offerings to Chango, and indeed the two spirits more or less fuse, so no contradiction or inconsistency is perceived. For the believers in Santeria, the gods, on the most profound level, *are* the saints. Thus they all consider themselves good Catholics and would be horrified to hear themselves characterized as pagans. Their notion of Catholicism is simply a bit more, well *catholic*, (universal and comprehensive) than that espoused by the Roman Church.

Then there's Elegua, the equivalent of Janus, god of doorways, beginnings and endings. He's represented by a grey truncated cone-like head, like what you'd get if you used a child's sand-bucket as a mold for concrete. Cowries are pressed in with the nubbly slots facing outwards for eyes, mouth and ears. Beyond these details the head is eerily featureless.

Peter was making collages of Santeria deities with holy cards, marbled paper, hand-watercolored gay porn and frames from "Tijuana bibles." I was edified by his appreciation of crude popular religious art, and the way he swept all the ephemera he enjoyed into the artistic mix.

As regards the Santeria imagery and Catholic kitsch, on my own I would have dismissed it as the unskilled and slightly creepy expression of vulgar, ignorant superstition, but Peter would look at the images on the magic candles or the bottles of hoodoo oil and delight in the errors of anatomy and perspective. In fact, the aesthetic shock of an untutored rendering frequently *enhanced* the power of the imagery. This was artistic information of a kind undivulged at Columbia's art history classes. Being with Peter seemed to give me new senses.

Peter's conversation had a certain acrobatic method to it. Whatever the topic, he would take up an opposite, devil's advocate position. Not one of outright contradiction, but one that encouraged you to define your own position more clearly. The talk was a kind of genial sparring, which no one ever really "won." Peter always made you feel like you and he were together getting to the bottom of something interesting.

He did however have a consistent theme that goes through his conversation, at least when any really interesting subject is being discussed. In a way it is the very opposite of that which preoccupied Socrates — though Peter's method was indeed Socratic. The Greek was forever testing for an underlying absolute, the ideal. Peter on the other hand always advocated the mongrel and mixed over the pure, and focused on the detail rather than the pattern.

In literature he always preferred the late, the decadent, the mannerist over the classical and golden-age exemplar. In Latin, which was his major at Columbia before he dropped out to wander across India, he had no interest in Virgil or Horace, except as sources of ideas and myths that might illustrate his ideas. The author he admired and has translated is the fifth-century AD poet Dracontius, of Vandal North Africa, whose works are generally considered an arid expanse of abstruse Biblical and Classical allusions, varied only by stale rhetorical tricks. Dracontius is typical of a poet of decadence, capable only of scribbling derivative imitations of the masterpieces written centuries before.

Similarly, in Greek, Homer bores Peter and the dramatists mean nothing to him, but he has read with attention the voluminous *Dionysiaca*, written in Greek by the Egyptian Nonnius in the fifth century AD. I don't recall what gold Peter succeeded in panning out of that Nile mud.

The point is that Peter is interested in the moment when classical culture is melting into its barbarous surroundings. You can see this in late Roman sarcophagi, where the execution of classical motifs, say a scene from the life of Hercules or the signs of the zodiac, are becoming a crude repetition of visual formulae whose meaning is being lost at the same rate as the visual realism. Yet it has a certain barbaric energy, a power which wasn't there when it was all still careful and correct. As the imagery yields to pattern, geometry charges the art with an energy unfelt in Classical sculpture for centuries. At the despised margins of culture Peter discerned lawless new forms, just as he finds at the margins of society, in the dispossessed and naive, a creativity which is lost to society's respectable circles. From the Moorish Science Temple to the hoboes to trailer trash to the die-hard hippies of failed communes, Peter took a Whitman-like pleasure in culling the flowers that grow in the ruins.

In religion, he was always interested in the heresies, the syncretisms, the crackpots and apostates. The aberrations and the byways Peter considered to be of importance equal to that of the royal road and highway of knowledge.

To give Peter his due, our sense of cultural peaks, progress and purity are rather subjective. A case can be made for everything being a mongrel admixture. The most pristine examples of cultural continuity known to history are in fact streams so polluted they catch fire by themselves twice a year. But the merits of this point of view can be overstated, as I hope I just have.

I once challenged him, "You think the incidental detail as important as the overall pattern. For you, a camel would be as essential to Islam as the Koran." Peter proceeded to maintain exactly this position, and not by connecting the camel to Ibn Khaldum (the sixteenth-century Arab historian

whose great thesis was that civilization is motivated by the tension between the nomadic and the settled). No, Peter maintained the centrality of the camel on purely aesthetic grounds. Did he mean to suggest that the picture on the iconic American cigarette pack was the equivalent of a *surah* (chapter of the Koran)? In its way, yes!

As a primary intellectual orientation, Peter's perspective led to some questionable conclusions, particularly evident to me when he ventured on the deep waters of archaeology and ancient history.

It was from Peter that I learned to be a scholarly trespasser, ignoring the signs that said "private property, keep out!" to draw cross-cultural comparisons, and look beyond my own specialty.

Peter's intellectual agility and really remarkable insights can all be traced to one great understanding. From a certain point of view, mutability is the rule, everything flows, fixed forms are an illusion. This is the perception that made Peter take to Nietzsche.

Change is the very life-blood of reality. Transitions and intermediate phases are more common than full development and complete realization, and they're never neatly separated. The outmoded past survives just under the surface of the present, superstition lives hardily on within religion, repressed impulses contribute to our noblest acts.

It is not by coincidence that a Luddite love of bygone ways, sympathy for naive superstition and a trust in spontaneous desire are key features of Peter's worldview. Peter is a partisan of the undercurrents which belie the placid surface.

VII: Adrift

1: Heroic Materialism

While Peter was completing my education and producing the broadsheets that would finally be gathered into TAZ, I was working on my epic poem *Blurred Person Singular*, which would occupy me for the next decade.

A great deal of the content deals with homosexual sex and gender transformation. This may seem strangely obsessive today, but when I was growing up, the only validation I found for my perplexed sexual identity was pornography. The sex scenes in Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* were my psycho-sexual declaration of independence. Thus when I made my personal literary revolution I reclaimed as valid, and even as beautiful, a portion of my experience which I had been raised to regard as profoundly shameful.

This was about the time when I began to fully appreciate Allen's genius. My new views were a massive validation of physical existence. I dismissed all idealism and transcendence as "world slander." Thus I found in Allen's meticulously phrased, well-observed and witty naturalism a continuous hymn of praise to reality. (At the same time I discovered Zola who now replaced Baudelaire in my pantheon as supreme French poet). Allen was pleased, if a bit perplexed, by my sudden torrent of admiration. His own rationale for the naturalism had nothing to do with the heroic materialism I saw in it. Rather, he had come up with his image-rich hyper-realist descriptive style in a personal synthesis of Beat aesthetics and Buddhism.

In any event, Allen arrived at his mature poetic style for his reasons, and I admired it for mine. He thought he was revealing the beauty of the uncluttered mind confronting material reality, I now agreed, and I was very glad to bring something new and positive to our friendship.

My drinking had greatly pained him. He finally forbade my getting get drunk in his apartment. He was accustomed to enduring it from Lucien and Harry Smith, but he wasn't taking on any new clients of this sort. "I can't watch you destroy yourself," he said.

For the first few years after my affair with Allen, things went on in the complex ambivalent way they do with an ex. Tension, hurt, puzzlement, hope, loneliness and mistakes one awakes to with a hangover. There are echoes of this final phase of our romantic relationship in a few poems of late seventies, the songlike rhymed quatrains, all of which have "Love" in the title. These were written about a number of young men who drifted in and out of Allen's life in those years, and some are composite portraits of his relationships with youths in general. I recognize myself however in the poem *Lack Love*, wherein appear the lines,

Now I lie alone, and a youth
Stalks my house, he won't in truth
Come to bed with me, instead
Loves the thoughts inside my head

He knows how much I think of him
Holds my heart his painful whim
Looks thru me with mocking eyes
Steals my feelings, drinks & lies

It's all there, my admiration for Allen's mind that had become Platonic. My alcoholism, and my adolescence, which entailed a cynical manipulation of his emotions, and a brutal delight in exposing the compromises and inconsistencies in an adult's beliefs.

An unlovely image of me, embodying Buddhist insight into the hollowness of desire. The poem ends

Till I see Love's empty Truth
Think back on heartbroken youth
Hear my heart beat red in bed
Thick and living, love rejected.

Once more, I am abashed before Allen's moral stature. He saw in my really awful behavior an opportunity for insight. His vision transformed me into an unconscious bodhisattva, purveying painful but valuable new awareness.

Now, as in a dream come true, I was healthy, sober, wildly appreciative of his artistry—and only too willing to expound, at wearisome length, my insights. Allen finally said, "You didn't get over your addiction. You just replaced alcohol with ideas as a way of staying drunk all the time." I was delighted by this formulation.

Danny Goldin, my friend from Columbia, had a similar insight. "You are the most dangerous kind of lunatic there is. You're the kind who takes ideas seriously."

Later on I heard, at second hand from a friend, Lucien's reaction to a visit from the new me. I had lectured him on the cultural pathology of AA. Lucien's take on it was, "What could I say? I was talking to Friedrich fucking Nietzsche."

I resumed my studies at Columbia in the summer of 1981, taking pre-calculus courses with the intention of studying economics, which I had now

decided was the true twentieth-century path of the warrior. Though not an entirely bad idea, this plan was vitiated by a number of miscalculations. First, I failed to realize that paltry as the mathematics one learns in high school is, for those who apply themselves it actually covers a considerable amount of ground. It's six years of following a well-organized curriculum, and that's more than can be absorbed in eight weeks of summer school. Columbia was very much to blame for offering this course as sufficient preparation for Calculus One, which I had to drop as soon as the classes began in the fall after a few weeks of desperate attempt .

This didn't much distress me, since I had a back-up plan. During my year at the book factory I had got it into my head that I should go into banking (whence the interest in economics). A friend of my father's, Harvey Kruger, was a higher-up at Lehman Brothers, Kuhn, Loeb, and it was arranged for me to talk to him about a career in finance. There was an oriental rug on the floor of his waiting room better than anything that had ever been unrolled in my parents' living room. I met Mr. Kruger in his office overlooking the East River, bound copies of business deals and models of jet planes on the shelves behind his desk. He asked about how I came to be interested in banking, and I explained how I thought finance was the modern equivalent of warfare and that bankers and the like were equivalent to the military class in Vedic India. I rabbited on about Marx and Heraclitus and *kshatriya dharma* —and how I was well tired of serving in the underfunded heaven of the humanities and intended to reign in hell with the plutocrats.

Kruger was positive enough, either out of friendship to my father, or through sheer bemusement at my rhetoric. Perhaps he liked being compared to Agamemnon and hearing his trade described in quotes from Homer, though he felt I wanted, as I later learned at second hand, "all the right things for all the wrong reasons."

At a certain point I mentioned that my present plans were a necessary translation into modern reality of the heroic life. I told him that, were this the 1880's rather than the 1980's, I'd not be bothering with math and economics but be founding Israel with the pioneers of the First Aliyah.

Now I really had his attention. Kruger was quite the Zionist, made hefty donations to Hebrew University, even had a building there named after himself. Now at that time I was rather up on modern Jewish history. I had continued to read the Bible, but with true historical perspective, and was very taken with the heroic splendors of Israel's bronze age. My reading in Islam filled in a lot of the coloring, since the modern Arab world preserves, in culture as in language, much that is unchanged from the days of Abraham. The Rabbinic period and religious Judaism struck me as a dismal interval of medieval ignorance and misery, but I was fascinated by modern Israel, which

seemed to have a continuity with its ancient history unmatched by modern Greece or Italy. I thought the Jews in Israel had taken up exactly where they had left off when the Romans crushed their Bar Kochba revolt in 132 AD. Kruger and I discussed the battles to establish the modern state of Israel with the utter absorption and passionate identification of a couple of Civil War buffs walking the hills of Gettysburg. By the time the clock brought a meeting he couldn't get out of, we had gone as far back as Hannibal (this Semitic general who shook Rome to its foundations is seen as a foreshadowing hero by literary Zionists) and I was discussing some little known details of the Carthaginian's personality which can be deduced from a close reading of Livy.

When we parted, he gave me this advice. Finish college, get a MA, it didn't matter in what, just to show I had more than a BA's worth of ability and could be trained. Then if I really wanted to go into banking, he'd look after me.

The meeting had just the opposite of the intended effect. Kruger was a tremendously successful man, yet he looked to Israel to give his life meaning. He had spoken of their army with frank admiration, and of banking with a pragmatism calculated to dispel the metaphoric glamor I'd accorded it. So when I dropped Calculus One I replaced it not with Economics but with Hebrew. I resolved that when I left finished at Columbia come January, I would go to Israel and join the army.

2: This Ain't Texas

I was by no means the first literary man to imagine his true calling was to be a man of action. One thinks immediately of Arthur Rimbaud running guns in Africa, or Melville in his twenties signing on as a whaler, or T. E. Lawrence orchestrating the Arab Revolt. For me the literary reference that hit home was the twenty-ninth ode in Horace' first book, addressed to the poet's friend Iccius. Iccius sells his books of philosophy to buy a sword and a breastplate and go with Aelius Gallus on the 29 BC Arabian expedition. It begins,

> *Icci, beatis nunc Arabum*
> *gazis . . .*
>
> "Iccius, you already picture yourself rich
> with the plunder of the beaten, fleeing Arabs . . ."

I was sober, I'd quit smoking, I'd learned some math, I had a year of Tae Kwon Do, I worked out with weights and was in top physical form. I'd had a year of psychotherapy and thought I'd dealt with the major snarls in my psyche. Dr. Hecht was of course horrified by the turn my thoughts had taken. He didn't mention what now seems the obvious inference: that my determination to join the Israeli army was an overcompensation for my sexual ambiguity. At the time I would undoubtedly have dismissed this as the cheapest of cheap shots, and might well have ended our meetings over it. Cheap shot or not, it was a bulls-eye. I would add to this that I had till that point felt weird about being Jewish. Though my parents would privately indulge in some jocular chauvinism, there was nothing about them that would suggest that they took any pride or pleasure in it, or were even interested in it. They were completely assimilated, members of a "Papa, please, we're Americans now!" generation.

By this time Bill Burroughs had already left NYC for Lawrence, Kansas, where he would end his days, so I never got his opinion on the Israeli adventure. Allen was diplomatic. I didn't realize then that this was another way in which I recapitulated his father, who politely but insistently reminded Allen of his race. Allen regarded this as yet another of his father's unexamined inherited prejudices. Looking back now on the deliberate courtesy and neutrality with which he met my Jewish identification, so at odds with his usual ease, I can see that he was showing remarkable self-mastery in the face of something that set his teeth on edge.

Peter Wilson, ever pleasant, gave me practical advice about travel in the Middle East and was far too tasteful ever to mention his own strong dislike of Zionism. I suppose all of my friends looked on this as a period of perhaps inevitable insanity as I dried out. I must have given everyone quite a scare.

My life finally felt to me momentous and heroic. *Blurred Person Singular* has this poetic record of the journey to Israel, in which my attention to Allen's naturalism is readily observable.

> His every step kicked a splash of paper trash
> and leafage that the wind took up and wove
> in airborne spirals. He walked past an abandoned trainstop,
> spray-can calligraphy fading on walls of rotten concrete,
> into a misty industrial landscape,
> gray smoke-stacked factories, metal-skeletal structures,
> low small-windowed buildings, chemical tanks,
> patches of colorless scrubby grass with weeds between,
> silver-black railroad tracks and slow oily streams.
> Sunless, treeless factory land, ground zoned with metal fences,
> electric wires stitched across the sky.
>
> He walked so far there was nothing left before him
> but flatland with a white dashed line down the middle.
> Jake taxi'd forward. Suddenly he screamed.
> His cry became a thunder.
>
> He ran forward, skipping up, his feet trod air.
> He pulled them up into his belly—
> not a belly but a hull. Arms out, a jet,
> he soared up at an angle on the strength of steely fins.
> Below him, New York, all America,
> a purple map and a silver sea
> lost behind his tailfins.
> He had no more past than he carried on his back
> and if he had a future he held it in his hands,
> coasting over the clouds at thirty thousand feet.
>
> Europe was under him like a shadow,
> the Mediterranean was dull dark blue.
> There was Greece: a spray of islands.
> Ahead, a shore, tan stone and foliage,

a crusader port-fortress, its great beige bulk
of rotted rock breasting the windy sea.
Jake glided over Israel.

He passed over green goat-trodden slopes
brilliant with white scattered stones,
Arab towns of cubelike rock houses
half-sunk in the hillsides.
There ahead, Jerusalem, hotels, parks, roads,
tall cypress trees, churches clanging heavy bells.
The Old City was just under him,
jumbled blockish houses with moss-grown roofs of rock,
TV antennae and laundry lines among the stony domes,
thin upstanding minarets yowling the megaphone-hoarse
call to prayer.

He stood on the ramparts of old Jerusalem.
Over there, the Wall the world could not destroy.
Jake took off his shoes and covered his head.
He'd gone around the world to get there,
to stand in high Jerusalem, a city
set like a saddle on the planet, riding it!
He stood atop the earth, balanced on the ball of it.
From far down the planet he seemed to hear
his parents calling—then the voices died,
the callers don't exist.

He was out there on world's end, the apex of the earth,
a terrible ascent. Just overhead the point
where empty sky stops and an empty infinity begins.
The loneliness was total, the heavens seemed unreal,
the stars were very clear and much too close.

Morning filled a brilliant unfamiliar sky.
Strange birds perched on spiny tropic plants.
It was a land where he recognized nothing.
He was startled to hear his own voice
speaking some guttural tongue. In the markets
he filled his hands with fruit, richer to the taste
than any in the states. Its sweet weak flesh
yielded to his teeth. Warplanes raked the skies,

sharp and finned like missiles. Soldiers walked the streets
in green rumpled uniforms, machine guns slung from shoulder,
heads up, noble, quick to anger.
A beaten people stared at them in hate.

(When I showed these lines to Allen, he tightened up the language, crossing out a superfluous word here and there, and he emended the line "Below him, New York, all America, a purple map and a silver sea lost behind him" to "lost behind his tailfins." Of course it's much better with the definite image.)

Stuffing my poetry notebook into my backpack, I presented myself at an induction center in Jerusalem. I made the man behind the desk a pretty speech (in Hebrew) about how I had got on the plane the moment I finished university, and had come to build the nation, defend the Jewish people, and avenge the blood of my ancestors.

He sighed and explained that the last thing Israel needed was crazy Americans trying to join their army.

"What makes you think I'm crazy?"

"You *want* to join our army." Then he added, by way of editorial, *"Ze lo Texas po."* ("This ain't Texas.")

When I reasoned and remonstrated, he referred me to another branch of the bureaucracy where I could apply for psychological testing. If could pass those exams, my application could be reconsidered.

What I didn't know was that there had recently been a few extremist American Jews who had shown up and promptly involved themselves in far-right religious schemes to blow up the Dome of the Rock and rebuild the Temple on the ruins, so the army was on the alert for Yankees eager to fight. With my full beard and wild hair I fit the profile to a T.

With no notion of the political context, I took it all quite personally and was mortified. From my point of view I would be giving up a lot, exchanging America amenities for Israel's austerities, and joining the army would have automatically cost me my American citizenship. I thought this degree of commitment should have earned me a handshake at least. Instead, I was getting the bum's rush.

I figured I'd tour the country a bit while I got my bearings. I worked on a kibbutz for a few months. I went to Jerusalem and tried studying at a Yeshiva. Neither farm life nor piety much agreed with me. I finally decided that I should return to America, get a doctorate in classics, and *then* return to Israel, not as cannon fodder but as a professor.

I had learned a wee bit about the world by now. Academe had proven unsympathetic to my ideas of what a historian should be. Harvey Kruger had been a poor advertisement for the satisfactions of being a capitalist villain. Now Israel made it clear that my notions of military glory were out of date, perhaps by as much as two millennia. It finally dawned on me that poetry and ancient texts were the one constant in all my evolutions. Very well then, if I wasn't after all a warrior, a *kshatriya*, then I would be a scholar, a *brahman*. Though I now knew how little to expect from academia, I figured that a classics degree would be largely be occupied with vocabulary, grammar and syntax, so there was a limit to how much worthless modern interpretation I would be subjected to. And I could concern myself directly with poetry, which was my true vocation.

3: Gregory Corso

It was the spring of 1983 when I returned to America. My philosophical point of view hadn't altered, I was still very much a Nietzschean. I was now drinking a bit, figuring, as I would for many years to come, that I could always go back to AA if it got out of control. And I was still determined to succeed as a heterosexual.

Even in 1983 we knew that people weren't getting tenured jobs in the good East Coast schools, but they were still hiring in the desolate flyover states, and surely Israel wasn't about to be mobbed by job-hungry classical philologists!

I applied to several grad schools. I couldn't be admitted by any before the fall of 1984, so I had over a year to kill. I was going mad with boredom living with my parents in New Jersey, though I did spend a lot of pleasant time with Peter Wilson. I had learned to drive by then, and one of my favorite things to do was to cruise through Times Square, then still sleazy, late on a rainy night, listening to gamelan music (which, as Peter Wilson amusingly observed, sounded "like pop music from the spirit world"). The wet streets in the rain-soft darkness reflected the neon and marquees in pastel colors: it was like gliding through the world of *Blade Runner* (which had come out the year before).

It occurred to me to take the year in San Francisco. Peggy Biderman had moved out there for good, so I already had entree through her into whatever North Beach bohemia remained.

A few days after I arrived, I was taking a typing test at a lofty floor of one of SF's few tall buildings. Back then they'd just started making high-rises in their financial district, like a toy New York to keep their money in. Glassy towers with concrete pocket-parks between them. I was trying to become a Kelly Girl, an employee of the office temp agency founded in 1946 and thriving globally to this day. By then they'd changed the company's name from Kelly Girl Services to Kelly Services, but office temps were still primarily women. They apologetically required me to watch the standard training film on workplace dress and decorum, from which I learned that I should avoid metallic lip gloss and find a skirt length that was right for me (somewhere below the knee) and stay there regardless of fashion.

Advised now of the style standards I would be expected to live up to, I was seated at a table taking the typing test while the woman who interviewed me scanned my resumé. She must have gotten to what I'd studied at college when a very mild earth-quake made the building sway. I heard a voice call out "Get away from the windows!" My interviewer looked

up from my CV to say, "you know Latin, do something!" I rattled off a *Pater Noster* in classical pronunciation, and this seemed to do the trick, since the tremor ended without damage or mishap, and I got hired on.

I had a series of employers in SF. One was as a secretary for a group of engineers whose only concern was that I had no objection to making coffee. By '83 this had become a feminist bone of contention: they were afraid to ask a woman to grind their beans. Besides preparing stimulating beverages, my job consisted mostly of sitting at a desk and reading science fiction till quitting time.

Though many of the jobs required no work at all, and the only challenge was to see if I could use their phone to make long distance calls to friends in Israel, others were grueling. For six weeks I alphabetized file cards at the Wells Fargo Bank eight hours a day. Once you accepted an employment, you couldn't leave it till the contract was up no matter how much you hated it or Kelly would never send you out again. I got a cassette player, the original blue-and-silver Sony Walkman with the big rectangular boxy control buttons, and listened to Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (with Janet Baker of course) over and over and over as I brought order to the index cards.

Another place I worked was a law firm which wanted me to proofread, onscreen, the text components of off-the-rack wills. At the end of the first day I complained that my eyes hurt. They explained there was something wrong with the monitors, but it would cost too much to replace them or fit them with translucent filters, and since no one stayed at the job for long, why bother? They suggested I try sunglasses.

Now legal documents contain a certain amount of Latin. By the time I was finished, these ones contained a whole lot more. I replaced the usual phrases with grammatically equivalent obscenities. The "term of art" *mandamus*, "we command," was replaced with *irrumamus*, "we give blow-jobs;" *in re*, "in the matter of" was now *inter nates*, "between the buttocks of," and so on. My best innovation came in the stipulations regarding organ donation. These now included their potential use as fish bait or cat food.

I stayed at a cheap hotel in North Beach, but eventually moved into a rent-controlled apartment on Harwood Alley with George Scrivani and his boyfriend Adam. I'd met George through Peggy when I was making my drunken debut at the Chelsea Hotel. George was just a decade older than I, a tall, bearded, Italian-American fellow, brilliant and fascinating.

I was for the most part sober, going to AA meetings to right my gyroscope as often as I fell off the wagon, deciphering Aeschylus with the help of a grad student from Berkeley I had hired to tutor me, gearing up for grad school. I benefited greatly from my association with George, who was deeply read in Italian and German literature. I acquired from him an interest

in Dante and philosophical German which was to bear fruit twenty years later. Not that George was giving a seminar or running a book club. But his ordinary conversation was so informed by what he'd read that an anecdote about grocery shopping wove in and out of idealist philosophy or Petrarch's verse.

The North Beach poets didn't much interest me. I went to a few open readings, and though they were far nicer than those in New York—the poets who had read stayed to hear those who hadn't yet, and they went to bars or cafes together afterwards—it was still not very good. George referred to their common style as "a garbage heap of associations."

For the better part of a year I was the third member, with George and Adam, of that strange household on Harwood Alley. Many a North Beach poet and personality had coffee with us in that kitchen. The one I best remember though was not a poet, but a man named Lionel, a gay retired navy officer, who had a store of interesting anecdotes from his lifetime of sailing the world, and an unsinkable "anchors aweigh" optimism. Lionel was also a vexillographer. That means he was interested in flags. He collected them, full-sized. He liked to pick up men of every nation and bed them on their own country's colors. I found his patriotism amusing and touching.

George was born in Brooklyn, grew up on Staten Island, which he hated, with an ogre-like father who despised his son's want of manliness, that is, his verbal precocity and intellectual bent. He went to college and majored in classics at SUNY Buffalo, a school he chose because it was the only one in the state system that offered both Latin and Greek. George kept his head down and attended to his studies, not an easy thing in the tumult of the Vietnam War protests. He met Gregory Corso when Gregory gave a reading there in 1970. They spoke after the reading and really hit it off. Gregory was fascinated by the classical world life-long, and George, being a classicist, had the goods. Being both poor Italian kids from NYC, they could communicate at once with easy direct comprehension. George has a profound appreciation of literature, and Gregory was a great poet. They shared a love of Shelley: the first time they met they got to trading quotes from Percy Bysshe, each of them able to complete the other's line. Last, but by no means least, George's father was an alcoholic, and so was Gregory. Their friendship, which lasted as long as Gregory did, was, as the psychiatrists say, "over-determined."

Right after grad school, George moved into a mansion turned commune in NYC along with his lifetime friend and elective sister from Staten Island Susan Dente. Gregory joined them and began an affair with Susan. George was working part time for the post office, putting together money to go to Europe. Gregory got a teaching job on the island of Aegina in Greece, but he

was strung out on junk. George, pretending to be a recovering heroin addict, obtained a prescription for methadone for Gregory, who, thus provided with the means to ride out his withdrawal, got on a plane. George and Susan followed him soon after. George toured the sacred places of Greece and western Turkey, while Gregory, off junk, went onto alcohol. Throughout his life he would alternate between the two drugs, depending on what kind of trouble the one or the other was causing him. Smack was expensive, dangerous and illegal; booze led to antics that made his friends shut their doors.

When George returned from the ruins of Troy, Gregory and Susan had concluded their Dionysiac revels under Aegean skies and left, without however leaving him any information as to where his luggage and return ticket were stored. So George gave tours to make ends meet till he got the information he needed by mail.

This was around 1970, George was in his early twenties, Gregory about forty. Though it may sound like George was the patsy, it was a real if twisted mentor relationship. George was just a kid when they met, and Gregory could be really spellbinding. He was a brilliant poet. It was a privilege to be with such a man, to see how his mind alchemically worked, to observe how he'd hone and adjust a phrase from original inspiration to final form. When I met Gregory in the eighties he was already in his fifties and the drugs had given him quite a drubbing. I thought he was a disgusting low-life—which he was. But George had known him when he was still holding it together and humanly sociable. George had come to love him, and love corrupts your judgment.

From the seventies to the late eighties George alternated between New York and San Francisco, always working for the post office to raise money to stay in Europe. He lived in cheap, inexpensive apartments, cooking his own vegetarian meals at home, didn't take drugs, drank occasionally, his only vices being tobacco and books, and he finally quit the former. He led a spartan life. On his meager but carefully managed earnings, he managed to pass many years in Germany and Italy, becoming fully fluent, as a speaker and a reader, in both languages, attending countless operas. George had many friends who were glad to put him up for extended periods: he was the perfect guest. If he stayed with you he was always out, going to museums or concerts or bookstores, lounging in cafes or tomcatting about the gay world. So George, as a guest, was never underfoot. And, due to his unstructured existence, he was always available if you wanted his company, which you often did, since his conversation is fascinating and he has a charming sense of humor. And he is ever helpful. He'd assist with the errands, cook the

dinner, sew a button on your shirt. Being the perfect guest is a job, and George was very very good at it. His presence in your home was weightless.

When he was in San Francisco, he hung out with the City Lights crowd: Ferlinghetti, Philip Lamantia, and of course Gregory. George regarded the North Beach poetry scene as the classical tradition come to life. When I came to SF, in '83, George was there with Adam, a twenty-years-younger dropout from the University of Chicago, whom he met in the City Lights bookstore. Adam was bi, was then in a gay phase, though he would later become a Hassid while visiting Israel. He finally married a girl who converted to Judaism, but who was originally from West Virginia, had been a marine sharp-shooter, and gave him a house full of children.

George would accept this turn of events rather philosophically. He didn't invest a lot of energy in relationships, or rather, he did so on the emotional level, but not on the level of long-term strategy. He was a man of passion, not of plans. And for gay men born before 1960, that seemed to be the way it was. Gay marriage was unimaginable. Gay long-term relationships seemed scarcely more plausible.

George had hung over his bed a quotation from Shelley which he had carefully calligraphed himself: "Rarely, rarely comest thou, spirit of delight."

George is a helper. When he was fifty he went to nursing school (a herculean achievement at any age), and worked in that profession till he retired around age seventy. But even before he became a professional, he cared for an old boyfriend who died of AIDS, and took care of Peggy Biderman when cancer finally took her. He had an enabler relationship with Gregory. The best emblem of this was George's copy of Book Six of Plutarch's *Moralia*, which he had in the English and Greek facing-page Loeb edition. Gregory was fascinated by this book, which contains many unique details about Delphi and ancient Egyptian religion. It formed the basis of conversations between the two. And any number of times George would find the copy gone—Gregory had stolen it and sold it to raise drug money. To my mind, that seems to symbolize the relationship. The two friends were joined by a love of poetry and lore which both saw as a living link with the ancient world. In this, they really were a couple of Renaissance Italians. Gregory was, in his own phrase, "a lovely demolition of a man," and George shored him up in what ways he could, because to be with Gregory, to hear his hilarious, bizarre and sometimes beautiful conversation, was to experience a level of being that felt powerful, valid and meaningful. It was a Boswell-Johnson, Watson-Holmes kind of relationship. George served as Gregory's guide, translator and manager during his poetry tours in Europe. Curiously, George never had any literary ambitions of his own, and it was only under

duress and with financial incentives that he even made the occasional translation.

But what was Gregory really like? His sublimity is easily experienced from his poetry: what you won't find there, or in the sparse biographic accounts, is the trickster theater that was his ambiance.

Allen introduced me to Gregory when he'd returned from Paris with Jacques Stern's girlfriend, Jocelyn, a woman of independent means and serious junk habit. I was then a drunken seventeen-year-old hanging around the Chelsea, and I ended up spending much time with George and Peggy, who were both Gregory's mesmerized and long-suffering friends. Gregory and I formed a brief and immediate friendship as fellow alcoholics. We'd both get gloriously swozzled and converse about poetry. I had the vague idea that I could learn something of the poetic art from Gregory. Let's just say Gregory taught more by example than by precept.

Gregory was a Cro-Magnon looking unkempt mess, often as not dressed in beautiful clothes he'd promptly ruin with spilt drinks, spatterings of sauce or blotches of his own junkie blood. He rather enjoyed the gory drama of his addiction: one of his favored routines was, after shooting up, to spray the blood left in his syringe across the wall with an arcing flourish and say, "I have used my blood like an extravagance."

Gregory loved attention. Anyone's. He'd address whoever was on hand with a mixture of slangy street-hustle, poetry and surreal obscenity. He liked asking women if he could suck their dicks. Sometimes he'd ask a man if he could suck his great-great-great grandmother's cock. If these sallies failed to produce the desired response, he would disgustedly say "Stick a rose up your heart!"

He had no death perception. I remember being with him at Washington Square Park, listening to a Black street comic doing his routines, which were admittedly rather anti-white. After listening to this for a minute or two, Gregory heckled him with,

"You know, man, if it weren't for basketball, there'd be a lot of tall janitors." We hustled our drunken friend off before the scene got ugly.

He was fond of saying "The poet-man doth lead a charmèd life," and in many ways that was true for him. But occasionally his luck ran out. One of his routines was to say to people "I don't owe you no respect—so long as I don't *disrespect* you." I think he imagined himself to be a lyrical Diogenes, puncturing the pretensions of the Athenians with his distressing paradoxes. One drunken night while he was out getting fried calamari someplace in Little Italy he tried this particular bit on a mafia capo who didn't appreciate the fine distinction. He had a couple of his soldiers drag Gregory into an alley and knock out a few of his remaining teeth.

Subtlety was not Gregory's strong suit. If he were deploying his charm on a man, his steady response to any attempt at wit would be, "I love you, you lovely fucker!" If the object of his attentions was a woman, her utterances would regularly be met with "Smart lady!"

Alternating between binge drinking and periods of heroin quiescence, Gregory was forever on the make, for money, drugs or meals. He'd put the bite on all his benefactors, especially Allen. At Naropa he learned to target him just after he'd bedded a student (a not infrequent circumstance) and was in a particularly benevolent mood. If Gregory scored big, like a grant from Allen's Committee on Poetry, he'd blow it right away on cab rides, drinking in bars and meals in fine restaurants. "Like he was the prince of poets," Allen said.

I wasn't of much interest to Gregory when we met, being a penniless student. He put my claims of poverty to the test, rolling me one evening at the Chelsea when I'd dozed off from drink. I snorfled awake to see Mr. Hyde with his fingers in my pockets. I gave him a bleary quizzical look.

"Heh, heh! I love you Jacob you lovely fucker!" was his agile rejoinder.

This took place in the Chelsea, in the room of a girl named Maggie, a junkie prostitute who was taking care of Gregory's infant son Max Orpheo—I don't know the details of who was the mother, but I recall Gregory had come back from Paris pushing Max in a stroller. Gregory had a number of children with various women, as though determined to people Manhattan isle with Calibans. He didn't make much of a husband or a father, though he did succeed in persuading various women to bear or raise his offspring.

Maggie was as unfortunate as the girl of the same name in Stephen Crane's novel. Not all that long after I met her, she killed herself by jumping off a building. I made love to her that drunken night in the Chelsea. Gregory was snoring on the couch, Max-Orpheo was sleeping in his crib, and I was sharing the bed with Maggie: I'd fallen asleep drunk, still clothed. At some point I opened my eyes and she gave me a look which even I couldn't misunderstand. I remember still her red hair, her freckles her sadness, how she held me, and her strangely grateful and hesitant expression afterwards. I was young, about eighteen, probably six years younger than her. I was still cute in a girl-boy way, skinny with shoulder-length hair, and I was kind of a sharp dresser back then. I had said I was a poet, and hanging out with Gregory made that plausible. I was probably a lot nicer than most of the guys she had dates with. I had no idea what to do. It was kind of a strange constellation of events that night in the Chelsea, the poet and the whore, both opening my clothes to look for something I didn't have to give.



Allen's photo of Gregory and I on the street in 1978. I was twenty.

Lucien's pronouncement on Gregory's merits was "The little guinea has an inhuman lyric gift." Allen more than agreed, often publicly stating that Gregory's talent outmatched his own. Gregory gave persuasive evidence of his merits in his 1981 book *Herald of the Autochthonic Spirit*—though someone who cared about him should have really gotten him to rethink that title, which probably did more than anything to kill interest in his finest book. His self-characterization there goes,

> . . . like an old mangy bull
> crashing through the red rag
> of an alcoholic day.
> Yet it's all so beautiful,
> isn't it?

This unpitying description of his own lurching, unlovely bulk and his child-like bemused drug-vivid and drug-false beatitude—there you have the man himself, clear as in a glass. *Herald* is a beautiful book, and it would have been a great one were it not so sad a testimony to a wasted life. He acknowledges, with poignant embarrassed candor, his genius squandered for causeless

euphoria. His language is so lovely that you believe him as you read him. But his sublimity is the expansiveness of a junkie who just shot up, or of a drunk whose heart is brotherly with cognac. It's the gorgeous monologue of a brilliant man who's learned nothing worthwhile from life.

Gregory was spectacularly damaged. He grew up in foster homes until he was old enough to be sent to jail. He was busted over and over for stealing, and he stole because he had no home and no food and no family. A particularly heart-breaking and revelatory incident was his jailing for stealing a toaster when he was thirteen. He was supposed to deliver it, but instead he sold it and with the proceeds he bought himself a new white shirt and went to see the movie *Song of Bernadette*. He wanted to desperately to look like a normally cared-about kid and do something normal—to see what it felt like not to be the world's forgotten boy.

He was in and out of jail so many times they finally put him in prison. At the age of seventeen he was in Clinton Maximum Security in NY state, where he was befriended by some mafia guys who acknowledged in him an Italian kid from the old neighborhood. They made this verbal and often hilarious boy their mascot. They were the first people who ever were good to him, and they helped him find work when he got out.

Gregory's style of humor and performance was devised to save his skin during his odyssey from foster home to jail to prison. He had no inherited friends or protectors, he wasn't big and strong, so he used his witty brilliance to make people like him. His shocking behavior and obscene utterances, his crude ingratiating patter make perfect sense if you picture him running these routines in jail: those are the rooms they were designed to play to. His showmanship made him liked and saved his skin. After twenty years of practice, he didn't know how to change up the material.

Gregory's life of hustle, the infinite loneliness which he spent his days trying to medicate, it all makes sense when you think of the abandoned boy he was and remained. Bear this in mind as you read. I'm not relating Gregory stories just to make you laugh or to make him look bad. They *are* funny, and he *was* bad, but they're worth retelling here because they make it possible to understand the tragedy of his life. Without appreciating that sad clown, punk *pagliaccio* dimension, any reading of his poetry will be superficial.

Lucien hated Gregory. Whenever they met, he would make a point of addressing Gregory as "Geppetto." And Gregory never answered back. Though he had a nasty hilarious mouth on him, he promptly turned tail if anyone matched him line for line and tossed the wisecracks back. It's not that Gregory was a poltroon: he was too reckless to be accounted either brave or cowardly. He had perfected his verbal performance as pure defense: it was an evolved panic reaction, and that doesn't leave the door open to dialogue.

You could talk to Gregory on an equal footing in private conversation, but in the public arena, either he was the show or away he'd go.

This is illustrated by a famous story about him at a party at Jackie Kennedy's apartment, some time before she became Mrs. Onassis. (Allen always promoted his friends to the height of his powers, talking them up in interviews, introducing them to publishers, taking them with him to high-class social functions to which his fame gave him entree. That's how Gregory got past the doorman and up to the Kennedy penthouse.)

Gregory made free of the bar and, roaring drunk, underlined some verbal sally with a sweeping flourish of his arm—accidentally knocking a Ming vase off its pedestal. Came a crash, and forty thousand dollars' worth of blue and white shatter was twinkling up from the floor. All was silence, save for the horrified air intake of New York society gasping and aghast.

"Don't look at that," said Gregory, "look at me—I feel terrible!"

The catastrophe turned to laughter and the wealthy guests enjoyed Jackie's ingenuity in inviting this Tasmanian Devil of a poet to liven up her party. The girls all rushed to comfort our distressed Gregory, and he ended up getting spectacularly laid.

Various versions of this story abound. No one knows where it actually took place or if it took place, whether it grew up as a spontaneous legend or Gregory invented it all. Factual or not, it is true on many levels as a sketch of Gregory.

Gregory was a kind of a trickster character. He loved to appall pretentious, stiff people. I remember when I was in SF, going to a poetry event where he was present, hoping to impress my date, a cute hoyden of a girl who was a bit of a prim feminist, by my personal acquaintance with Gregory. After the introductions, Gregory (drunk) leaned in towards me and confided "the bitch smells of lubricant." My date did not take this in good part, so Gregory pressed his advantage by reaching into his pants, rooting around in his privates, then extending his hand, fingers fanned towards my date's face, explaining, "Once they smell my scent, I own them." The young lady spun on her heel and marched out. Thus my voyage towards heterosexuality was blown off course by the autochthonic spirit.

This was not atypical. I am told that at Naropa there was some sort of feminist poetry consciousness-raising circle going on, and Gregory emptied into their midst a sack of black dildos, proclaiming, "Here's what you bitches need!"

Another of Gregory's favorite japes was to enter a fancy French sea-food restaurant and announce "It smells like cunt in here!"

One summer morning, while Gregory was teaching at the Naropa Institute, he tottered hungover out onto his balcony and urinated into space.

(The faculty at Naropa were housed in a nearby motel-complex in the days before the campus was fully built.)

Gregory, like the man in the joke who, "seeing it was nice out decided to leave it out," stood there rather fully enjoying the morning sun's rays. The children of another one of the faculty members had witnessed the whole show from *their* balcony, and were in hysterics at the sight of a grown-up with his wiener in the breeze. Attracted by the hilarity, the mother came out, saw what the fuss was about, and told Gregory he was disgusting and to hide himself.

"Oh shut up lady," said the poet, "you got a face like a hammerhead shark." The logic here being, if logic there was, that she was no lovely vision either.

"I most certainly do not!" she retorted, "or at least, not more than anyone else!"

The tales are all funny, but they're funny if you see them as a Groucho Marx & Margaret Dumont opposition, the dour humorless feminists or the snooty French *Maître d'* sputtering. I don't think you need to be a profound psychologist to wonder whether Gregory, who was abandoned by his mother, wasn't angry at women in general. His early poem, *But I Do Not Need Kindness* is appallingly candid on this head, and psychologically prophecies his untroubled exploitation of the women he could use, and his habitual insults to those he couldn't. This was a poet who never wrote a love poem. As he himself declares in his best known poem, *Marriage*, "I deny honeymoon!"

The characterizations I have so far offered of Gregory—Mr. Hyde, Caliban, Cromagnon Man, the Warner Brothers' Tasmanian Devil—though not particularly charitable, give no very false impression of his physical appearance. Once when George Scrivani took a cab to visit Gregory, the cabbie, seeing Gregory on the street outside the building, said "Look at that bum!" George indignantly informed the driver "That *bum* is who I came to see!"

Gregory *did* look like a bum. Though he was generally fastidious about personal hygiene, his mop of unbrushed hair, rumpled clothes low forehead and missing teeth gave him quite a wild appearance. That he did so well with women, that is, persuaded a number of them to bear his children and even more to look after them, is a testimony both to his verbal magic and the power of effrontery over women with low self-esteem.

But the appearance was very misleading. Gregory was actually rather a vulnerable and sensitive man. One time I ran into him on the street in SF when he was clearly on a bender and had slept in his clothes. Alcohol dehydrates, and habitual drinkers sometimes get so dry in the face that the

skin flakes on it like dandruff. Gregory looked like a heap of diseased laundry. I was not in the mood for his antics, and didn't even want to be seen in public with someone looking as he did, so I gave him a sharp-tongued dressing down, which stunned him. The next day he showed up at George's apartment sober, hair brushed, face scrubbed, in pressed clothes. He stood there with one hand on his hip; with the other he made a flourish in the air, ending with his index finger pointed heavenwards, as if to say *Voila!* I had no idea he could have been so hurt by my words. What could I say?

"Gregory, today it is you who are the lovely fucker."

Gregory worked very hard on his poetry, all the time. He would try out his verses in conversation, introducing them a few lines at a time into his ongoing patter, gauging their effect in various iterations till he arrived at the form that communicated his ideas most clearly and immediately, that was, as he put it, "sharp." When the opportunity presented itself, he would hole up in his apartment and work on his poetry, writing and re-writing for days.

Gregory had a particularly important place in the economy of Allen's poetical flying circus. Allen truly loved and respected him, and felt that Gregory maintained an element of "crazy wisdom" in the Beat Movement and particularly at Naropa. All traditional societies have some individual or ritualized activity that serves to ease the pressure of law and conformity. A good example is the court jester of medieval Europe, today best known from the Fool in Shakespeare's plays, who is permitted to voice uncomfortable truths. Mardi Gras and the Roman Saturnalia are well known seasonal instances of the same mechanism. In Tibetan Buddhism, the 11th–12th century sage Milarepa is the paradigmatic "mad sage"—this particular trickster character startles his fellows into the realization that all phenomena are empty (that material existence offers no meaningful goals, and that it must be escaped through enlightenment).

Gregory was a Milarepa only metaphorically, though Allen, being a true poet, was always ready to accept a similarity as an identity when the result pleased him. More importantly, Gregory's heckling of Allen at readings and disruption of classes at Naropa was a part of what made these things so entertaining. Though no cynic, Allen was no fool, and had early appreciated the importance of shock and spectacle in maintaining the momentum of his career and his projects. Naropa would not have been the legendary place it was if the most exciting thing it offered was Allen's insights into Blake's prophetic books.

And Allen's handling of Gregory's heckling was very delicate. He stood his ground, and made replies, but the tone was always collegial, the banter of a comedy team who argue as part of the show, with stagey dismay and

indignation that has no heat to it. Allen always pulled his punches: he knew that Gregory would have crumpled if he really landed a blow.

4: Burroughs in Kansas

While I was living with George and Adam on Harwood Alley I got a call from James Grauerholz, Burroughs' assistant and manager, whom I'd known years ago when Bill was still living in NYC. Would I be interested in helping edit the papers of Burroughs' son, William Burroughs Junior?

Burroughs Junior had published a memoir of his amphetamine addiction, called *Speed*, in 1970. I thought this was a beautiful book, and nothing inferior to his father's finest productions. I had read it several times as a teenager. This was followed in 1973 by *Kentucky Ham*, a careless compilation of random writings, wildly uneven in quality, which he'd thrown together to satisfy the publisher long after he'd spent the advance on drugs and booze. He was by then too far gone in alcoholism to care about his literary career. I never met Burroughs Junior, but I'd heard from people who had that he was a fat unhappy drunk in a baseball cap, nothing like the amphetamine wraith I'd pictured: the weepy, sloven antithesis of his elegant, self-possessed father. Billy died in '81, the last year Burroughs lived in New York. I remember visiting Bill in the Bunker, on the Bowery across from CBGB's, a floor in a converted YMCA, which still had the bathroom with the urinals on the wall and a row of stalls. It was a big windowless space, the walls painted shiny white under fluorescent lights, with a few big Brion Gysin paintings on the walls.

Bill was very proud of having quit smoking in the time I knew him. He encouraged me to quit as well, telling me that no addictive drug gave so little in return. Junk, alcohol, even coffee, at least made you feel something. Tobacco just kept tobacco withdrawal at bay, without conferring any mood-altering benefit.

He was right of course. In this same period his drinking dwindled to a light social indulgence. It was a good time for Bill, and James Grauerholz was the cause.

James played a role in Burroughs' career that was inversely proportional to his visibility. He had discovered *Naked Lunch* (as I did) at age 14, and remained fascinated by the Beats through college, where he gave depth to this interest by an academic study of Buddhism. Graduating in 1973, he got into his VW Microbus with his guitar and his folk-rock songs to become a musician in NYC. He'd also written to both Ginsberg and Burroughs, whose addresses he'd gotten from *Who's Who*, a reference work on prominent persons that included contact information. James described himself, his admiration for their work, his eagerness to meet them, and his interest in the possibility of working for them. Allen responded positively, as did

Burroughs, who luckily had just returned from London, where he'd spent the last decade, to do a writer's residency at the City College of New York. Burroughs was in need of secretarial assistance.

James immediately made himself indispensable. At this time Burroughs' public readings and publications were arranged in a haphazard manner. Now James had been in a number of rock bands, and picked up the full array of managerial and booking skills. Also, his mother had been a professional actress, and James grew up backstage, acquiring a professional knowledge of light, sound and staging.

Burroughs already had a style; he practiced his "reading pieces," as he called them, very carefully, with a tape recorder, in front of a mirror. The theater Burroughs had grown up with was vaudeville and carny, and his delivery, in a gay anglified southern drawl, ended up sounding formal, compelling and unlike anything else. James came up with the spare, Spalding Gray-like dramatically lit presentation of Burroughs at a skirted metal desk with his papers and his microphone, looking and sounding like a news announcer from an alternative universe where the south had won the civil war with the help of giant insects from another dimension. At first Burroughs went on the reading circuit with his friend the Warhol superstar John Giorno, whose Andy-influenced aggressively ordinary unedited style made an appealing contrast with Burroughs' studied delivery. James had focused and amplified Burrough's stage presence with an austere film-noir, almost German Expressionist vibe.

James then got Burroughs taken up by New Line Presentations, (later New Line Cinema), which had begun by touring the old drug scare film *Reefer Madness* on college campuses, and then became a speaker's bureau that supplied colleges with hip newsy lecturers. These were hired with student activities fee funding, which students had discovered they could spend in less ordinary ways. These engagements were paying $1500 a show, plus expenses.

But James' real coup came via the music world. Though James' own taste ran to more to the country, bluegrass and blues that provided the acronymic name CBGB's, he was on top of what was happening in the NY music scene, and saw the first performances of Television, The Ramones, Blondie, Pattie Smith and the rest.

James had gotten Burroughs a gig writing columns for the music magazine *Crawdaddy*—which Burroughs hated doing. He never liked writing what other people told him to. But Jimmy Page became fascinated by the column and wanted to meet Burroughs. This resulted in Burroughs' quasi-interview with Page in June '75. They talked about Aleister Crowley and magic. Burroughs absolutely didn't "get" rock and roll, and he kept the

conversation away from music. But James divined in Page's fascination *with* Burroughs a rock-and-roll potential *for* Burroughs which no one had imagined. In '76 James began booking Burroughs at punk clubs on both coasts. People were immediately interested, and often surprised that Burroughs was still alive: he'd been out of the country for a decade, so he was more of an idea than a person. But people had heard of him and wanted to see him. It was like having Kafka at your club. And here the persona that Burroughs created and James skillfully produced, found its proper audience. After three years touring with James as his manager, Burroughs was an "overnight" success. As James rather modestly put it, Burroughs was "shanghaied" by the Punks. And the love affair never ended. In '92 a letter from Kurt Cobain came in on Grauerholz' fax, asking if Burroughs would appear in a Nirvana music video. But by that time Burroughs wasn't up to it.

Grauerholz' brilliant presentation of Burroughs as a Punk and New Wave icon catalyzed the vogue for all things Burroughsian among hip young people in the eighties. The rising tide of his success, and the friendship of James, who had relieved Burroughs of the tedious work that goes with making success last, turned the late seventies into one of Bill's happier decades, and this was when I got to know him.

Then Burroughs Junior died in 1981. He had so savaged his liver with speed and alcohol he'd gotten a liver transplant in 1976. He then kept on drinking and finally stopped taking the anti-rejection drugs. He died at age thirty-three, raging at his father for his mother's death.

Burroughs was undone. I made a condolence call at the Bunker, saw him at that long conference table he had in the kitchen area, a cigarette in his hand and vodka and tonic on the table in front of him. He was in pain as profound as any I have seen. "Bill," I said, "I'm so sorry . . ."

He thanked me, dignified, holding back the tears with patrician self-mastery. I should have put my arms around him. We were better than friends; the gesture would not have been misplaced. But I was twenty-two and I didn't have the confidence to crash past his reserve. So I stood there feeling stupid and useless. I bumbled through some small talk, then I left.

When James phoned me in San Francisco two years later, I remembered my affection for Burroughs and my admiration for his son's work—I was quite curious about these literary remains. So I said yes, and took a plane out to Kansas.

If you ever wondered what America would look like if the Germans had won World War II, go see Kansas. Everyone there seems to be six feet tall,

blond and preternaturally healthy. Grauerholz himself is something of a corn-fed colossus, at least compared to my diminutive Semitic self.

The most striking thing about Kansas is probably the general love of maize. A bowl of popcorn is presented with breakfast, as though it were a vegetable. There are even popcorn boutiques, where you can buy the puffed-up salty morsels in different colors and variously flavored. All served without a trace of irony.

I was soon surveying the Burroughs Junior material, which was fascinating, but not a book. Burroughs Junior had taken an interest in Catholicism at the end. In some of his writings he described drunken hallucinations seen while staring at a black-and-white TV tuned to a dead channel. Gothic arches rising in the dirty snowstorm onscreen while Gregorian chants surfaced and sank back into the static. There was a letter from a priest explaining that although he warmly applauded Burroughs Junior's sense of vocation and wish to enter a monastery, the first step would be to begin attending church to see if he liked the experience of being a Catholic.

All of the writing was on torn, stained scraps of paper. One of them, clearly addressed to his father, had the terrible words "Your wallet is full of blood."

I discussed it with James. It was fascinating material and would make a marvelous appendix to a collected Burroughs Junior, but it wasn't a stand-alone, nor could I add meaningfully to the thinking James had already done.

As for Bill, he was very drunk and heavily armed. There were shotguns leaning against the walls in every corner of his living room. All I recall of our conversation is me asking him why he had the house stocked with weapons as though he were preparing for a shoot-out.

He spoke of being ready for the coming race wars.

"Bill," I said, "you're nuts."

"Well," he replied in thoughtful, even tones, "I suppose I am."

There I was in a house literally stacked with weapons, with a drunken man who, being asked, confirmed his want of sanity. It didn't seem like a great place to be. Not that I feared Bill, who was a good man and my friend. I feared alcohol, which often has its own agenda.

We spoke about the project of editing his son's papers. Bill bitterly cited that line, "Your wallet is full of blood." The meaning, obviously, was Burroughs Junior's rejection of Bill's ceaseless efforts to save him, paying his bills, medical and otherwise, whatever it took to get him out of his scrapes. Bill had done a lot. Liver transplants don't come cheap, and Burroughs, despite his celebrity, didn't have that much money. His move from Manhattan to Lawrence, Kansas, had been dictated by economics as much as

anything else. The Bunker had gone out of rent control in 1981, and the monthly cost doubled overnight.

Burroughs was not a very emotionally forthcoming man, but he dearly loved his son. Burroughs Junior's scrawl contemptuously rejected one of the few ways Bill knew to show his love—and that really went for the heart. Burroughs Junior, sad and alcohol-crazed, wrought havoc even from beyond the grave.

As everyone knows, Burroughs had accidentally shot and killed his wife, Billy's mother, when he was 37 and drunk, back in 1951. I never discussed the matter with him. As they say in southern gothic novels, "folks 'round here know what's better left unsaid." But he did allude to it vaguely a few times, in ways that made it clear there wasn't a day he didn't painfully regret what happened. Billy had killed himself with drugs to punish his father. He succeeded. His father responded by numbing himself with alcohol and methadone for the remainder of his days. This was the context of that creepy sentimental pet book, *The Cat Inside*, which Burroughs published in 1986. The book can't really be read for pleasure, unless your idea of pleasure is particularly malicious. But it has its biographic value as a measure of the misery of this brilliant writer who lost his entire family, who treated his misery and loneliness with alcohol and a houseful of cats. He became a shut-in spinster lady out of Faulkner.

I told James that, since the Burroughs Junior project wasn't going to materialize, I had best return to San Francisco. James drove me to the airport. I never saw Burroughs again.

VIII: The Chelmer Rebbe

1: Catullus

The next fall, I went to Brown to work on a doctorate in Classics. When I arrived in Providence, I couldn't believe my luck. The town was beautiful in an Autumnal New-Englandy way. Brown itself is situated on a hill, and its immediate vicinity is crammed with historical houses. I already had a friend there. Brett Rutherford had moved to Providence, lured by its associations with Poe and Lovecraft, and disenchanted with a New York beset by crime, cost and AIDS. He lived there in a rambling Victorian house, filled with Chinoiserie and Halloween decorations, with a computer publishing setup that looked like it could have controlled a starship.

My tour of duty as a Kelly Girl made me realize what a sweet deal graduate school was. I knew that the job market for university professors was getting worse by the year, but how long could that go on? I wouldn't have my PhD in less than five years, and no one knew what the landscape would look like by then. It was 1984, I was twenty-six. Surely the nineteen-nineties would bring better things.

The first discovery I made in New England was how truly bad the food was. I was originally on the meal plan at Brown, but I soon learned that the hefty sum I would be charged translated into flavorless fodder whose only quality was its quantity. I canceled this after a single meal, and explored the local restaurants. Though one could drive to a few ethnic exceptions, the local eateries were appalling. The Puritan heritage still cast its shadow over the table: the concept of dessert had become conflated with that of one's deservings, and the idea of one's portion was confounded with notions of retribution.

I lived in the Graduate Center, a concrete brutalist object that looked like a Swedish-Modern prison. My tiny dorm-room hadn't even a sink, but I acquired a tiny cube of a refrigerator, made the top of my dresser into my countertop, and filled the drawers with utensils and containers of sugar, flour, dry pasta and spices. I cooked Italian dishes on a hot plate, ferrying my dishes out to the bathroom to wash them, stacked in a cardboard box. I generally had a pot of cooked beans ready to set simmering. I bent a wire coat hanger so it held a slice of bread just over the hot plate, and thus I had a toaster. I dined better than any of my fellows, at a fraction of the cost, and I found food preparation a pleasant respite from reading Greek, dictionary in hand.

I didn't exactly hit it off with my fellow graduate students. These had all been members of the Latin Club in their respective high schools, became classics majors in college, were largely male, entirely white, and very uptight. Classicists are a subset of nerds; innocent of fashion, and proudly out of touch with popular culture. Classics conventions are highly desired by hoteliers, because we have the biggest bar-tab and the least breakage of any professional group.

The Classics profession is a very exclusive Anglo-Saxon gentlemen's club, in which good manners and polished mediocrity are the rule. In the last quarter century a considerable number of women have taken up philology and secured professorships, though these ladies have done nothing to ameliorate the frumpiness of the field. As for the men, they cultivate that studied disregard of personal appearance that is the hallmark of Wasp gentility. Their shirts are of good linen, but all one rumple, since they are deliberately never ironed. Classicists are clean shaven; their hair is well cut, but never properly brushed, so it always looks as though their mother woke them early. Their cars are high quality, Mercedes or Volvo, but never new and never washed. They have the flawless manners of old money, and act just as nice as they are not.

In my first semester I had a seminar on Catullus, a contemporary of Julius Caesar. His girlfriend was a gangster's wife, he wrote gleefully obscene insult poems against his personal enemies, as well as some of the most poignantly beautiful love poems in Latin. He was dead before he was thirty.

In the Catullus seminar each of us would be assigned in turn one of Catullus' sixty-something surviving short poems to present with historical and literary analysis. I included in my treatment frank translations of the poems, and discussed the precise color of the Latin words and the best way to convey this in English two millennia later. This poem will give some notion of Catullus' romantic writing:

> You want to know how many kisses would be enough for me, Lesbia?
> The number of sand grains between the tombs of Libya's ancient lords
> and the temples where Egypt worships Jove in the shape of a ram.
> The number of stars that watch the furtive
> love affairs of humankind
> while the night is passing over them in silence.
> That's how many would satisfy your crazed Catullus,
> What can't be counted can't be an unlucky number.

While this poem will give some notion of his aggressive style:

> Furius and Aurelius, you'd follow your Catullus anywhere:
> to where the utmost shores of India re-echo the river Ocean thrashing its way around the disk of Earth,
> to Hyrcania, to silken Arabia, to Scythia's frozen fields,
> to the archer Parthian's home, to where the seven mouths of Nile shoot silty color into the Mediterranean,
> or up the skyish Alps to look out over Gaul, the Rhine, the terrifying sea, and Britain out on the world's rim
> (now they're mere memoranda of Caesar's conquering).
> My friends, ready to adventure so far off with me, taking chances on the gods' good will,
> I only ask you to ferry back a message, not very long or very nice, to my girl:
> that I hope she's getting on well with her lovers whom she takes on three hundred at a time,
> loving not one, but all the same milking their dicks on an assembly-line basis,
> not caring about my love — like she used to — my love cut down (her fault),
> like a flower at the edge of a field razed by the passing plough.

Catullus wasn't just a stand-up comedian in meter, he was a brilliant poet, and I feel I did justice to the depth as well as the heat of his feelings. The professor was vastly entertained, but my fellow students were horrified, going so far as to present a petition to the classics faculty demanding I be dismissed from the program for my low morals. I had imprudently allowed the student newspaper to print, in their literary supplement, my translations, and even performed them at a club, in a toga and sunglasses. For the posters I used the grinning visage of Felix the Cat. The department of classics no doubt had misgivings about the new and groovy presence I was giving ancient letters at Brown. But nothing could have secured my position more effectively than the petition. The faculty were outraged at the notion of graduate students telling them how to run the program. Thus the prigs inadvertently protected me from every consequence of my ill-considered Catullan enthusiasm.

I was startled to see that instruction was a mere trace element in the graduate level courses. The subjects of these were whatever the professor

happened to be working on. We would carefully study the texts in Latin or Greek, sit in class while the prof. pontificated without preparation, and at the end of the semester we'd hand in a twenty-page paper which was returned, unread, with an "A." There was no serious attempt to cover the major areas of classical literature, the Greek Epics, and Tragedies, the Roman Satires and Histories. There were a few required courses to make it look like a real program, but these were perfunctorily and reluctantly taught. The courses given the undergraduates were just casual lectures, with the graduate assistants grading all the papers and exams, and doing the real teaching in the "discussion" sections.

The object of the program was to avoid at all costs any encroachment on the professors' leisure. After three years of this haphazard course work, one was ready for the qualifying exams.

For the first few months I was in something of a panic. I thought I must be missing something. I was used to studying literature on the level of my conversations with Peter Wilson. I couldn't believe the instruction was as superficial as it appeared. Slowly I grasped how little the professors expected of *themselves*. It finally dawned on me that grad school was merely a period of freedom from the need to earn a living, during which one independently pursued one's own education.

My Latin and French were by now quite good, but I had my hands full bringing my ancient Greek up to speed. It was a full year of Homer and Demosthenes before I was reading on something like the graduate level. I also had to acquire German for the degree, which I did using Nietzsche and the Luther Bible as my textbooks.

I took courses in Hebrew as well, finishing the foundation I'd established in my year in Israel.

I don't actually have any particular gift for languages. I've met a few people who do, and I hate them. What I do have is a capacity for hard work and a tolerance for monotony. People often ask me how I managed my linguistic attainments. I usually answer, with more truth than I am credited for, "A profound question, but one that admits of a fairly simple answer: I don't get out a lot."

2: Berlin Stories

In 1985, in the spring of my first year of graduate school, at the age twenty-seven, I gave up on being straight. I'd been trying to date girls for five years now, with no real success. I was well tired of being found wanting. I have already enumerated the actual factors which made me an unlikely prospect. I finally concluded that I was really, intrinsically and unchangeably gay, and that everyone but me could tell this at a glance. So I should just accept this and to hell with psychiatry and the map of psycho-sexual development, according to which I was permanently left behind. Or let the analysts be right: my psychic development was banzai'd. But never getting laid and spending my days resenting the general enmity of womankind wasn't doing me a lot of good. I started attending meetings of the Gay Students Alliance, and for the first time since I arrived at Brown I had a few friends.

That summer I went to Germany, to take classes at the Goethe Institute. I figured, mistakenly, that in Germany at least, where they know how to get a thing done, they'd be able to manage a decent language course. Admittedly, the course wasn't all that bad. Since I already had the grammar and was just picking up vocabulary and fluency, I was put on the intermediate level. But all my fellow students were Turks and Chinese, and speaking mostly to them I was picking up some weirdly accented and oddly worded German. I figured I'd do better if I cut all the classes, just used the dorm room as a base of operations, and learned my German from Germans. This proved easy and enjoyable. I was already reading Nietzsche and Luther, so I more than had the rudiments. Now I spoke to people everywhere. I asked directions, how to use the machines in the laundromat, asked people in the drug store which was the best toothpaste. I listened enraptured if the other person but spoke to me in idiomatic German, which, in Germany, was a wish frequently realized. People liked me, since I hung on their every word with obvious delight. At first I didn't understand most of what people said to me, I'd just listen and nod and smile, and whenever I was asked a question I couldn't follow I'd say "yes" and see what happened. When you know the grammar and are ready to jump into a language, the problem isn't speaking. One can generate simple phrases to express one's meaning, and people can see past the shaky grammar. What's really hard is understanding the language spoken at normal speed. But after a month of listening to people for several hours a day, my listening comprehension became good.

Of course, my spoken German was sometimes eccentric. My language came from literature, and I sometimes used archaic words whose sense had altered. I once began a statement about my mother's childhood with the

phrase "*als meine Mutter eine Dirne war*," meaning to say, "when my mother was a young woman," and instead conveyed the information that she had at one time worked as a prostitute. (I'd encountered the word *Dirne* in Luther, where it meant "lass;" in the centuries since the great reformer it had shifted sense to mean "whore.") The Luther Bible cast a dramatic shadow over much of my speech. Even when the words were technically correct, the scriptural tone gave a baleful and portentous emphasis to commonplace statements.

I was soon able to have interesting conversations with intelligent people. My accent was never good. I'd been careful to choose a Goethe Institute in Göttingen, close to Hanover, the capitol of pure and perfect German utterance, but my American accent, which to my ear had been suppressed, was evident to every German. The Germans take a keen interest in German accents, and every German seems to consider the speech of most other German states irretrievably hick. I only seemed to speak entirely credible German when I spoke really "gay." I remember hanging out at a café with a couple of German gay guys, and lapsed naturally into effeminate speech patterns, provoking at once the comment, "*Jakob, du schreiest*!" ("Jacob, you're screaming!") But everyone agreed that in this mode my German rang true, *echt*.

The Germans are an extremely proud people, and have a fine sensitivity to all matters relating to personal dignity. Thus no one ever volunteered a correction to my grammar. I'd only know I'd made a mistake when I saw my interlocutor's forehead furrow with pain at what I had inflicted on the language of Goethe. I would then beg to be enlightened, whereupon they would always preface it with something like "Your German is very good, and I only say this because I know you strive for perfection . . ."

Germany was a revelation on many levels. The two months I spent there was my first experience living outside America. Admittedly, I'd been in Israel for a year, but my Hebrew hadn't been fluent—Hebrew's about five times harder to learn than German—so I remained on the Anglophone periphery of Israeli society, no better than a tourist. I came to Germany speaking German, and didn't utter a word of English the whole summer. Though a number of Germans wanted to try out their English on me, when I told them I had "sworn an oath" that I would speak only German, they all accepted this as a higher-order obligation. The oath concept is still a live one for them: they're in many ways like characters out of Norse myths. Germany, one should bear in mind, was never conquered by the Romans. The Germans didn't start to become Christians till the time of Charlemagne. Civilized late, they still have a lot of their old barbaric energy and heroic folkways, which is how they managed to write nearly all the good books and good music in

Europe for the last five hundred years. And in their everyday speech, you yet hear echoes of the Franks and Alemanni.

Germany is an intellectual country, to a degree Americans can scarcely imagine. Every town has a bookstore, a real bookstore, with literature, not just magazine racks and genre fiction. They review serious books on the evening news! For all that, it was admittedly still weird for me as a Jew. I tried not to think about World War II. In the nineteen-eighties it was already forty years in the past.

The Germans, however, were a bit obsessed with it. Anyone can tell at a glance that I'm Jewish, but anyone who had any doubts on this head would ask "Are you Italian?" which is the polite way for a German to ask if you're Jewish. When I'd decided to accept being gay, I shaved off the Theodor Herzl beard I'd sported since my last year as an undergraduate when I'd become fascinated with Israel. (Herzl, the nineteenth-century father of political Zionism, had evolved his sideburns into a broad besom of a beard, like that of a sculptured Assyrian king, to evoke the heroic glory of the ancient Semites. So iconic did his beard become, that clippings from it are displayed in Jerusalem's Herzl Museum.)

My clean-shaven boyish look played a lot better in the kind of gay bars I liked. But I still had the glasses and the Semitic nose. You didn't need a degree in forensic anthropology to identify my ethnos. I could be identified as Jewish at fifty miles an hour, as I discovered while hitch-hiking in Germany, when a car slammed on the brakes and reversed back to me so the driver could shout "Churchill was a war criminal too!" before zooming off.

Most Germans went unbelievably out of their way to be kind and helpful. One guy who I hitched a ride with to Berlin let me house-sit for him for two weeks in his splendid home in Charlottenburg. He and his family were taking two weeks off in France, and suddenly I had a house to myself in the center of Berlin.

We'd spoken about literature for an hour as we drove, and he put on his car stereo a cassette of Bettina Wegner, a lefty folk singer, sort of the German Joan Baez. The album was her "Jewish Songs," and the track *für die aus. . .* came on. It's an elegy for those slain in the concentration camps, in which she makes a dirge of all the camp names. I'd been able to suppress the feelings I couldn't reason away for six weeks now, but this song caught me off guard, and tears started rolling down my cheeks. I put on my sunglasses quick as I could, trying to be discreet, but I couldn't help wiping my nose a few times and blotting a few drops that trickled from under my Ray-Bans.

Then this man, a judge, who as it turns out was personal friends with Bettina, offered me his house. For him it was a personal act of national contrition. We never discussed that moment in the car, nor did I give him

explicit absolution, but I gratefully accepted this sumptuous base of operations in Berlin. Money was tight, and it was a big help.

It was still pretty weird, and I don't much enjoy being seen as a minority rather than a person. I've experienced this a few times since when people have responded to me as gay and pointedly "accepted" me. But really, you have to be patient with these things. Getting to know someone who's really "other" is always a bit clumsy. If you're going to judge people, you have to judge them by what they were trying to do, not by how well they succeeded at it.

So instead of staying in the cheapest hotel I could find, I had a big house all to myself. I watched German television on a color set over breakfast, and found that a lot of it was American shows dubbed into German. These were strangely compelling, because the German voice-over actors were infinitely better than the American originals. It was like hearing the lines delivered by the Royal Shakespeare Company. I learned some interesting phrases this way. From *Magnum P. I.* I acquired the useful *Keine Bewegung, Scheisskern!* ("Don't make a move, asshole!")

German food was a revelation. Lunch might be a big hunk of meat, mounds of potatoes and overcooked vegetables and a glass of beer, followed by a wedge of cake with frosting laid on dense as mortar, and of much that consistency. I was amazed that anyone could stay awake after ingesting such shovel-fulls of flesh and stodge. I took my meals out at Chinese restaurants or pizza joints, the latter being all run by Turks.

But there were some marvelous surprises. The Germans have bread in variety and quality that easily matches French cheese, from the lightest white to the richest dark bread, and everything in between. I particularly liked the *Vollkornbrot*, whole-grain bread, which was really soft whole grains barely held together by flour, dense, rich and savory as paté. Compared to German bread, French baguettes are like rolls of toilet paper.

As the attention to bread might suggest, the beer was also magnificent, but I wasn't consuming that much, nor the wine either. This adventure was too interesting to squander on boozing, and the exigencies of language learning ruled out the indulgence.

Another remarkable aspect of the German table was the smoked meats, all pork, hams and sausages prepared in myriad amazing savory ways. The whole German relationship to preserved meat is a profound one. I noticed that Germans really like leather, to the point of wearing leather ties and leather pants, and not out of rock-and-roll or New Wave trendiness. You'd see unexpected leather on staid businessmen. All the leather was splendidly made. I acquired a leather schoolboy's bookbag which I kept for years, and which I cannot even afford to replace today.

Since the best place to learn a foreign language is the bedroom, I went to gay bars, of which there were two in Göttingen. I soon met a man about my age named Wernie, with whom I had a blissful affair. The first time I met him he was incredibly drunk and full of pills; I was drinking only moderately, since I was still on duty learning German. I fell for him immediately, and he took me home to his parents' house, where he still lived, and there we slept together. We kept on seeing one another. He was very taken by the idea that I was from New York City. I gave this as my origin, since it was easier to explain than the mysteries of New Jersey and its exits. Wernie had some extraordinary ideas about Manhattan, acquired evidently from films. He believed it always rained there, that we traveled exclusively by cab, and that everyone carried a gun and was a millionaire. I improved his knowledge only minimally, since he seemed to enjoy my being from so mythical a place. He spoke no English, my German was quite halting when we first met, and our creaky communication made for a very smooth relationship. Pleasure and affection are easily expressed. Communication has to be very good before two people can really misunderstand one another. I carried with me a pocket sized *Odes* of Horace, and his epicurean mysticism, his pagan enjoyment of wine and love as the very presence of the gods, expressed the mood of that summer.

Wernie's parents were quite liberal. They had a daughter who lived with them also, who was raising a child born out of wedlock, whose father was nowhere to be found. Although nothing was mentioned explicitly, I don't think there was any mystery of the basis on which I was Wernie's frequent sleepover guest. On Saturday nights I joined Wernie and his family in the backyard for animated evenings of beer and conversation. It was clear I made him happy; he'd lost interest in pills when he met me. That was enough for his father.

I didn't maintain contact with him after that summer, nor am I about to hunt him up on Facebook today, almost forty years later. It was a wonderful, summertime love between two people who didn't have all that much in common, a shared happiness that wasn't meant to be lasting. It was a blissful coincidence, an irrepeatable stroke of luck. Things like that are like butterflies or soap-bubbles, weightless amazing visitors you aren't meant to capture. Even to trap them in a photograph is sad.

3: The Zine Scene

I returned to Brown, fluent in German, happy in my sexual choices, and looking for a serious boyfriend. I was very out. I pierced my right ear—the "gay ear"—an act of bravado for which I paid dearly. I was amazed to discover that everyone knew what this subtle signal was, from my parents to the guy at the gas station to the department of classics. I told my parents it was their problem; it didn't bother me. I'd suffered enough for their antique notions about sexuality. It wasn't a choice, and it couldn't be changed. At this point I was 27, my father 57—he knew it was a fight he couldn't win.

But the Department of Classics was under the impression that this was a fight they could indeed win. They withdrew my funding and put me on probation for a semester, for "want of focus."

For once I understood exactly what was expected of me. I lost the earring and acquired a fiancée. For this last move I considered pressing a rugby-playing lesbian friend named Hershey into the service, to accompany me to departmental functions with her tank-top and tattoos. I imagined this plain-spoken, big-bicepped virgin greeting the faculty with a hearty "Hey, dirtbags!" while I proudly declared, "Maybe she couldn't live in an Ivory Tower, but she could darn sure build one!"

But in fact the fiancée never needed to manifest. The mere announcement of my engagement, taken with my now unadorned ear, was enough to persuade everyone I was a homo *sapiens*, or at least sufficiently sapient to stay below radar, and my funding was restored.

During this time my world view had mellowed from the harsh materialism I had adopted when my attempt to live like a poet had so signally failed. Peter Wilson had a great deal to do with this. His use of Islamic mysticism suggested to me a synthesis of life and poetry of a far more subtle, versatile and realistic sort. Rumi's Sufism made Rimbaud's "alchemy of the word" look quaint. But I looked neither to Islam, nor to Buddhism for direction. Judaism has a three-thousand-year literary and spiritual tradition. It was to this I turned, and found what I was looking for in the Baal Shem Tov, a Jewish mystic from Poland, roughly contemporary with George Washington, the founder of Hassidism.

In brief, his teaching was that even the worst aspects of human character—which he did not deny or minimize—are testimony to our capacity for nobility and holiness.

His teaching was a kind of mystical psychology. Within even our failure to do the right thing is the *desire* to do the right thing, brilliantly implicit as

the flame in lamp oil. Within even suffering, meaning is hidden like the new plant in the buried seed.

He taught that God is present in every aspect of life, no matter how commonplace: this fit neatly with my own heroic materialism. I recognized in his teaching a this-worldly focus like my own, but while I had chosen to invest existence with the gloomy glamour of existentialism, the Baal Shem Tov saw reality the very joy that Nietzsche had extolled as the highest philosophical insight, the great "Yes!" to existence.

Having thought my way into becoming a religious kook, I got involved in the Zine scene. Peter Wilson had published a two-page edition of the *Moorish Science Monitor*, and I was very excited about it. I now realized Zines were genuinely interesting, and indeed what was "happening." I figured the best way to get dealt into the game was to print up my own edition of the *Monitor* (which I did with Peter's blessing), and mail this out in swap copies to all the zines that interested me in the pages of *Factsheet Five*.

The content of my *Monitor* was a mixture of mysticism, poetry, homosexuality and humor. People had a hard time figuring out whether I was serious or not. I got a post office box and used a variety of pen-names, since I didn't want trouble with the very sensitive Classics Department from my samizdat antics. I also published a Jewish heretical zine, called *Der Golem*, and for a time used the pen-name Hassid Vicious. But my main identity was the Chelmer Rebbe.

Hassidic spiritual masters, *rebbes*, take their names from the town where they live. Thus the Lubavitcher Rebbe came originally from the town of Lubavitch. The Chelmer Rebbe would then hail from the town of Chelm—a town in mythical Poland where all the fools live. (E.g., they see the reflection of the moon down a well and try to rescue it before it drowns. When a building catches fire at night they consider it a miracle that God provided the flames that let them see to put it out, &c.)

The Chelmer Rebbe was my spiritual identity, my equivalent of Peter Wilson's Hakim Bey. My motto was my personal distillation of the wisdom of the Baal Shem Tov:

"It isn't *going* to be alright, it already is."

Soon I had a post office box full of fascinating weirdness to pick up every week. Though there was a lot of eccentric material out there, it soon became clear that there were only a handful of writers whose productions had literary merit. Due to the demise of literary print when the Internet ended the age of paper, none of these writers ever attained the prominence that would have been theirs had they come on the scene even twenty years earlier.

There was Blaster Al Ackerman, a skid row latter-day Robert Benchley; Thom Metzger, who wrote strange pamphlets about meat and mysticism and spirits of the dead, in a rhythmic frenzied poetic prose like the monologue of a disoriented archangel soaring berserkly earthwards on wings of pidgin English. And there was Bob Black, a lawyer turned anarchist essayist whose wit was nothing short of devilish. All of their works are a mere google-search away, and well worth the looking at. But since I knew them mostly by mail, I have few tales of the Marginals (as this literary movement was known, insofar as it was).

Except for this one about Bob Black, whom I got to know for a few months while we both lived in Albany. Albany is a strangely favored city in terms of art and architecture. It boasts the Empire State Plaza, a complex of state government buildings built between 1965 and 1976 for about two billion, designed by Wallace Harrison, who is best known for the U.N. and the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. The buildings in Albany look like the landing field of a Martian invasion: a giant oblong monolith, four finned daughter monoliths and a concert hall that looks like a flying saucer. The underground concourse linking these buildings displays eighty pieces of modern art, and serious modern art it is, including Rothko, Motherwell, Pollock, Nevelson and Frankenthaler.

When this astounding public display was briefly taken down for the cleaning and maintenance of the concourse, Bob printed up handbills stating that the paintings had been confiscated by the Art Strike. Now the idea that museums should be closed and artists and dealers should cease work, as a political protest, had been around since 1969, so the term Art Strike was not unknown. I and a few others helped Bob staple his flyers to telephone poles all over Albany, and a day of chaos, alarm and media coverage was produced in Albany by Bob's "terrorist" act.

Bob, who was an anarchist and on principle opposed to work, had no scruples about getting money from the government, so he applied for SSI, Supplemental Security Income, which is designed as a safety net for aged, blind, and physically or mentally disabled persons. Bob claimed membership in the last category. Apparently Bob was well able to satisfy the authorities that he was unbalanced, but he ran afoul of the bureaucracy by listing his profession, on one of the forms, as "alcoholic." SSI refused to release the funds they accorded him until he sought treatment for this condition. Bob successfully sued SSI, obtaining the retroactive payment of his withheld checks, on the grounds that he was not a medical professional and thus unqualified to make the diagnosis of "alcoholic." When the check finally arrived it was a whopper, and Bob made sure the media was there to cover

him cashing it and using the winnings to buy caviar, saffron and the like at the priciest gourmet emporium in Albany.

4: Sabbetai Zvi

My religiosity developed in entertainingly heretical directions, and the expression was likewise entirely literary. There was a certain tension to my quest, since I was sexually nonconforming and not about to give up any hard-won ground just because I'd got religion. They weren't ordaining any gay rabbis in 1985, so whatever spiritual legitimacy I claimed I'd have to create for myself. I seized upon Sabbetai Zvi as my precedent and exemplar.

Zvi was a Kabbalist who'd become swept up in the millennial hysteria of that seventeenth-century Europe: the last lovely, hopeless flowering of religion before modernization really set in. Believing the end of the world was at hand (and the end of the Medieval world actually *was* at hand), the most religious people of this period embraced the final hours of the old order with a kind of *Mardi Gras* madness.

In 1648, at the age of twenty-two, Zvi declared himself the Messiah. He carried out a number of theatrical actions to announce this, taking as his model the Hebrew prophets who had similarly pantomimed God's intentions. Zvi "married" a Torah scroll, to show that an entirely new and more imaginative relationship with religious law would henceforth be the rule. Zvi would chant secular love songs as part of the liturgy of the synagogue: he saw the love of God in all music.

Zvi married a young prostitute named Sarah. Orphaned by the Cossack massacres in Poland at the age of six, she had been raised in a convent, whence she escaped and, without friends or resources, became a girl of the streets in Livorno, Italy. Sarah got caught up in the general messianic fervor, and became convinced that she was destined to be the bride of the Messiah. Sarah's beauty, intelligence and mystical convictions won her celebrity. When Zvi heard of her, he had her join him in Cairo where they were married, in an echo of the prophet Hosea's marriage to a whore as a sign that God would receive humiliated Israel back into his love.

In the context of the terrible misfortunes which had beset the Jewish people in the previous hundred years, most notably he expulsion from Spain, the news of Zvi's messiahship was received as overdue truth. Throughout Christian and Islamic lands, the most convinced of Zvi's followers celebrated. Fast days were replaced by feasting. The ordinary formula of blessing, the *baruch atah Adonai* which declares the holiness of God who has given the Torah with its laws, was replaced with the formula "In the name of God who permits what is forbidden."

Zvi's pretensions to the throne of David finally got him imprisoned by the Ottoman sultanate, who offered him the choice of death or conversion to Islam. He chose the latter.

Just as Peter had identified with Caliph Hakim, the Caligula of mystical Islam, whose name he took as his *nom-de-plume*, I made use of Zvi, establishing *The Sabbetai Zvi School of Magical Judaism and Punk Rock Yiddishkeit*. What this grandiose appellation actually involved was printing up a letterhead and visiting cards, and creating a zine, *Der Golem*, to propound my views, which I did through a number of pseudonyms so as to give the impression I wasn't the lone kook I in fact was. I was sufficiently alive to the humor of my situation to make the academy's motto "One God—One Church—One Believer," which I felt made up in symmetry what it lacked in grandeur.

This was of course a "joke religion," like the Church of the Subgenius or the Moorish Orthodox Church, but unlike them it did have a serious, if purely literary agenda. Though I was happy to accept "converts" and confer upon them arrogant earthly titles, my real purpose was to produce literary works that would revitalize Jewish culture in America.

Such a culture had already existed, but in Yiddish, and my grandparents' had been the last generation that read it. In my parents' time American Jewish culture had been reduced to sentimental recollection: *Fiddler on the Roof* and the novels of Chaim Potok. No wonder Allen had wanted nothing to do with it! The Jews in Rock, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, and dear old Ron and Russel Mael of *Sparks*, never sang a minor-key Semitic note. I wanted to create a new, hip Jewish culture, edgy and compelling.

I gave no quarter as regards sexual freedom. My years trying to be straight had given me a backlog of misery which needed to be worked through. Taking up Zvi's "In the name of God who permits what is forbidden," I saw in myself an echo of his bride Sarah: hadn't I been driven almost to suicide, shamed, finding my only approaches to love in furtive, sometimes dangerous situations? So the first act of the Zvi School was to found the Committee to Restore Sodom and Gomorrah (Gay Zionists International). I printed up pink 11x17 broadsides, with maps and illustrations outlining "our" demands: an autonomous enclave within the Israeli state on the site of the "cities of the plain," and by way of reparations for the "Dead Sea Holocaust," one luxury hotel, with sauna, in the shape of a ziggurat. The broadside read:

> It was a beautiful land once, and it was ours. " . . . all the plain of Jordan . . . well-watered everywhere, before the

Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the Garden of the Lord . . . " (Gen. 13:10).

And then, Jehovah rained fire and brimstone upon it. Well,

WHO IS MISS JEHOVAH?!?!?!

Sodom for the Sodomites! Homeland for homos!

I let my beard grow, put on a long formal coat and a fedora—I looked just like a Lubavitcher with his Jew-Haul full of tefillin. And I stood outside the leather bars of the West Village on Halloween night, passing out my flyers, asking prospective proselytes "Are you Jewish?"

Most folks thought this bit of street theater was hilarious and wanted more copies. Every so often someone would ask, "Is this serious?" to which the reply was always, "As far as you know, yes."

5: The Unholy Bible

Alongside such japes as Gay Zionism, I began a new poetic project alongside my nearly complete sex epic, the metamorphic narrative poem *Blurred Person Singular*, which I'd begun while still at Columbia. The new work was *The Loose Leaf Scriptures*, which was a modern poetic retelling of Jewish mythology. The mythic material I appropriated had developed as part of the Talmud, primarily as a way to flesh out the often cryptic and elliptical Biblical narrative. At the center of this prose-poem was an account of Jacob's wrestling with the angel, highly mystical and clearly homoerotic.

I was interested in offering ways to engage with Jewish religion, in which one could disagree with tradition without disrespect. The "Loose Leaf Scriptures," was the poetic approach. From a scholarly perspective, I set about translating the poetic books of the Hebrew Bible, *The Song of Solomon, Psalms*, *Lamentations, Job,* and *Ecclesiastes.*

I remember reading to Allen this passage from my rendering of the Book of Job,

> Has anyone ever gutted Leviathan, parted the curtains of his flesh? Whoever dared draw near his horizon-wide lips?
> Who's knocked on the gates of his face, seen them open on the terror of his teeth?
> His sealed, tight-fitted scales glitter magnificent as a river of shields, one so close to the other not a breath could leak between them, they stick together like brothers, hold fast and never give up.
> His sneeze is a white blast of heat, his eyes are two dawns side by side, live coals shoot from his mouth as embers leap from a fire
> — when he smiles the escaping flames lick his lips, smoke geysers out of his nostrils like steam from a boiling kettle,
> his breath would kindle coals, his mouth is a gaping cremation.
> His backbone is the summation of strength, he radiates anguish and fear;
> the layers of his flesh are pressed so dense that nothing could budge his bulk, his heart is hard as fossil, solid as a lower millstone;

when he surfaces, heroes hug each other in terror, their boat shatters and they splash in panic.
Sword, javelin, slingstone, mail — nothing stands up to him.
He treats iron like straw, brass like rotten wood,
no arrow makes him dive for cover, a hurled rock does no more than a handful of grass, to him a club is a nutshell, he thinks it's funny when you shake your spear.
He can stretch out on glass-jagged rocks, comfortable as a flatbottomed barge drawn up on a muddy bank.
He makes the whole ocean boil around him like a pot of stew on the fire, his creaming wake so foams the sea it all goes white like a human's hair,
there's nothing on earth even like him, not nearly another so fearless a creature, this being looks down on all proudest things, king over the kings of beasts.

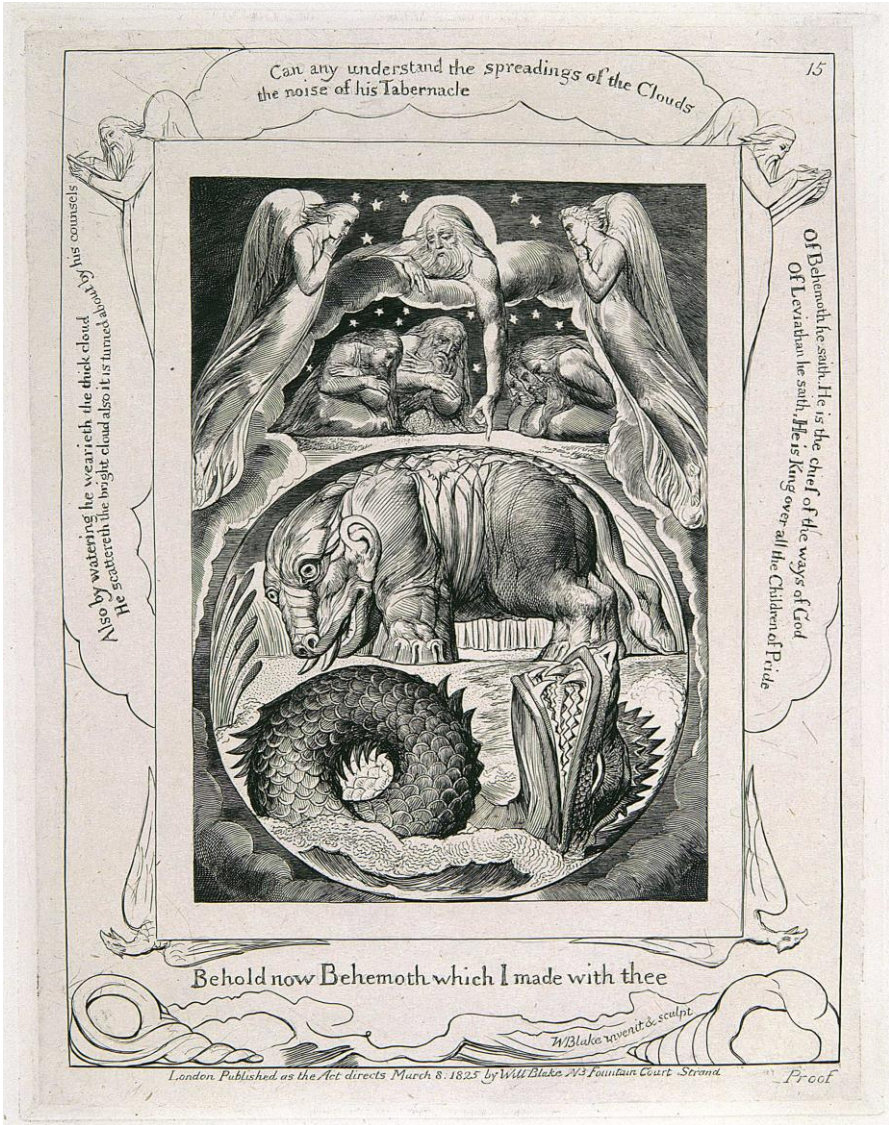
I orated these lines in his kitchen on East Twelfth Street. Exactly the passage I'd once drunkenly read aloud when he'd soberly kept company with swozzled Lucien and equally inebriated me. Here was the text, freed of fustian, not without a debt to Allen's own style and intonation. And this was the poem that Blake had engraved the illustration to! I had brought it back alive into modern English!

I clearly remember Allen's slightly pained look. I was sober, the text was strong, the language made to his recipe. I couldn't understand what was wrong.

I hadn't reckoned that in my embrace of ancient Jewish literature, as in my preference for classical poetic expression, I reminded Allen strongly of his father. There was no way this was going to delight him.

Allen was extremely ambivalent about his Judaism. Though he never attacked Israel, he never said a word in its defense. He had, after all, effectively renounced his Judaism. He called himself a Buddhist and he was one, a very good one too. He'd kept his last name, and he'd written a major poem called *Kaddish*, but this was essentially decorative. He was content to be Jewish, but absolutely didn't want to be a Jew. He'd been raised in utter ignorance of traditional Jewish culture. He was, as he himself says in the programmatic opening lines of *Howl*, "meat for the synagogue thrown on the pavement."

Allen read my *Unholy Bible* with an interesting combination of admiration and hostility. He kept going back to it: he had his copy on little shelf of books where he could peruse it every day—next to the toilet.



Blake's illustrations to *The Book of Job*: Behemoth and Leviathan

As Blake said in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Opposition is true friendship."

It was Autonomedia, a small independent press in Brooklyn, that eventually published my translations from Hebrew under the title *The Unholy Bible*. It was a dismal sales failure. Religious people aren't interested in a *literary* version of the scripture: the crowd who like Holy Writ aren't about to swap it for Holy Lit. And modern people want nothing to do with the Bible on any level, because the Evangelicals have put such a stink of

bigotry on it. Autonomedia published the book because they thought it was meant to be anti-religious. In this opinion, a few die-hard atheists bought copies in hopes of annoying God.

I thought my ideal audience would be Jews with literary intelligence, who had never been exposed to Hebrew literature except as unintelligible liturgy, or as a byway of English Renaissance literature: the King James Bible, which everyone admired and no one read.

I remember I had one discussion of Jewishness with Burroughs. I was quite drunk, and flushed with ethnic pride, I sang a few verses from *Shir HaMa'alot* (Psalm 126). I made the concrete walls of the Bunker ring with the sweet weird minor-key melody that sounds like it wafted down from the Carpathians in the neighborhood of castle Dracula (which in fact it probably did.) "There," said I, "beat that with *Bringing in the Sheaves*."

"Now, now, Jacob," said Burroughs, very amused, "That's not what we like. We like nice Episcopalian Jews, with Jew-jokes."

6: Penny Novack

My attempts to make hip literature in the Jewish tradition met with less than tepid success among my own folk as well. Orthodox and Conservative Jews wanted nothing to do with a Gay Dada approach to the scripture. Neither did the more liberal factions of the faith. These were, to varying degrees, ex-hippies, who'd decided they needed religion when they had children. They didn't want any immediate experience of God. They wanted the deity to be off somewhere in the distance, like the police, present enough to keep the kids from behaving too badly, but they didn't really want him in the house.

My synthesis was too profane for the religious and too religious for the profane.

My search for mystical co-conspirators finally led me to the woods of western Massachusetts. I had become curious about neo-Paganism, which had some presence in the zine scene, so I read Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*, a partisan but thorough journalistic survey of the neo-Pagan movement in America, from its origins through the 1980s. In this a woman named Penny Novack was quoted, frequently and at length, as a Jewish witch. Penny had gotten involved in the neo-Paganism which had taken off in the sixties, energized by the last phase of the hippie movement. Concurrently, she became interested in and converted to Judaism. In the pages of Adler's book, she gave voice to her own synthesis of nature worship and Jewish monotheism. Her main idea was that the interconnectedness of all nature was a mandate for monism. I was very interested in what she had to say. Her formulations were paradoxical and thought-provoking, and she was the only person I'd heard of who seemed really alive to the more adventurous mystical potential of Judaism. I wrote to Penny, care of Margot Adler, care of her publisher. She wrote back with an invitation to visit her on her farm in the Berkshires, so I got in my white Honda and drove off to see her for a weekend, thus beginning a friendship that burned hot for a decade.

Penny's background was quite interesting. Her mother, Ellafern Poindexter, was born in 1924, got married at age fifteen, and had four children—Penny in 1941, when Ellafern was twenty-six. Ellafern was psychically gifted and a free spirit. The family's original religion was some variety of Baptist: they believed in immersion in natural bodies of water. Penny remembers them breaking a thin skin of ice on a lake to baptize her. At age six, Penny thought it was an interesting adventure.

The mother left for New York City, when Penny was barely seven. Six months later the father disappeared as well, leaving Penny to be raised in foster homes. After a somewhat bohemian life, waitressing and going to jazz

clubs like Birdland, the mother became interested in yoga, and finally set up as a guru under the name Mataji ("Dear Mother"), and spent the rest of her life running an ashram in Thunder Bay, Canada.

Penny's religious upbringing was limited to Bible stories learned at a Methodist summer camp down the street until she approached puberty, when the various adults entrusted with her spiritual care told her about hellfire and damnation. Penny, who was having her own conversations with God, whom she saw as an "invisible friend" who just listened, decided to figure out the religion question on her own. Reading the Bible in the light of her personal experience, she came up with a *panentheism* which she assumed was what the Bible was really getting at. Panentheism is similar to pantheism, which holds that the universe and God are identical (as in Spinoza). Panentheism agrees with that in principle, but maintains a distinction between the spiritual and the material and sees their relationship as dynamic (as in Hegel).

During her teen years Penny was periodically taken to revivals, where she acquired a pronounced personal dislike of Jesus, whom she saw as "a wimp-burger who looks at us sorrowfully when we commit a sin." On a more structural level, she thought that a deity taking over responsibility for the moral wrongs of individuals was just dishonest bookkeeping.

Penny got friendly with a boy on the last day of high school; by fall she was pregnant and they were married. The end of high school, which had offered some kind of context and structure, probably had something to do with Penny's precipitating herself into that relationship. She stayed with him for four years, had two children with him, but the marriage wasn't fated to last. Penny had turned to books in the decade she'd been shunted hither and yon among relatives and foster homes, and was really quite well read. The husband could just about manage reading the paper or the directions for a power tool. He developed a taste for the bottle and was in and out of jail for petty theft. He tried to keep Penny jealously interested in him by having, or seeming to have, outside romantic involvements. In response, Penny was blasé—which made him nuts. She finally threw him out, or as out as she could throw him, since he kept coming back for money. Penny, you see, had a job.

Penny moved to Iowa City, where she knew she could get welfare, took some courses in world religions at a college, and met Mike Novack, who would become her next husband, at a Students for a Democratic Society conference. They tried moving to an anarchist commune in Vermont in 1968, but it became clear that these lovers of nature and freedom weren't ready for a New England winter, so Mike and Penny moved on to Philadelphia. Michael was Jewish, but very interested in witchcraft, and with him Penny

explored both. The reading she did to explore paganism, which led through certain byways of anthropology and archaeology, enriched her reading of the Hebrew Bible, which she had always much preferred to the New Testament. So Penny ended up converting to Judaism in 1976, and being initiated, with Michael, into a family-tradition coven in Philadelphia at more or less the same time. Michael saw the two paths as entirely compatible, and Penny, who would not be likely to describe herself as a very tidy thinker, was untroubled by the contradictions of Jewish paganism.

Penny and Michael stayed in Philadelphia till 1983, when they moved to northwest Massachusetts and bought a farm in the Pioneer Valley. Penny was an old hippie through and through, so moving to the country was part of the dream. She never wore make-up, rarely wore shoes, dressed in clothing from Goodwill, and lived on a ramshackle farm where she raised vegetables and goats. Michael had a degree in physics from the University of Pennsylvania, and supported Penny's oasis of growth and compost by his job computer coding for an insurance company. Together they raised her two children. Penny was the magic grandma, eventually taking care of her children's children in a farmhouse full of toys and kids' videos, and what amounted to a petting zoo in the back-yard. After the uptightness of Brown, I found Penny's organic utopia refreshing.

Penny is a genuine mystic. In her mind she is able to symbolically picture the flow and interplay of forces at work in her world; currents of luck, health, money, injustice and general momentum—rather reminiscent of the forces described in the I Ching. Only instead of being formulated in images from the Chinese landscape, Penny has an utterly personal system cobbled together out of images that appealed to her from SF and fantasy novels and popular books on astronomy and geology. One image she liked particularly was that of the world as a vast web: if you know how the weave goes, you can pull one cord here to produce a result far away. I'm doing no justice to her very fascinating view of reality, nor could I, since it was coded in a way that wasn't readily intelligible unless she explained it at length. Which she would if you asked, and it was generally worth hearing.

The farming she did, though not a livelihood, was more than a hobby. Raising a quarter acre of vegetables and milking six goats is a lot of serious work for one person. But the main purpose of her agriculture was spiritual. Penny liked to do her teaching right out in the field while she weeded (and you helped), taking her images and illustrations directly from the cycles of seed, root and fruit, and the eternal circle of the seasons. Judaism was for her a pleasing name for the unity of being. God was to her a spiritual ecosystem. Early on in our friendship, I tried to tidy up her thinking a bit. Her idea of God was not really monotheistic; it wasn't a deity who could be personally

known or who had any moral qualities, positive or negative. She told me once, "I never suspected God of being anything so limited as good or evil."

Well, there was no way I was going to get her (or anyone else) to read Hegel, and I soon tired of trying to teach her philosophy. I regarded her as a naive genius, and simply tried to learn what I could from her. Penny's ideas and the language she chose to express them were so eccentric and specific to her that I despaired of including her in any of my Xeroxed zines. I spent hours sitting in her kitchen, sipping coffee and trying to understand what she was saying. It was a compelling farrago of radical politics, home-made panentheism, practical magic and stories about her extended family's troubles with the law, drugs and adultery—all of it punctuated by her explosions of golden, uninhibited laughter. It would take hours to get to the point, but the detours forking off at every step were fascinating. I felt like Wotan disguised as the Wanderer, consulting the Earth Mother, Erda, in Wagner's *Siegfried*. I wondered whether she wasn't some sort of primaeval Female Wisdom, like Socrates' first teacher in philosophy, Diotima, in the *Symposium.* She probably was. I don't say that glibly. There is some wisdom a man can only learn from a woman.

Mystics often make their own world, their own language. Through Penny I came to understand better the interior worlds of Blake and Hegel, whose alternate universes similarly have a special vocabulary, often using words we have in common with them in senses that could never be guessed from etymology. When you study Hegel or Blake, you end up with extraordinary insights into reality, but most of your energy is spent threading the hermetic labyrinth of their ideas, the funhouse of their minds.

I spent many a weekend up at Penny's. I'd stop off in Northampton on my way to stock up on booze—I'd be drunk most every night I was there. In the world of the rural poor, drunkenness is an accepted part of lived life, like unemployment, beat-up cars or jail time. There was a coven which had coalesced around Penny. This included one of her sons, Gary, a proficient carpenter, and his wife, Beth, who worked as a cook. They lived in an adjacent house on Mike and Penny's land. Gary and Beth had an "open" relationship. The rest of the magic circle included a fellow who was a biker who did R&D for a tampon company, and a couple of other local Pagans. This was Penny's sprawling disorderly family, into which I'd been informally adopted.

There were rituals at the farm, at the four turning points of the year, of which the most important were the Spring Equinox and the Winter Solstice. We erected a Maypole each Spring, wound it round with ribbons in a dance while Mike played medieval melodies on a recorder. There was a brief mystery play with the characters of Maiden, Mother and Crone. It was pretty

generic pseudo-Celtic neo-Pagan flummery, but out in the woods on Penny's land, out of sight and sound of any lights, cars, or people, it was magical.

I remember one night after the Spring ritual, we had built a fire and were sitting around it, drinking, smoking, talking. I recall looking at us all in that circle around the fire, in the round clearing in the woods, tree-cover open on a constellated night sky, where the ritual joined together the pieces of the year in the cycle of seasons. Circle within circle within circle. I felt an almighty sense of continuity, participation in a mode of being that was primaevally real, a moment reckoned not by human time but counted by stars and stones.

Time stopped, and I felt a unity with the creation such that I might comprehend what thunder mutters, read what lightning writes, understand the whisper of leaves, what pebbles remember and rocks recall.

Another incident that stands out in my memory was a Yule celebration. The tradition was to cut the previous Spring's maypole into lengths for burning in the fireplace all the solstice night. First the still beribboned, parti-colored logs were heaped on a sled and pulled counterclockwise around the farmhouse through the snow. We were all given lanterns to carry as we trudged along in procession. As I marched behind the sled I looked back to see who was behind me. I held my lantern aloft to shine the light as far as I could. One of Penny's grandchildren was bringing up the rear. Once again, time slowed — this was evident from the snowflakes' too-gradual descent. The scene took on a poignant, archetypal quality, every character looked typical and picturesque, as though it had been transformed to a real-time Currier and Ives New England winter scene. Then it was completely silent, and for all the snow it wasn't cold, as though the pause in time kept sound and temperature in abeyance as well. The clock had stopped; it was still the instant when I first raised my lantern. The child walked towards me in eternity. Then large, soft, slow droplets of light fell gently from the night sky onto the snow, like the descending flames of the Holy Spirit in a painting of the first Pentecost. I thought of Thomas Nashe's strange line of rhyme, "brightness falls from the air." A strange aphasia came over us. The child said to me, "Light light?" Trying to reply, I only succeeded in saying, "White-bright." We expressed our wonder in language that had been folded somehow into the phenomenon we described.

Then we were going back in the front door, the yule log was carried in from the sled by many hands, everything was normal again. I never told anyone what happened. Penny had, as she would say, "raised power," charged the world around us with magic, made of time a solution so heavy with grace that implicit spirit took visible shape.

Penny wanted to initiate me into her coven, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to go through with it. Penny began to pass on to me the meditations and exercises, which seemed, some of them, a lot like theater training. I don't know if my squeamishness arose out of a monotheist sense of delicacy—I was exploring Rabbinic Judaism at this time rather seriously—or whether it was just reluctance to accept Penny as a master. I was already in my late twenties, and rather past the point where I was going to be content trying to fit myself into someone else's shadow. Penny had a strong, guru-like personality, and she didn't have a system that could be abstractly mastered. What Penny had to teach was Pennyism. It was a literal "in for a Penny, in for a pound" situation.

The magic was there. Why wasn't that enough? Well, paranormal experiences, though they make for good stories, are not particularly useful or valuable. They're really just an epiphenomenon on the spiritual path. The attempt to pursue them, through thrill-seeking or out of the deluded view that they can somehow become controlled and used to impress people with one's attainments—this is one of the classic pitfalls of the mystical path. Nothing comes of it, nothing good anyhow.

What bound me to Penny was the project of Judaeo-Paganism, which she saw as the revival of the ecological dimension present in Hebrew scripture. This was a very legitimate interpretation. The Jewish calendar is adapted from the pagan agricultural festivals of the Canaanites, and Jewish law addresses every aspect of life in a land that depends on farming. Ecological concepts are prominent in Judaism, which is local and national, as they are not in Christianity and Islam, which are free-standing and urban intellectual creations. I was very interested in this ecological dimension, but also wished to amplify the Canaanite polytheism which had been absorbed into Judaism as fully as the agricultural folkways. Penny and I would eventually split on this point. Breaking into factions with one member each was perhaps the most authentically Jewish thing we ever did together.

7: Frederic

Meanwhile I was exploring, tentatively, the orthodox world. I had studied the *siddur* (the prayerbook) to where I could confidently mumble through the required two hours of daily prayers. I accepted the sabbath hospitality of many orthodox families in Providence, who considered it a big mitzvah to share the meals with young Torah students who came to the *schul*, who hadn't family of their own to be with. I made trips to Brooklyn to visit the courts of Hassidic Rebbes, where the sabbath meal might last for hours, veering into long spiritual discourses from the Rebbe in Yiddish, interspersed with hymns sung by the *Hassidim*.

I was warned, but I didn't listen. Becoming orthodox is like joining the Amish. (The black hats and beards should have been a tip-off.) You have to renounce everything: opera, painting, Latin, Greek, Shakespeare and Kant, not because it's evil, but because it's irrelevant to the serious business of living a pious life. Orthodoxy is really a separate world which makes no compromise with the modern. They have the traditional learning and the traditional spirituality: the less austere brands of Judaism, Conservative through Reform, are frankly bankrupt on these heads. But can you pay that price for authenticity? And you've got to ask yourself, what's under that hard, hard shell? Is it really wonderful, or just a dried up fusty old nut? Native Americans seem to have the same problem: the long-house party demands traditionalism that is not only blind, but in important ways deaf and dumb. And the modernizers want to turn it all into a venal casino.

It took me quite a while to decide I wasn't on either side, and while I did, things were pretty schizophrenic. I might drive down from Brown on a Friday morning, ritually bathe in a *mikveh* and sing the Kabbalistic hymns that welcome the Sabbath with Breslov Hassidim. Then on Saturday night, at the conclusion of the holy day, filled with spirituality and, as it seemed to me, particularly the *Shechina* (the female aspect of God), I'd steer my white Honda to the West Village. The next scene would show me in the bathroom of the Ninth Circle, hacking at my beard with disposable razors purchased at the drugstore, restoring myself to a goyish boyishness that would allow me to get laid.

I never planned these scenes. I was catapulted from one world to another, unable to long endure the strictures of piety or the emptiness of purely selfish pleasure. It wasn't that I didn't know what I wanted. I had well formulated the balance of tradition and creativity that would content me, and I was realizing it in my writing. The trouble was I didn't want to walk this path entirely alone.

The loneliness and the spiritual longing were both resolved in the spring of 1986, in my second year of graduate school, when I met Frederic Evans. He was my first real love. Frederic was a graduate student in linguistics, a Quaker, and a member of a medieval band called Melusine. He was brilliantly fun, and a skilled humor writer. His favorite authors were Louise Fitzhugh (*Harriet the Spy*), Muriel Spark (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*) and, to me inexplicably, Virginia Woolf. I met him at a party in the apartment of another linguistics student I knew through the gay students alliance. After a week of flirting, visiting, hanging out together, and doing what espionage and surveillance we could manage via mutual friends, we finally tumbled into bed together. The first thing we did was start writing comedy. Our first joint production was a parody of Marlowe's *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*. Frederic's father was a Freudian psychiatrist, like my mother, so Frederic had been treated to exactly the same speeches about homosexuality, and with the identical repeated admonition to "keep your options open." And Frederic had grown up, like me, in a house full of medical magazines and the plastic models of internal organs which drug companies gave doctors as gifts to encourage them to prescribe their products. The humor of the way we had both failed so signally to profit by good advice both parental and medical, led us to indite this imaginary speech from a (finally) approving parent.

Marlowe's *Passionate Shepherd* enumerates the rustic delights the swain can offer the object of his affection, and ends,

> If these delights thy mind may move,
> Then live with me and be my love.

Our version concluded,

> Color magazines wherein
> dreadful things befall the skin;
> plastic models showing tongue,
> sinus, trachea and lung;
> if these pleasures sound like fun—
> come live with me, and fuck my son.

For that first year things were idyllic between us. I'd never had a relationship that lasted long enough for a honeymoon period, the blissful interim before two people actually learn enough about each other for the basic stresses in the partnership to become apparent. One of these stresses, unexpectedly, was

a woman. Frederic had a highly developed relationship with a girl named Shoshana with whom he'd attended Swarthmore. She was a fine poet with a fast wit. They were so close that they decided to attend Brown together as graduate students, she in the creative writing program. When I met Frederic, she was taking a year in Israel: they had parted with firm plans to rent an apartment together in the fall. After an untroubled summer of love I found myself dating a man who shared rooms with a woman with whom he was already in a relationship.

Even though they'd never slept together, they had a real couple's dynamic. Frederic would be jealous if I spent a happy afternoon with Shoshana, and Shoshana wasn't always gracious about having one roommate more than she signed up for. Shoshana had outlasted many of Frederic's boyfriends: I was the first who presented real competition. So things were awkward during our year of unexpected *ménage à trois*, and I think Frederic might have felt more impelled to make things work with me had he not had a back-up marriage.

Alcohol was also very much in the picture. Frederic liked to drink, though he could hold it very well. More momentously, he liked it that *I* drank. His mother, who had died while Frederic was a teenager, was a real alcoholic, so my bacchic cavorting threw some major comfort switch in Frederic's psychic wiring. It was a situation he was familiar with, love in terms he could understand. I was in and out of AA throughout our relationship, walking a tight-rope life between a week of binge drinking followed by a few months on the wagon—a compromise which proved sustainable for many years to come.

Frederic was a Quaker. He'd gotten involved with the Society of Friends when he was a teenager, and still went to the big yearly meetings to "maintain the franchise," and keep in touch with old friends. He liked telling people he was a Quaker—it did have a certain panache. Often as not the reaction would be "Really? I didn't think there were any of you left."

This was when I was being the Chelmer Rebbe, so I was into spirituality of all kinds. I entered enthusiastically into Frederic's professed faith. I read through *The Journal of George Fox*, got up to speed on English Dissenters (Protestants who separated from the Church of England in the seventeenth century). The politically anarchist, aggressively mystical and morally antinomian ideas of the more extreme groups (Diggers, Ranters, Levellers, &c.) were a matter of great interest to Peter Wilson, who put me onto the relevant literature.

Of these radical groups, the Quakers survived, because under Fox's leadership they foreswore politics along with violence and acquiesced in Cromwell's rule. The pattern of quietism and compliance served them well

under all succeeding regimes. I was also studying William Blake intensively at this time, so I was getting my English Protestant mysticism in high poetic form as well.

To me, the most interesting part of Quakerism was the doctrine of ongoing prophecy, the idea that the believers today may access the same inspiration vouchsafed to the Hebrew prophets and the earliest Church with the first Pentecost. The silent Quaker meetings are supposed to be an expectant waiting for the spirit. Members who feel themselves moved by God stand and speak the messages they are given, not words they themselves have chosen. Properly, Quaker prophecy should be a charismatic, ecstatic phenomenon, closer to Voodoo possession than to Sunday sermonizing.

The modern reality is: people sharing pious reflections culled from their everyday experience, insights and sentiments well within the spectrum of greeting card poetry. When the children are brought in for ten minutes of meeting before they're released to the playground, someone is sure to make them a pretty speech .

In my Quixote-like determination to close the gap between lived life and literature, I decided to make a good job of my amateur Quakerism. Frederic had begun to attend Providence Meeting, shamed into it, I realize now, by my enthusiasm—and probably to keep a co-dependent eye on me, to be sure I didn't get myself in trouble, stumbling over rules whose existence I couldn't imagine. This was a fear well-founded. When you look into the white-walled imageless, Zen-Protestant spareness of a Quaker meeting house—not even a cross—you're likely to be dazzled by the cleanliness of the aesthetic and the gallery brightness of the space. I would soon discover that, whatever the original motivation for removing the pictures and gew-gaws of Christian religiosity, that emptiness has since been filled with the complex, unspoken etiquette of old-family Yankee behavior, a secret oral tradition of protocol and hierarchy that makes a Coptic Orthodox Easter look relaxed as a Black Baptist Picnic.

8: Quakers

Into this formal void of Jewless decorum I stumbled one Sunday morning, stoked with Blake and coffee, my mind all a-tingle with dire sparkles of spiritual anticipation. I sat through the meeting, listened to the well-intentioned messages, and it seemed to me I discerned a common thread in the trivial topics broached. It was as though they were launching paper boats on a lake, and I could read by their motion the direction of the rising wind.

That wind blew through me. My heart pounded. It was as though someone strong and tall were stamping up a staircase in the center of my chest. I struggled *not* to rise and speak—but I'd felt something like this the week before, had wrestled back the impulse, and felt it weigh on me like failure for days. I stood. I knew with strange suddenness what to say. The thoughts and words didn't come in sequence, but complete, all at once, the last phrase in place together with the first. I rebuked their make-pretend spirituality in these words,

> Do you know where you are? Do you know what you say?
> These walls, these benches and these bodies are all immaterial
> and the air is solid God.

Frederic knew this was the real thing. He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "He got you!"

After the meeting, my head was still humming with the spirit, *the surface of my skin was hot*. I wasn't sweating. I was experiencing *tapas*, the spiritual heat of yogic practice. The warmth you feel from alcohol (which doesn't actually change your body temperature) is in fact a crude version of this. It was a moment of holiness.

I wish he had stayed with me that morning. He had to be elsewhere. His errand wasn't really important: a spiritual opening into a faith I hoped to share with him was. But the disappointment, the first of our relationship, wasn't really his failing, but mine. I didn't understand what people are really like. If someone was intelligent and I loved them I invested them with some of my own qualities. I assumed they too wanted to take whatever they did to the limit. I didn't believe everything *anyone* said to me, but I did believe the people I loved. And people *say* they want all sorts of things. Frederic said he was a Quaker. He was, but not to any extent that would have satisfied George Fox. He wasn't up for the terrifying plunge into psychic wind and fire. Me, I didn't accept this as a valid choice: to me it seemed a failing. As I

acidly (though tacitly) observed at the time, with a nice Quaker pun, you either run with the fox or hunt with the hounds.

I didn't realize that people sometimes presented themselves to me rather grandly because they wanted my good opinion. Frederic wanted me to like him, and that was worth something all by itself, regardless of whether he could deliver on his self-description. I misunderstood. I'd been raised in total intellectual neglect. On the one hand, it led me to develop a reckless independence, but it also became inconceivable to me that anyone would want *my* approval.

Never having been given any approval, I didn't think I had any to give. This made me too demanding and too unforgiving. Just like my father. Other factors that led me to be so unrealistic in my expectations, of myself (to which I'm entitled) and of others (which is doomed), were my mentors. About the time I turned twenty and started to forge my own worldview, I learned to think from Friedrich Nietzsche, weighing everything myself to see what was meaningful, flinching from no true conclusion. I made Nietzsche's arduous honesty my standard. I approached everything like a detective, observing words, no matter how trivial, noting down everyone's story and treating it as tentatively true. Then, when all the facts were in, I'd chase down every inconsistency and connect all the clues to produce a picture of pitiless accuracy. I'd explored Frederic's Quakerism like a police inspector.

From Friedrich Nietzsche I'd also learned a very Greek belief in contest and excellence: as he put it, "it is the good war that hallows every cause." I judged people less by what they did than by how wholeheartedly they pursued it. I would despise a petty pilferer, but would admire a master thief. I felt that salvation lay only in the extremes. Lucien Carr's gadfly mentorship had confirmed this disposition in me. For Lucien, life was not a cabaret but a caravel—the shallow keeled boat with three triangular sails, incredibly fast and maneuverable, with which the Portuguese explored the world in the sixteenth century. This is something more than a metaphor: in his final years Lucien had acquired a trim sailing vessel and cruised Chesapeake bay at racing speed. His ideal was the one that you glimpse in Tennyson's *Ulysses*, and see full on in Canto twenty-six of Dante's *Inferno*, or in Whitman's transcendent *Passage to India*,

> Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!
> Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me;
> For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
> And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

Admirable as a personal ethos, but a poor basis for managing a relationship. In dealing with other people, people who care about you, the rule should be to give full credit for good intentions, regardless of how well they are realized. It's a poor sort of love that doesn't forgive trivial shortcomings, and expressions of disappointment are not the best way to encourage excellence.

Years later, with the help of a brilliant psychologist, I understood further that I had tried to give Frederic what I would have wished for myself. My mother was cold and my father was mean, and neither of them ever showed the least interest in what I really had to offer. It would have been my dream come true if they had ever warmly tried to enter into my interests. When I attempted to do this for Frederic, he felt not validated but invaded. In response to his disquiet, I showed the dark dissatisfaction my father had taught me so well.

Thus it was my interest in the Society of Friends fizzled. The one Friend who concerned me was spooked and embarrassed by my fervor.

I generated at the time the following parable to encapsulate my insights into the world of Quakers, into whose midst I had intruded myself, meaning well, but too earnestly.

Jesus returns to earth. He announces himself at a number of houses of worship, and is not well received. ("Quiet in the back!" "Get that nut out of here!") Finally, reluctantly, he goes to a Quaker meeting. After waiting a decent interval, he stands up and says, "It is I, the Alpha and the Omega, I am returned unto thee," and shines with a mild effulgence of heavenly splendor. He sits down. There is no reaction. Really quite annoyed now, he rises to his feet once more, announces himself as Jesus, the Christ, and utters a hundred and ten new beatitudes, each one more astonishing than the last. At this tremendous inrush of holiness the roof flies off like a hat in a high wind, a chorus of angels appears in a singing ring round the lidless building, hailing the risen lord. The sun shines down a spotlight of transfiguring glory and the cloudless heavens thunder approval. Jesus sits down again, crosses his arms, as if to say, "There, *that* ought to do it."

An elderly gentleman seated behind Jesus taps him on the shoulder and says,

"Friend, we heard thee the first time."

Cut to: the coffee hour. Jesus is swirling the last bitter sip in the bottom of his Styrofoam cup, looking every inch the Man of Sorrows. A great fat woman wearing a sweatshirt on which is printed "I am the mother of all living things" comes up and gives him a hug. She says,

"Is your name Jesus? You really have a way with words."

But I am getting much ahead of myself. That inspired morning at Providence Meeting, I felt only the faintest suspicion of the spiritual difference between Frederic and I. I have described it in detail as the geological fault line it finally became. Then it was no more than a hairline fracture you'd have to look hard to see. The relationship was still all before us, shiny and new, an unnumbered wealth of glad days, round and full and bright as unspent silver dollars.



Allen's photo of Frederic & I at Allen's kitchen table

9: Love's End

That first year, Frederic and I loved one another sincerely, and I experienced a happiness that took me entirely by surprise. I was thirty-three and I'd never had a real relationship. My love life had been confined to fleeting sexual encounters and years of wretched straight dating. Now, at last, I felt entirely validated in my sexuality. An oblique expression of my triumphant happiness was a *graffito* I added to a bathroom stall in Brown's Rockefeller library that had a certain reputation as a meeting place. I inscribed the lines George Orwell made famous in a far different context: "Four legs good, two legs bad."

Frederic and I had gotten together in the spring. We had that first summer off together. We went to the beach a lot. The floor of my car was crunchy with sand, and often held the shells and pebble trophies we'd gathered in our walks. Frederic's uncle, who taught at Harvard, had a summer house in Tiverton, Rhode Island. This is a particularly beautiful projection of land into Narragansett Bay, that great irregular estuary with Newport at its entrance and Providence as its inward limit. Frederic and I caught great pugnacious blue crabs in an inlet by the house. I steamed them in herbed wine, cleaned them on the grass, and made crab cakes of their meat which I cooked packed into their spiky heraldic looking carapaces. The crab one buys in a supermarket tastes like an inferior species compared to those that are broiled as soon as they're caught. We ate them with bottles of chilled cheap Italian white wine. We were like real people, taking a summer holiday by the shore, lazily reading and listening to music, whole days spent with no greater focus than figuring out dinner and watching the late descent of the summer sun. It may not seem extraordinary in the recounting, but I had never experienced a normal, reciprocated love, or one that could be enjoyed openly, comfortably and at leisure. All my other involvements had been furtive.

Now for the first time I experienced, the amusing, awkward process of introduction to each other's circles, becoming a recognized "item." Embarrassing, and gratifying, to see myself accepted, to shine, turn on the charm, and win a good opinion from his friends.

I remember one night in late August of that summer. The evening was cool, but the waves were still warm from the whole summer's sunning. The almost autumn night was clear like it gets when the air's a little brisk.

The stars shone for us alone on the long deserted beach. We'd waded out a ways and now we held each other naked, waist-deep in the dark and gentle waves, private in that wide night.

The water was yet tepid despite the chilly air: it was as though we bathed in remembered warmth. No one saw us on all that open beach; we did not even speak of our happiness: it filled the dark world.

Nowadays it may be difficult to imagine how much this meant. I had grown up in a very repressed, homophobic world, not all that different from what it had been a century before. When I read the *Calamus* section of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, I understand exactly his oblique and cryptic hints. I shared what he called "the secret of my nights and days," and "many a hungry wish told to the skies only." I too would try and read the subtle tells of homosexuality in someone else, trying to decide whether they might possibly reciprocate my interest, looking for what Whitman calls "secret and divine signs." Like him, I was timid, hesitant in "the terrible doubt of appearances." I grasped the elegiac resignation in his utterance, "Passing stranger! you do know how longingly I look at you," and I knew the furtive, anonymous encounters to which he alludes in the phrase "city of orgies." There was a freemasonry to being gay back then, when it was still, as Allen once jocosely put it, "the love that dare not *scream* its name."

Just being gay and out was new to me. I'd plenty of experience slutting it up from bar to bar, tipsily taking home someone entirely unsuitable, waking up and figuring how to get rid of them. (Playing my record of bagpipe music usually did the trick.) The relieved and panicked moment when at last the door closed behind them and I'd think, with a kind of proud amused anxiety, “My God, this person knows where I live!”

I remember lying in bed with Frederic on a summer afternoon, both of us unclothed, it was too hot even for bedsheets. We exulted in the mirrored symmetry of our two male bodies. Homosexuality has an element of Narcissism to it, but Narcissism can also be mythic and Ovidian. That moment had at once the feel of archetype and eternity. Our parity was a likeness of love itself, of two become one. Heterosexuals achieve a reciprocating union; homosexuals enjoy the different refinement of absolute identity.

And it *was* Ovidian; the witty ribaldry of the Roman rake playboy was never entirely absent from the mood. How not? Sex is itself intrinsically funny, and gay men, at least in my day, usually had a sharp sense of the ridiculous.

I will spare the reader the rest of the tender banalities. The details of other people's bed-play and pillow talk rarely have much interest for non-participants. We recounted our romantic histories, compared our musical tastes, exchanged poignant confidences, had spats which were made good with usurious pleasure.

We made a slightly funny-looking couple. Frederic looked a bit like Chris Elliott, and I was a skinny Jewish guy with glasses. Though we passed for straight separately, somehow when we were together we read as 200% gay. Strangers would occasionally become abusive, on the street, in a restaurant. This was more than thirty years ago, and homophobia was still very much a part of the landscape, even in a New England liberal college town.

Frederic played recorder and did vocals in a medieval band called Melusine, which played renaissance fairs, weddings and SCA events. Some of these gigs were pretty surreal. Popular sites for weddings were the mansions at Newport, where the high society of the Gilded Age, the Astors and Vanderbilts, built hallucinatory castles of kitsch. Statues and marble and brass and tapestries and suits of armor were crammed into mansions that would do credit to the vulgarity of a present-day Russian oligarch. The people who rented these aesthetic houses of horrors often recited verses of Kahil Gibran at each other as part of the wedding solemnities. Frederic's band added their medieval too-muchness to the mix.

Frederic was away most weekends with the band during the year, and I got pretty tired of that. The program in linguistics didn't seem to require much work, particularly if you never meant to complete it. I was working very hard indeed for the classics degree, reading seriously in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and German, and memorizing vocabulary for all five languages, so I didn't have a lot of free time. At this point I was keeping the Sabbath, in my own esoteric way that usually had a lot more to do with vodka, poetry, music and food than it did with traditional Jewish observance, but from Friday evening when I lit the candles till sunset Saturday I'd "fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world." I didn't think it an imposition to take one day a week and unplug the phone, slow it down, and recover your existential center, try to live beautifully. Since then I've learned that everyone but orthodox Jews considers this level of observance an intolerable hardship, so I no longer ask it of anyone.

I finally got pretty annoyed that the one day as week I took off, he was away with his band. I think I would have reconciled myself to it if he'd been playing music seriously, but it seemed to me he was just playing at playing music. The band was as good as it needed to be for the kind of gigs they

played, but none of them were really in earnest, and all of them finally set it aside to earn real livings.

Frederick and I moved in together for the second year of the relationship. This only made matters worse. We stopped having sex not that long after we moved in. This was my decision. I wasn't interested in sex if we didn't have a relationship. I finally told him, "Look, you're not serious about being a Quaker or a musician or a linguist, fine, I'll stop pushing you and acting disappointed. Be whoever you want to be, I'm behind you. But you absolutely have to stop misleading me, telling me what you think I want to hear about your aspirations, because I keep knocking myself out trying to gratify you in ways you don't want."

"I don't *know* what I want," he said at last. And he really didn't.

Frederic charmed everyone with his charisma, impressed everyone by his boundless abilities. Charming and impressing people was the main thing he did. It was all-consuming.

I remember one time, during that first summer, when we'd driven back from the beach, he had to go to lunch with one of his professors. I told him I'd wait for him in my room, just come on by as soon as he was free. I had the whole Ring cycle on cassettes, a huge boom box, and I figured I could spend the time from eleven to one pleasantly enough in Wagner's fantasy. Frederic spent the next few hours with his professor, drinking and gossiping—he was out to her, so he sang my praises at length. Then some other friends of his showed up at the restaurant; the professor left and he was delightful with them. He rejoined me at my dorm room at six, and delightedly told me he's spent the day bragging about me. When I pointed out he'd left me waiting for five hours more than agreed his face fell.

There it was, on the very threshold of the relationship, in that first honeymoon summer. Frederic needed to be the gregarious winning focus of all attention, to seduce everyone to such a degree that he completely forgot about the one person who really loved him. He could forget me even as he spoke of me. I felt like a prop, our whole involvement a bit of stage business.

My disenchantment with Frederic began a destructive cycle. The more critical I became, the more he found other rooms to play to. He had often left me alone on Saturdays, he later confessed, to punish me. So after two years we parted. The sexual distancing that preceded the final break may have saved my life. When we first got together, no one knew how AIDS worked. We had no idea whether kissing was as risky as intercourse. We were frustrated beyond endurance by our, in retrospect excessive, safe sex subterfuges. We joked about playing it safe by getting his and his diving bells and rapping out endearments on the windows in Morse code. Finally

we figured we'd roll the dice and hope to win big. We went completely unsafe.

I hadn't stipulated monogamy; it didn't seem a realistic demand in a gay relationship back then. Also, I had at the time a number of silly anarchist ideas: I thought fidelity that wasn't entirely spontaneous wasn't worth much. So I told him it was OK if he slept with other people, so long as the sex was safe, and he didn't humiliate me by hooking up with people so local I'd meet them.

After we broke up and I was back in circulation, I met a couple of local guys who'd enjoyed Frederic. Apparently he'd been quite busy. Considering his need for continuous approval, his turning to casual sex to find it seems inevitable.

Two years later, when I was living at my parents' home, writing my dissertation, I heard that Frederic had AIDS, by a complicated chain of transmission. It was Brett Rutherford who heard Frederic was sick and phoned me.

Had he been exposed while he was still with me? Could he have once again forgotten me while he sought others' approbation? Or had he gotten careless after we broke up, out of a suicidal combination of alcohol and depression?

I'd been in a state of low-grade terror since AIDS first appeared. I'd never gotten tested because there wasn't any treatment and as anxious as life was in deadly uncertainty, I wasn't ready to handle absolute despair. But after Brett called me I went to my father who, being a physician, was able to arrange the test expeditiously. Even so, it was two weeks before we got the results. After the first week I couldn't stand just watching TV and waiting. I drove up to Penny's farm. She was a good person to be with in such a crisis. She evinced an unpanicked sanity that calmed me, and I slept to the sound of Clesson Brook, which flows close by her house. The untroubled steady hubub of its waters soothed me to sleep. On the final day, I phoned home and got the news: negative. Years of anxiety, ending in two weeks of terror, were over. I was so happy I was numb.

When I got home, I phoned up Frederic, who was at his father's home in Westchester New York. I didn't say anything about my own status or about him not calling me himself. He didn't mention these matters either. I was safe; I could afford to be magnanimous. I just told him I was at my parents' home in New Jersey writing my thesis, I was a mere forty-five-minute drive from him if he wanted to see me or if there was anything I could do. He declined the visit, and the renewal of our friendship.

The last thing that he said to me was that I should look at Psalm 91. After I hung up, I opened my Bible and read,

> Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day;
> Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday;
> A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.

This was really spooky. I had told no one about my testing negative.

A month before I wrote these pages I gained an unexpected insight into Frederic's end. I still occasionally look him up on the internet, to see if anyone has posted his band's recordings or a picture of him. All I have to remember him by are some of our humorous writings. (The photo of me with him that appears here I acquired a week ago when I got access to Allen's photo archive.) I found that the New England Quakers had just posted online the memorial minutes from 1994. There I found, in a list of remembrances read on Sunday, August seventh, at seven p.m., a brief account of Frederic's end.

He'd gotten an adjunct job at Yale after finishing his course work at Brown, no doubt with the vague intention of writing a thesis somewhere down the line. He was diagnosed during the 1991–92 Christmas break. He moved to Cambridge to be closer to Boston's Beacon Hill Quaker Meeting, which had the largest, most active Gay and Lesbian component on the East Coast. There he found a solid support community, and became very public and activist about his condition, speaking and playing music at AIDS awareness events. The Westport Rhode Island Meeting, near where we'd had our summer of love with the white wine and the crab cakes, made a special quilt for him with patchwork angels on it—he'd become quite interested in angels. He brought the angel quilt with him to the New England Yearly Meeting, displaying it as a kind of personal banner. He wrote devotional songs about his renewed faith.

It's probably for the best I wasn't around. I shrink from any public display of personal pain: I don't like other people sticking their dirty fingers in my wounds. I'd have made a very poor widow-to-be. And Frederic's final metamorphosis into a plaintive singer-songwriter, would have made me uncomfortable. It was, I feel, a time for ACT-UP, Gran Fury art activism, not a New England quilting bee.

But for Frederic, it was a kind of apotheosis. He had everyone's fullest attention, scope for all his showmanship, an unequivocal outpouring of

public support and love. Who would dare to be unmoved by the frail young man bearing his cross with glad faith?

I like to think that Frederic, who undoubtedly began by playing the tragic figure he'd been implacably cast as, truly rose to the occasion. How not? The script was serious as scripture. This time the game was played for keeps. His soul acquired a depth that till then had been left potential.

I like to think that, if he hadn't gotten sick, we would have gotten back together at last, me less exacting and he more candid. Thirty years later I still love him, I still miss him. When we first broke up I was in such pain I could scarcely fathom it. My life was like a bad country song played really loud for months on end. I got over it at last, then came that polite last phone call . . . .

The account in the Memorial Minutes says, "these words ended a message Frederic gave at the Harvard Divinity School Gospel Fest for AIDS in December 1993,

> So here's my little nugget of gospel truth for you to take home. The truth is not: it's going to be alright. The truth is: it already is."

The motto of the Chelmer Rebbe! I was still in his thoughts; he'd had a regard for my spiritual strivings; some things I had said were a help and well-remembered.

It was like when he told me to read that psalm, his psychically right farewell blessing. I find here, in his last words of which I'll get any record, a warmth of meaning that is particularly, secretly for me. I believe we are finally reconciled.

IX: The Secrets of Life and Death

1: The Oral Exam

I never fit in well with the other classics grad students, but I truly earned their enmity in a matter which seemed to me trivial. And it was trivial: which is not the same thing as unimportant. The classics department invited professors from other schools to come and give talks, followed by bad wine, inedible appetizers and some socializing. I attended a few of these my first year. The talks went on for an hour and were followed by half an hour of questions intended to show off the questioners' knowledge, not to elicit any enlightenment. I soon stopped showing up.

Even if the talks had been interesting, which they weren't, their content would have been better accessed as an article, which they all ended up as anyway. A real discussion, of the kind I had with Peter Wilson, free and far-ranging, would have been valuable, but that wasn't going to happen. What did happen was the dreary bonding among the grad students through shared tortures of boredom. My non-attendance was sharply resented. But I figured—my fellow students were cold and nasty already, I had nothing to lose by skipping these supposedly optional affairs. The price I paid for this was that I was out of the loop for a certain amount of very practical information—the "secret oral tradition" as it were. This became painfully apparent with the Oral Exam.

We graduate students had been given a list of about fifty classical authors and their principal works, all of which we were supposed to be well familiar with for the orals — though our course work bore no real relation to any of this.

Had I been hanging around with the other grad students, I would no doubt have heard the stories—horror and otherwise—of the Oral Exam and how to prepare for it. As it was, I assumed that what was expected was what was actually asked for. I read all the books and was ready to discuss their content intelligently.

In the actual exam, I was asked only for precise, niggling details. The exact date when every book had been published, how that date was determined (did the book mention a specific political or astronomical event?), what were the principal scholarly controversies that had arisen regarding the texts over the last hundred years, and so on. It was as though they'd combed through the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* for rare trivia. One particularly nasty fellow asked for information that he himself knew only because of an article he was writing at the time. This man, of an extremely

old and wealthy family, waited eagerly all year for the orals to come around, and then he'd badger female grad students with rapid-fire unanswerable questions till they burst into tears. With males he had to be content with making them blanch with terror or choke with suppressed rage. The rest of the faculty watched this brutal and annual intellectual hazing without comment. At one point during my running of this Greco-Roman gauntlet, I asked if they were ever going to get to questions about the *content* of the literature. I was told that I could not presume to discuss the content of any work I couldn't date with absolute precision.

At the end, I was told that I had disastrously failed. "Evidently," I replied, and suggested that they were not quite blameless of this outcome—not a one of them had communicated to me, verbally or in writing, what was expected for this exam. I told them I would retake it when I had prepared in such a way as to answer expectation. They agreed—they had to. After all, a refusal would have brought us all before the dean, awkward for everyone.

I spent an entire year in utter misery, cramming to retake the orals. I'd broken up with Frederic just before my classics catastrophe. It seemed I had not only failed at love, I was also failing at graduate school. At heart, I had no real confidence I could redeem either disaster. I moved to a tiny apartment at the bottom of Hope Street to prepare to retake the exam. That fortuitous address was the first glimmer to appear in my despair.

I set about studying as I should have from the first. Instead of stupidly mastering the content of all of classical literature, I undertook an almighty feat of memory that would produce the *illusion* of such knowledge in the most superficial, stagey way possible. I learned by heart the date of every datable composition, and knew whatever dull detail surely moored that date. I bought the *Monarch Notes to the Greek and Roman Classics,* and memorized the plot synopses of every Greek and Roman drama, the outlines of all the histories and of the Platonic dialogues. I committed to memory the birth and death dates of every author and how they were ascertained.

From the standard histories of Greek and Roman literature I learned that there were one or two questions that had occupied scholars regarding each of the authors, never very interesting ones, and always ones that arose in the first few pages of the author's principal works. Was Homer the author, or the editor and compiler, of the epic material that appears under his name? Does Herodotus achieve the two (possibly opposed) goals he announces in the opening sentence of his history, sober accuracy and the recording of marvelous deeds? The last two hundred years of classical scholarship has largely busied itself with pondering these nearly rhetorical questions. I learned the principal opinions advanced, by whom, and when.

I also memorized a great number of illustrative passages in Greek and Latin: Aristotle's definition of tragedy, programmatic choral stanzas from each of the tragedians, and so on. I would deploy these to prove my points.

A year after the original debacle I offered my improved performance, a truly intimidating display of memorized fine detail, all of which could have easily been looked up in a standard reference work. For this eructation of data I was warmly congratulated on a stellar performance. Thus I wasted an entire year, during which I might have been translating Aristophanes, producing an illusion to delight evil fools. The only positive thing I can say about the whole exercise is that as soon as it was over I forgot everything I'd learned—so at least it did me no lasting damage.



Allen's photo of me in 1989, age 31.
Hello.

2: Factsheet Five

After I passed the Orals, I took a job with Mike Gunderloy, in Rensselaer, way up the Hudson near Albany, co-editing the zine review magazine *Factsheet Five* along with another new hire, a girl named Cari Goldberg. Mike, who was an anarchist vegan, thought I was the biggest bargain going: I was gay *and* Jewish, two minorities for the price of one! But then Cari was a woman as well as Jewish, so in the race for moral beauty the two of us were pacing neck-and-neck.

It was fun coming up with three-line capsule reviews of zines for a living and Mike was an upright, fair and fun guy to work for. Still, I wasn't getting much done on my thesis, so after two months I moved back to my parents in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, to get to work in earnest. I knew exactly what I wanted to write about and had access to the Columbia Library across the Hudson for my research. I single-mindedly read and wrote. I had no intention of letting this drag on for a decade as most doctoral candidates seem to.

Two scenes contemporary with my brief tour of duty at *Factsheet Five* are worth preserving from oblivion. Just before I moved to Rensselaer, I decided I would divest myself of all my possessions. Books, clothing, CDs, furniture. I wanted to see what it was like to own nothing more than I could fit in my compact car. I had a computer, a few cookpots and utensils, one small rug to sleep on and to pray on, a tiny low coffee table I used as a desk, a meditation cushion, and not a lot more. The day after I moved into my apartment, the land-lady came up to ask me something, and she saw me in the bare room.

"Where's your furniture?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"This *is* my furniture," I explained, pointing to the prayer rug and the meditation cushion.

"That's not furniture!" she said, a shrill tone entering her voice.

"Well," I added helpfully, "to a Japanese person, this would be furniture."

"*You're not Japanese, are you?*" she demanded in a panic.

"No, no," I explained, "it's not like that." I realized some better explanation was in order. I had noticed a crucifix and other items of devotional decoration in the hallway and her living room where I'd signed the lease. I explained that I was a very religious person and that I had taken a vow of poverty. This at last made sense to her.

I gave her another scare a few days later when she was knocking at my door and I didn't reply—I was reciting morning prayers and didn't want to be interrupted, nor did I wish to come to the door with tefillin wrapped up

my arm and on my forehead, and a tallis that reached almost to the floor. But she was determined, and at last I opened the door, accoutered as I was.

"Please excuse me for not answering sooner, I was saying my prayers." Strangely enough, though she was visibly startled by this vision from the Jewish middle ages, she decided I was a holy man of some sort, and treated me with the utmost consideration ever after.

My tenure at *Factsheet Five* seemed insignificant to me, and probably to Gunderloy, who gave up the undertaking one year later. Yet as it is the occasion of my only mention on Wikipedia, I feel as though I should say something more.

I *had* attempted to introduce certain innovations. I suggested that Mike put an independent publishing centerfold pin-up person (male, female, cat, whatever) in F5, with an eye to a calendar of self-publishing playmates. I also encouraged him to rename his "best of" list, *Publisher's Choice.* I thought the title *Mikey Likes It* (after the child in the famed 1972 advertisement for *Life* cereal). These proposed innovations were tepidly received. I did however persuade Mike to include capsule reviews of the hate literature that people sent in, since noting this made F5 a truer, more valuable historical record.

I gained a certain notoriety for my sharp-tongued reviews—I took Edgar Allan Poe and Pauline Kael as my models. I made poetry, which no one else enjoyed reading, my special area, and found a number of good writers whom I was glad to praise.

But it was a bad match, and Mike was probably relieved to see me depart to finish my thesis. He was a civic-minded anarchist. Cari, the other new hire, was a nice but rather normal young woman. I was as out of place there as a page from *National Lampoon* in *The Whole Earth Catalogue*.

3: Egyptian Wisdom

I wrote my thesis on witchcraft in the ancient world. This took me three years. Since, as usual, I was given no useful direction from my professors, I didn't know that a thesis is usually about 200 pages long. I assumed that my task was to make a thorough investigation of my subject, so I wrote an 800-page document in which I exhaustively considered the entire record of classical witchcraft, from its first mention in Homer around 800 BC, to the Greek Magical Papyri, the latest of which were written around 400 AD. I also made a thorough examination of all mentions of witchcraft in the Hebrew Bible, with which I was by now quite familiar.

The study of witchcraft raises the question of prehistoric goddess worship, since Hekate, the witch goddess *par excellence*, is a goddess from ancient Turkey. There the archaeological record of goddesses, all of whom who are depicted in much the same way Hekate is, extends back as far as the Neolithic (8000 to 3000 BC). The images are mute: writing did not appear in the ancient world till the end of the Neolithic. Around 3,000 BC we first find writing in Egypt and Sumer, along with goddess images of the type that were of interest for my enquiry. If I could examine firsthand these literary records, it would bring me two millennia closer than the earliest Greek writing (Homer in the seventh century BC) to an original context of these goddess images. Egypt was the logical choice, since it was geographically closer to ancient Turkey, and trade contact existed between the two countries. Could ancient Egypt cast light upon goddess worship in ancient Turkey? It was a long-shot, but worth exploring.

Translations are inadequate for really in-depth research, so I learned Ancient Egyptian.

This proved to be artificially difficult, since the grammar remains something of racist battleground. In the nineteenth century, Ancient Egyptian was viewed as a Semitic language—an interpretation which didn't match the grammatical facts. But Egyptian is actually a *Hamito-Semitic* tongue, that is a hybrid of African and Semitic languages. It was, after all, born right on the border between the Middle East and Africa! The real nature of Egyptian verbs was discovered by Hans Polotsky, who taught at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Beginning from Coptic, the only still surviving dialect of Ancient Egyptian, Polotsky worked backwards to recover the original syntax of Egyptian. To this day Polotsky's theories struggle to gain acceptance by the old guard of scholars. The resistance is twofold. To acknowledge the African aspect of Egyptian syntax would make Egyptian more of a "Negro" language—and since Egypt is a great civilization, it can't

really be Black. Further, Polotsky's discoveries struck conservative Egyptologists as "Jewish trouble-making." So to actually learn Egyptian, I had uncover the dissident tradition in Egyptology!

It was a gay, Jewish Egyptologist, James Hoch, up in Canada, who presented Polotsky's findings in clear, accessible form in his *Middle Egyptian Grammar*. Once I found his book, matters proceeded easily, and I was reading tombs within a year. Brown had an Egyptology department, but they didn't care for Hoch's book, so there wasn't much to be learned from them.

It turned out that the nearer feel for the Neolithic which I acquired from Egyptian was irrelevant to the thesis. It did however prove very useful for my study of Hebrew Mythology which is included *The Cauldron of Prophecy.*

Freud advanced a controversial theory regarding just what mysterious knowledge Moses had acquired in the shadow of the pyramids—according to Freud, Moses' religious teaching was ultimately derived from that of the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten. I was able to get to the bottom of this by reading the relevant texts in hieroglyphics, and was able to pronounce in favor of Freud's hypothesis. Egyptologists have always angrily rejected the theory because it makes Christianity and Judaism more historical and less magical. For me, more historical *is* more magical, so I wasn't afraid to face the facts, and I had the language mastery to back it up.

Poetically, Egyptian was significant in a number of ways. I found out how wonderful Egyptian literature actually was, something that could never have been guessed from the translations. Here, as with Chinese, the English renderings were terrible because *the visual element in the pictograms* wasn't taken account of in the translations. Yet it's there, as palpably as the sounds and associations of English words.

Also of interest was the concentrated, overlaid levels of meaning in Egyptian poetry, such as one find in dreams, which cannot be conveyed in a simple word for word translation.

Perhaps most important, Egyptian literature lacks that degree of logic and abstraction we are used to. Not that it shows a "primitive" way of thinking—it's extremely sophisticated and subtle. But it isn't thought of the linear kind we are used to, where words are ordinarily used with one level of meaning at a time.

I immersed myself deeply in the ancient texts, to the point where I still vividly remember Egypt. The all-sufficient radiance of its days, the mystery of the nights that followed them, startling as silence after long noise. And the birds, I remember the birds along the infinite river, forever busy, speaking, fluttering, feeding, birds that flew unceasingly through the riparian atmosphere. It was the homeland of the birds, where even the sun had falcon

wings. The immobility of pyramid and desert and fixed fields was in counterpoint to the everlasting bustle of the birds who still preen in every line of glyphs. Every A is a vulture, the M's are all owls, the W's quail. The names of the animals are often the cries of the creatures (the word for "lion" is *rew*, that for "cat" is *mew*." It is as though nature itself had taught the Egyptians how to speak.

Never was there a land that so loved those they lost. They never accepted death as a final parting. The Egyptians were a people tender beyond all others, in fact sentimental, and not a little given to beer, at ease and sweetly disposed as one can be in a land protected on every side by oceans and deserts

We recover our lost ones only in dreams, or photos, which are the very archetype of transience, but in Egypt the circle was never broken. The afterlife was a magical journey, fully explored and exactly mapped, so no one who went there was fully forfeited or past contacting. With death kept so resolutely in abeyance, life was untroubled. They felt as confident of eternity when they looked out over the Valley of the Kings as you are that your savings were safe when you stand before a bank's granite pillars. Thus was their life, thus were their gods; an easy-going and secure existence enlivened by amusing squabbles, as one imagines the idyllic existence on a Caribbean island in the days before Columbus. My translation of this spell from the Book of the Dead will give a hint:

> An adoration of Ra, falcon lord of both horizons, as he sets in the western one:
>
> May you always be as beautiful as you are now, may your mother Nut each evening take your setting self
> into her arms which are the night sky.
> May your heart be glad as you set foot on Manu (the western mountain).
> The noble dead rejoice as you send the first rays down into the eternal dead-zone of Osiris,
> your power penetrates their graves. The painted coffin-lids slide open. The dead stiffly lift their arms in adoration, greeting your beams.
> They tell you all their problems, because you are the one who shines for *them*;
> the lords of hell are happy as well, your red gleam sweetens even these.

In the sunset west, the land of death, eyes open at your glance, dead faces smile again at the sight of you,
because you listen to their complaints, to all the sorrows of the dead.
You take away their pain, you make things right again.
You'll give them back the breath in their nostrils as they touch the mooring rope
to draw you to that further shore, when you dock on Mt. Manu.
May Ra always be this beautiful when his mother Nut takes him
into her arms which are the night sky.

Crowley claimed initiation in the inner chamber of a pyramid. I learned the language, and made the shades speak to me without an interpreter. His was a Halloween's worth of costume drama; for me, the Egyptians were my own dear people.

But among them I could not dally. I was seeking the truth of Moses and the Prophets. Through Egyptology, I had recovered Moses' original inspiration, the impetus behind the exodus. Through Hebrew and Eliade I had penetrated (as Blake had) the very heart of the prophetic imagination. As soon as the thesis was complete, I would leave for Israel to explore the land itself with the spiritual map I had recovered with ancient languages and modern methodologies.

4: You Can't Study Voodoo

I also considered that my understanding of archaic religion would benefit from some anthropological field-work. There was a large Haitian community in Brooklyn, which wasn't far from my parents' home in New Jersey where I was writing my thesis. Haitian Brooklyn was in many ways a pre-literate Pagan world. I resolved to explore it, to see how this might expand my understanding of archaic religion.

Gaining entry to the world of Voodoo was no easy matter. I had no Haitian friends, and an anthropologist I approached declined to share her contacts with someone who might be a mere curiosity seeker or worse, a journalist looking for a lurid story. I found, however, a drum instructor, a white guy named Steve Deats, who was married to a Haitian woman, and long a member of the Voodoo ensemble *La Troupe Makandal*, which played both "folkloric" events at colleges, and venues like the Museum of Natural History, as well as Voodoo ceremonies in Brooklyn. I started taking lessons in Voodoo drumming from Steve. I spent my days reading and taking notes for the thesis; in the evenings I practiced the complex polyrhythmic Voodoo drum patterns on a conga. It was a marvelous relaxation from my intellectual work.

Steve Deats had no idea of what I was looking for beyond musical instruction, and I did not particularly trouble him with my insights into Voodoo and classical mythology, except for when I was drunk, which had a tendency to make me rather forthcoming. Steve had a day job with UPS or something like that, but lived for his music. His teacher, Frisner Augustin, the leader of La Troupe Makandal, lived in Brooklyn. Frisner was a child drumming prodigy. Born in a slum in Port-au-Prince, he was playing in ceremonies by the age of seven. He began ringing a hoe blade with a long nail, (in America we use a drumstick and a cowbell), making the high metal-tone percussion pattern that is the metronome of a Voodoo ensemble. Then he moved on to the *boula*, the small high-pitched drum that maintains the beat. Next he mastered the *segond*, middlemost drum in size and tone, which weaves complex interlocking rhythms with the *maman*, the big, deep-toned lead drum. Finally he became the lead player, and eventually a *houngan* (Voodoo priest) as well. Frisner was a drumming genius such as arises only once in a generation. He was in demand both for ceremonies and for stage performances aimed at tourists. In 1972, a year into the "Baby Doc" Duvalier dictatorship, he moved to New York City. Not long thereafter, my teacher Steve began to study with him, becoming his *segond* player. Though other

musicians and dancers came and went, Steve, who had classical western musical training, was the reliable, disciplined backbone of the ensemble.

I didn't have all that much to do with Frisner. He was the star, with all the affability, charm and arrogance that goes with that job. He didn't really teach people on my level: he was only interested in musicians who were advanced enough to take his direction without much explaining. To him I was someone in the distance, *l'elève de Steve*, "Steve's student." He was always cordial, but I don't think we ever had a conversation. Steve was a really solid, upright and responsible guy, and a great patient teacher. But he was all musician, and the philosophical aspect of his music didn't greatly engage him, though his practical knowledge of Voodoo and ritual was, of course, encyclopedic. He was a lot of fun and a patient, though probably sometimes baffled, listener to my speculations and observations on the long drives back at dawn, after a ceremony in Brooklyn, to his home up in Spring Valley, New York, where I'd parked my car the evening before.

I learned the rhythms associated with different deities: the sinuous, flowing patterns of the sky gods, the rainbow serpents Damballah and Aida Wedo; the thudding march of the war god Ogun; the mazy ornate songs of the love goddess Erzulie; the rapid clattering beat of Gede, Lord of the Dead. After a few months of study, Steve began to take me with him to ceremonies. Many books have been written about Voodoo. The early twentieth-century one by Maya Deren (a great experimental film-maker who studied anthropology with Franz Boas at Barnard) remains unsurpassed.

The ceremonies I attended took place in overcrowded basements, tropically hot even in the middle of winter. The atmosphere was festive and party-like. There was a natural stratification of the attendees by interest. The ones who were mainly there to socialize stood on the periphery. The involvement of the participants became more earnest and intense as you proceeded to the area around the altar where the three drummers sit and the cowbell player stands, where the emblems of the gods, the *vevers,* are drawn on the floor in flour and the *houngan* or the *mambo* officiates.

After much music and song come the first possessions, always startling no matter how familiar you are with the phenomenon. Those who are taken stagger and pitch precipitously across the abruptly cleared space before the drummers. The lead drum player hammers the beat of the *cassé*, the sudden shift to intenser rhythm, that literally drives the *loa*, the spirit, into the "horse" who embodies it. The initiates remove the shoes from the possessed, for unless the *loa* can touch the bare ground with its feet, it will suffocate.

More momentous than these picturesque details was what I learned about modes of experiencing the sacred. In the voodoo ceremony, the presence of the divine was palpable, incontestable, thrilling, immediate.

There was nothing figurative about the experience. When you see a man become possessed by the Lord of the Dead, see *his face rearrange* into the planes of a static mask, watch him drink *clairin*, raw moonshine rum, that's been steeped in hot peppers, and splash the caustic potion into his face and wide unblinking eyes without discomfort—then you don't doubt.

When I obtained an interview with a great *houngan* and asked him about the rites and the symbolism, that's when I *really* made my discovery. At first he couldn't even understand what I was asking. I was questioning him about the shapes in the *vevers* and the order of the rites, the relation of *loa* who seemed to have similar functions. He was baffled. I then tried expressing my own speculations, hoping he could either confirm or correct my thoughts. He looked at me wearily and said,

"You can *learn* Voodoo, but you can't *study* it." What he meant was that I could learn the words to the traditional songs, the drum patterns, become initiated if I like, I could *absorb* the facts and practice of voodoo. But there wasn't an intellectual content that could be abstracted from it.

But just as the polyrhythms of the drum patterns can be analyzed in modern western musical terms, the content of myth and ritual *can* be understood and expressed abstractly. The actual practitioners may not be able to so do: that doesn't mean it can't be done or isn't worth doing. But the *houngan's* warning revealed something extremely interesting. There was a further level on which he was entirely right. To *study* voodoo was to lose touch with the experience.

Haitian religion, like Haitian language, is a Creole. The polytheisms of many different African countries were melted together there, just like their languages and musical traditions (in fact many of the names of the rhythms still used in Voodoo are those of particular peoples and regions: Mahi, Ibo, Congo, &c.). In the Haitian Creolization of African religions, the specific myths and cosmologies of the West African deities were lost. What survived in Haitian Voodoo was the *personae* of the deities. These characters *are* the mythology, unfolding itself in the interactions between the congregation and the *loa*. The possessed take on the traits and the powers of the gods, and freely mingle with the people—offering advice, rebuking bad behavior, joking and sharing gossip—in a sacred, spontaneous improvisational theater.

You should now have a deeper sense of why the *houngan* said that Voodoo could not be "studied." It was, like the drumming patterns, a tradition of performance, learned by rote and long exposure, with no *consciously articulated* intellectual content. Content it did have, and extremely rich meaning, but it wasn't intellectualized even on the level of myth or story. The "liturgy" of Voodoo is similarly folk-poetry of a very simple, non-narrative kind, as chaotic in structure as children's songs like "Miss Lucy

Had a Steamboat." Not that they are childish or childlike: they are profound and beautiful, but they do not give self-aware, abstract expression to religious concepts.

Thus I came to understand that there was, as it were, a price for the intensity of the Voodoo experience. And it was intense. I'd had profound mystical experiences. I've described a few of them already. Though they revealed Eternity, when I returned from them I realized they had been brief. In a Voodoo ceremony the contact with the divine is no less palpable, *and it goes on for hours.* The Voodoo experience was so rich and strong *because* none of its energy had been drawn off into abstract thought and limiting forms. It had the improvisational quality of jazz or Indian ragas. But note this well: its intuitive, spontaneous character in no way limited the *profundity* of Voodoo.

Every ceremony is a complete exploration of the cosmos, beginning with an invocation of Legba, the "Saint Peter" who opens the gates of heaven. This is followed by the songs in honor of the celestial gods, the rainbow serpents Damballah and Aida Wedo, then music for the deities that rule earthly concerns, like Erzulie the goddess of Love, and Ogun who, though technically the god of war, is more the lord of court-cases, business and politics. Finally the god of the underworld, Gede, Lord of the Dead arrives. But he is neither Satan nor the Grim Reaper, rather, he is comparable to the classical Hades or Pluto, or better still Dionysus. He is the lord of fertility, the underground realm that not only receives the dead but gives the grain from its infinite fertility. Gede manifests to the rapid-fire rhythms of carnival music, and performs obscene dances holding his walking stick like a phallus. Best-loved of all the *loa,* he offers not primarily spiritual or practical advice, but rather rude jokes and social satire. Thus every Voodoo ceremony is a twelve-hour Divine Comedy; every phase has its own drum-patterns, and songs and dance steps in which the entire congregation delightedly participates. In the middle of the ceremony, which typically goes from six in the evening till six the next morning, the altars—long tables covered with bright cloth—become a buffet, and the gods themselves, in the persons of the possessed, serve up plates of savory goat stew and fragrant rice to all present. When you see this done, you understand at once that gods don't need to be begged: they are the fullness of life personified, of their very nature they want to give you good things. I experienced, fully realized in Voodoo, what Eliade calls "strong time"—existence made new, all its potentiality utterly unexhausted.

Before I began going to Voodoo ceremonies, I had thought that we moderns, who had been educated out of the capacity to believe in anything, and were entirely out of touch with the natural world, were spiritually desiccated, stunted runts of the soul. But now I saw that *the intensity of a*

living dream exacts as its price the unconsciousness that is the precondition of dreams. Great, unsurpassable, deep as it was, Voodoo was not the solution to my modern existential problems. Its precondition was an innocence I could not even desire.

We inherit from German romanticism the idea that a thought is the grave of a feeling, that ecstatic and intuitive experience is intrinsically superior. From Voodoo, I learned that it is merely a different aspect of the same reality. The Eternity one may reach through the pages of Blake or Dante is not a lesser experience, only a more abstract one. And, for better or worse, it is the one that is authentically *ours*. I could only go so far into Voodoo, because *no* modern educated person can enter into it with complete authenticity.

There was also a limit to how far I could go with the Voodoo drumming. Though I learned, to some extent, all the parts —cowbell, small, middle and large drum—for the various standard parts of a ceremony, I was only going to advance so far practicing all by myself, playing accompaniment to tapes I made of Steve playing the other parts. I had lessons with him once a week, but after a certain point I needed to be playing with a group, which would have required attaching myself to a "house," a family of initiates observing the rites of voodoo under the direction of a *houngan* or *mambo*. Besides the existential problems of becoming really authentically inauthentic, my own spiritual path was taking me to Israel. Thus ended my apprenticeship in voodoo. I must have attended twenty or thirty ceremonies (which comes to something over two hundred hours of live Voodoo), and learned a great deal about their structure from the musical point of view. I had also learned, on my own, enough Haitian Creole to understand the songs. Brooklyn, every bit as much as Providence, had given me a magnificent education.

As far as the doctoral thesis was concerned, my exploration of Voodoo was of limited relevance. As it turned out, Hekate, who was originally a deity of gateways, transitions and translations, (like Janus or Hermes) was parallel to the Voodoo god Legba in a number of interesting ways. My familiarity with Voodoo in practice enabled me to make this cross-cultural comparison without error.

During the thesis defense one of the examiners asked how I could claim to understand anything of the beliefs of Neolithic people, as evinced by the statues of fertility goddesses. I replied that the very notion of religion being comprised of a set of abstract beliefs did not appear before the appearance of scripture-based religions. This so flummoxed the thesis tribunal that they let the subject drop, and I never got to support my case with my carefully conned quotations in Ancient Egyptian and Haitian Kreyol,

5: The More Women, the More Witchcraft

Encouraged by Penny Novack, I had attended a few Pagan gatherings. They were about the only vacation I could afford as a graduate student. All it took was a tent and a thirty-dollar fee, which was waived if I gave a "workshop"—which was pretty easy to do since I had some knowledge of Voodoo drumming and was writing a doctoral thesis on witchcraft. Thanks to the neo-Pagans, I could have a hippie camp-out holiday within an hour of wherever I was once or twice every month in the warm weather.

The pagans, who were mostly Wiccans of one sort or another, proudly proclaimed themselves heirs of hidden traditions going back to ancient Minos. Their beliefs actually reached no further than the nineteen-sixties. The one who got the ball rolling for Wicca was a retired British civil servant named Gerald Gardner, whose rituals, borrowing freely from Freemasonry, exalted feminine sacrality in a most particular way. Gerald liked having naked women whip his masochistic bum, and this became a high initiatic mystery of the fledgling faith. It is regrettable that in its later development Wicca lost touch with these (to me) intriguing roots. Howsoever, neo-Paganism was one of the directions in which the considerable spiritual energies of the hippies were channeled.

Pagan gatherings rarely delivered what they offered. The rituals required standing in a circle for an hour of bad poetry and inexplicable arm-waving. Real ritual, in societies where it is important, always takes some ordinary, necessary activity, like slaughtering an animal, or dancing, or reading scriptures, and gives it a sacred dimension. Neo-Pagan ritual was unrelated to the activities folks really came for: socializing and shopping at the tables of pagan merchandise. I only knew one person, Rose Meade, of whom I shall have more to say presently, who understood this. She called her sales table Kali Mart, and assured her customers that all purchases conferred an immediate blessing.

But none of this means that neo-Paganism wasn't fun. Since these were essentially hippies, it meant that drug use (for me, drinking) was acceptable, as was a moderate amount of promiscuity. This last was a draw for me now. After the breakup with Frederic I decided I was through with men for a while. It had finally become clear to me that I was bi. In those days bisexuals were regarded like unicorns: one had read about them, but no one had ever actually seen one. But mythical or no, that was what I was. I didn't really so much care what kind of equipment the other person had. I was now basically looking for anyone who was nice, smart, and liked me.

So I was back to dating women, despite my poor track record. I also reflected then that the better success I had had with men wasn't all that impressive. Sure, I could go to a bar and pick up a special someone I never wanted to see again. But to find a person who would really matter to me, that seemed an equally difficult quest with either gender. At least women, if they *did* take an interest, really did so. It wasn't just a cold transaction that ended immediately after sex, or at best concluded the moment either party showed emotional interest.

I now began to really *think* about women. In my undergraduate first attempts to romance them I had attempted to win girls by charm, wit and persistence. The first two traits made me seem entertaining, the last, annoying. Overall, I came on like a Restoration wit: mine was the elegant and acid chatter of an eighteenth-century coffeehouse swell. Which made me seem gay.

I asked advice from friends whom I knew to be card-carrying heterosexuals. They either suggested that I improve my wardrobe or that I simply show more boldness and effrontery. They assuredly had no useful dating advice and I don't think any of them had much understanding of women, or at least none that wasn't just intuitive and never brought to conscious awareness.

I chose witchcraft in antiquity as my thesis topic, in part because I thought if I finally got to the bottom of witchery, I would understand how to talk to girls. In a tractate of the Talmud, wonderfully enough entitled *The Sayings of the Fathers,* there occurs the aphorism. "The more women, the more witchcraft." That seemed like a mandate.

Alas, the western mythology of the witch, which has been developing for nearly three thousand years, actually hasn't much to do with women or even with the way men imagine women. It is rather a mythology of nature. Applying the methodology of Eliade to the material, I discovered that witch in western literature begins her career as a fallen fertility goddess, like Circe in Homer. She is gradually demonized as the Greco-Roman ambivalence towards the material world becomes more acute. Finally, she develops as a folkloric embodiment of the Christian view of nature as demonic. Throughout this development, the classic attributes of the fertility goddess, the moon which rules the cycles of nature, the wild animals and luxuriant vegetation she fosters, the rivers that irrigate the land, and so on, all remain. They are, however, inverted. By the end of her literary development, mother nature is represented as the evil witch, old where once she was eternally young; she draws down the captive unhappy moon which once represented her power over tides and seasons; the wild creatures she fostered are reduced to evil animal familiars; the rivers whose fertilizing flow she once

controlled now flow backwards in terror at her approach. It is a vilification of nature. Here you have in a paragraph, what I demonstrated in the course of a lengthy doctoral thesis, and which may now be found as the chapter "The Rotting Goddess" in my book *Devil Girls of Ancient Rome*. The witch is a mythology of nature, not a mythology of women. If it had been the latter, it would have flowed into the small current of literary gynophobia in Greco-Roman literature, or with the rather more pointed vilification of women in medieval Christendom. On this last point I call as witness Jankyn, the Wife of Bath's fifth husband, who, in his encyclopedic survey of the scholarly case against women, never mentions witches.

The common notion that the folklore of witches has anything to teach us about women is an indication of the superstitious ignorance in which the entire topic of female psychology is still largely submerged. Perhaps there *are* myths that can teach us about women. But these are not they.

Though the study of witchcraft didn't help me cast any love-spells, my foray into the mysterious world of girls was now rather more successful. The main difference was, I was drunk. During my earlier experiment, I was straight-edge sober, and this made me too focused. When I was drunk, I was relaxed, my defenses were down, my speech was simpler, and my inhibitions were lifted to where I could instinctively make a pass when the moment seemed right. In retrospect, the fact I had to lose a lot of IQ for most women to show any interest in me is a bit dispiriting. But at least I learned that I wasn't a complete sexual defective when it came to girls. The down side was, hook-ups that required me to chemically dumb down didn't have much of a future.

But I did have a few adventures silly enough to merit recollection. There was the Pagan girl whose brother was a police officer, who brought me with her to one of the law-enforcement get-togethers to which this family connection gave us access. It was a drinking party in the basement of the Fraternal Order of Eagles or maybe the Veterans of Foreign Wars, one of the charitable social clubs. There we were, seated at our table getting swozzled, and my date leaned close and said, "Do you realize you're probably the only man here who doesn't have a firearm strapped to some part of his body?"

"Wow," I pondered, "does that mean they're going to shoot out the windows when they're drunk enough?"

"No, they did that last year, and they got in *big* trouble," she replied.

Another young lady whom I met in a witches' circle promptly took me home. We were on the couch, most of our clothing had fallen to the floor, and I was about to press my decisive advantage when she crooned "Ooooh, stop!"

Having gone to grad school at Brown in the socially aware eighties, I instantly complied and withdrew to a respectful proximity. The girl looked at me in disgust, and said,

"So he *does*!"

That was quite interesting. I had no idea that the pre-Feminist world of twenty years prior was alive in the blue-collar hinterland twenty miles from Brown. It was as though time had turned into space.

Then there was the woman whom I met in an indirectly pagan way. While writing the doctoral thesis, I had become a bit obsessed with the archetype of the fertility goddess, and had even made a scrapbook filled with favorite images of women from fashion magazines interspersed with female advertising icons: the Land of Lakes Butter girl, the Sun Maid Raisin Girl, the Chiquita Banana lady. I wasn't using this to masturbate with: it was more of a devotional object.

Having carefully contemplated the archetype of the fertility goddess in my homemade "Book of Shadows," I thought I might achieve felicity with a woman involved in the restaurant trade. I placed a personals ad noting my interest in a woman who was a cook, waitress or bartender, mentioning my interest in "Chaucerian good times." Though I met no one in food services, I did get an interesting reply from a woman with an English degree. Our first date found us unintentionally strolling past a boutique that offered fetish clothing and paraphernalia.

"Makes me think of Thoreau," observed my date.

"How so?"

"*Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes*."

This extremely witty young lady was the closest I had come to a match, but her taste for the bottle exceeded even mine, and the sheer alcohol content of the relationship made it too volatile, and potentially explosive, to last.

The most enlightening of my bumbles through the garden of love was one that was never consummated. The girl in question, whom I met at a pagan event, was Jewish, very intelligent and independent of spirit. She was quite attractive, of an age that matched my own, and she enjoyed my conversation. Yet my most assiduous courtship, drunk or sober, was without positive effect. I was for a time dispirited at this failed match. More sensible fellows would have shrugged and been content to blame "chemistry"—an expression which seems to mean "this subject is too hard for me, I'd never pass the exam." I have never let a matter rest on such grounds. I will buy a better textbook, engage a tutor, take the course over if I must. I maintain that unless there is a defect in the question itself, an answer may always be found, one

may advance by better conjectures until the truth is attained. Never was there a chemistry that wasn't susceptible to science.

So it was in this case. Though I couldn't improve my understanding by direct question, I continued to wonder. At length she *did* find a man who was more to her taste. I burned with curiosity to meet this Oedipus who had solved the riddle of my sphinx.

He was, as I opined, a being out of myth, but one unknown to ancient Hellas. He was a *golem*. A golem is full-scale man of clay whom the ancient kabbalists knew how to build and animate by the power of a Hebrew word engraved upon its impressionable brow. The characters traced on the malleable forehead of the Golem channeled living spirit into it. As all poets know, the right word makes all the difference.

Making a manikin is a godlike act, but the golem remains a human creation. Though he lives, and thinks after a fashion, he's barely even an animal. He is a lummox, an oaf, a compliant Frankenstein. Just such an oxlike being was my successful rival. He was so big and stupid I wanted to step on his toes with an eye on my watch's second hand, just so I could measure how long it took the pain to reach his brain. My curiosity was purely scientific: far from feeling bitter, I experienced a calming sense of vindication. There could be no competition here. Even with a mighty backward effort of the mind I couldn't approximate the placid happiness this creature clearly provided. Ruminate I might, but ruminant I wasn't.

There was a further installment to this real-life paranormal romance. In the course of the campout, the Frankenstein boyfriend was struck by lightning—with no ill effect. Strange to relate, the vast majority of persons who thus draw heaven's fire survive. The duration of the lightning's current is three milliseconds, while the shock received at home by an amateur electrician lasts 500 milliseconds. Also, unlike household current, most of the force of lightning passes over rather than through a human (a phenomenon called "flashover"). Finally, direct lightning strikes are extremely rare. Usually the shock comes from a strike nearby that sends a charge through the ground.

So the safe ending of this golem's Ben Franklinstein adventure was no fable—though I couldn't have made up a better one had I tried. I immediately thought of the 1942 B-Movie *The Ghost of Frankenstein*, where, in the opening scene Igor (Bela Lugosi) tries to protect the monster (Lon Chaney, Jr.) from a thunderstorm. The monster, whose two previous feature film appearances have depleted his vitality along with the production budget, actively courts the jagged sky fire, and gets himself a good *zetz*, right in the bolts! The monster towers upright now. His powers are renewed, and

Lugosi crows "Frankenstein was your father, but your mother was the lightning!"

With a solicitude enriched by my childhood love of kitsch horror films, I inquired after the boyfriend's well-being the next morning. The couple had retired to their tent as usual and the night passed without incident.

"Did he seem any different after his, ah, experience?"

"Well," she replied, innocent of how she was fitting the point to the epigram, "he did seem more *animated*."

6: The White Trash Coven

To be fair, the neo-Pagans weren't much worse than the Jews or the Quakers as regards failure to live up to the promise of their scriptures. But there are always a few interesting people at the margin of any group. While many neo-Pagans were essentially fantasy gamers who took it all a bit too seriously, the White Trash Coven was the only crew I encountered that really deserved the name of *Neo-Pagan*. There was actually something *new* in their approach to paganism. I liked them so well that I became the fifth and final member of the group. We took our deities from the living pagan imagination of popular culture. Elvis was the principal deity, and the pantheon admitted advertising mascots like the Michelin Man, Colonel Sanders, Aunt Jemima and the Gerber Baby. There was a certain amount of gleefully superficial borrowing from Hinduism. We shopped for popular religious art in the stores of northern New Jersey's large Hindu community. There was always plenty more room in our pantheon. "Embrace impurity," as Peter Wilson used to say.

Our holy scriptures were the TV Guide, in acknowledgment that the TV screen is for modern people the principal portal onto the world of the imagination—and one which in some ways really does intersect with the spirit world. Rose Meade, our chief, would do weather magic to ensure sunny selling-days at the gatherings by enchanting the satellite-shot cloud whorls the weather channel showed on her enormous TV.

The Wiccans make use of a ceremonial knife in their rituals which they call an *athame*. This is a garbled pseudo-scholarly version of a Latin word which the Wiccans acquired from their founder Gerald Gardner. The Wiccans were very proud to know this "term of art"—but not as proud as we were of improving it into our own astral weapon, the Swiss Army Athame—which was obviously superior on the spiritual plane since it included a corkscrew and a bottle opener.

We authentically "lived off the land"—the highwayed and shopping-malled territory we really inhabited, from which we foraged fried pork rinds and cheap beer—to the dismay of the "real" pagans who bought their organic snacks two aisles over in the same stores. We exulted in being from New Jersey, home of the Toxic Avenger, and fantasized about producing a scratch-and-sniff map with industrial odors indicating its "seven sacred cities." The White Trash Coven was a good joke or a great truth; take your choice if you believe, as we did not, that there is some important difference between the two.

The Genius, or more properly, the Juno, of the group was Rose Meade. Like a low-rent Circe, Rose was surrounded by strange, unhandsome pets.

Madagascar hissing cockroaches. Male rats, whom nature endows with enormous testicles, which she delightedly denominated with the English slang term "goolies." A jowl-faced bulldog that drooled profusely. "Look at him," she would laugh, "he's dropping *ropes*!"

When I first met her, she lived in the house she'd grown up in; when this was lost to cover medical bills, she moved to a trailer eight-feet-wide in which she had a TV screen which covered a fourth of the wall. Here she chain-smoked and conducted business on eBay. She supplemented her SSI check by selling items of apparel and decor online and at Pagan gatherings, in the above-mentioned Kali Mart. She had extremely good, though eccentric, taste and combed the flea markets and garage sales of south Jersey for hallucinatory kitsch.

Rose lived her exuberantly pop culture aesthetic. She horrified her fellow neo-Pagans by her manner of camping out. Neo-Pagans liked "roughing it" —though their sense of nature accommodated ice chests full of canned beer and battery-powered lamps. Rose brought along lawn furniture and a gas-powered generator that enabled her to operate an enormous color TV. A heavy-set woman sprawled on an outdoor lounge chair with a cocktail and a cigarette, watching daytime talk-shows in the bosky grove—Rose succeeded far better than her critics in looking at home in nature. And the entertainment she brought was as unexpectedly complex as Rose herself. Come evening, she'd connect her VCR to the television, and offer a Jodorowsky retrospective or a survey of Hong Kong hopping vampire movies. It was an avant-garde film festival for anyone who cared to join her on the lawn chairs.

The Hong Kong films were particularly interesting, and Rose was the first one I knew to discover them. The movies often featured female ghosts who fell in love with impoverished students of literature, Buddhist monks who rescued towns terrorized by demons, or Taoist magicians who controlled troops of enchanted vampires. The story lines were cribbed from the tales of Pu Songling, the eighteenth-century E. T. A. Hoffman of China, or *The Journey To The West* which is a sort of tenth-century Chinese Buddhist Voyages of Sinbad. This was real Pagan mythology and a serious glimpse into the phantasmagoric depths of the Chinese soul. The staging was similarly startling. They were still using the conventions of the theater, not CGI, to produce the special effects. A phantom coach would appear from the otherworld, its supernatural status indicated by the fog around it bathed in blue light and the chorus of ghost poetry shrilled on the soundtrack while the enchanted vehicle wheeled forward in slow motion, tended by coachmen in costumes centuries out of date.

It was Rose who introduced me to the strip-mall Chinese supermarkets of south Jersey. We were limited to those items we could figure out how to eat, but prominent among these was Mr. Boss brand canned iced coffee. This was strong coffee sweetened with condensed milk which, between the sugar and the caffeine, had powerful hangover restorative properties. Another favorite item was fried pork rinds, for which the Asians have a pronounced taste. Rose showed me that if you go far enough south you can find home-made fried pork rinds for sale in gas stations. These lumps of spicy crisp goodness often contained at their center a delicious dollop of cool rendered pork fat. Nowadays I suppose you would call them "artisanal." Rose would sometimes gift me with such, saying "For your happy tummy needs!"

Rose was the charismatic leader, or "opium den-mother" as she put it, of our "White Trash Coven." Hardly a formal organization. Rather, it was an informal collection of friends who shared an aesthetic. And some substance abuse problems.

Rose had married young to a man named Johnny, who stood beside her through it all, who'd drive her to the Pagan gatherings, and rescue her when she needed it. Rose was not a well woman. She'd had some brain surgery years before and had to be on anti-convulsant barbiturates, which she was given to mixing with liquor. This brought forth a side of her character which we referred to as "Wolverina." Rose sometimes drank till she would just sit in the middle of a street at one a.m. and tell anyone who tried to move her to a safer perch to fuck off. It was important to keep her from reaching that point. We learned to ask bartenders, "Please don't give our mother any more to drink."

The coven included two gay guys, Nick and Clayton, who were good friends to Rose. I never got to know Nick that well, but Clayton was quite interesting. He had grown up Pentecostal in Louisiana, and did some serious hoodoo root work. Clayton shared my disdain for neo-Pagan religiosity. In backwoods Pentecostal churches down south he'd seen people "carry power" for real.

The next piece of this never-fully-assembled jigsaw puzzle was Virginia Sisbarro, a former high school teacher who fell apart while teaching at an inner city school. It was so bad there that the teachers used to run to a bar across the street and see how much they could pound back in a thirty-one-minute lunch hour to insulate themselves against their afternoon classes. Virginia was buying drugs from her students by the time they "retired me for being crazy," as she put it. She'd already been teaching long enough to be vested in the retirement package, so they gave her a watch and most of a pension, and turfed her out. When I met her, she was eking out the pension with SSI and living in a wretched basement apartment in Bloomfield, New

Jersey, which she referred to as "the cellblock." Eventually she moved out to Colorado ("a fuckin' outpost") where, by her account, it snowed continuously. Sometimes she'd end her letters with Shelley's "can spring be far behind?"

Virginia was interestingly literate. She introduced me to *The Stuffed Owl*, an anthology of the worst poetry by eminent hands, from Cowper to Tennyson. In college she had used it as a source of dubious quotes to enliven her essays for English classes. An English major, with graduate credits earned beyond the BA to raise her teacher's salary, Virginia's family was old-school New Jersey Italian, so her conversation was sometimes Tourette's Elizabethan, like "Methinks I be well fucked now." If Gregory Corso had had a dotty aunt, that would have been Virginia.

Virginia was much given to alternative medicine and was on various prescription mood-stabilizing meds "for when my senses become too exquisitely heightened." Her conversation glimmered with unexpected bits of erudition—she described herself snacking while she watched TV from her bed as "I now drag food back to my lair like Grendl."

She drank and was depressed. She wanted my help composing a personal ad. "I suppose I shouldn't list sobbing among my hobbies and interests?" I, too, was really very lonely then, while I wrote my thesis and went from library to voodoo ceremony to Pagan gathering. I wasn't bored, but there was no one who "got" me—except Virginia. Her literary refinement and her good heart made me glad to see her, and patient of her rambling phone calls and sometimes directionless letters. My friend Peggy Biderman, who had moved to San Francisco years before, died of cancer there in 1991, which is about the time that Virginia and I became so close. Only now do I see that Virginia was for me a kind of mother. She had the literary background to appreciate that my writing was really writing, even if she didn't get far reading it. For her I was a brilliant writer, no question. She automatically decided that the faculty at Brown, and later my employers in the public school system, were stupid bastards, while I was the young hero. She was the mother I needed. I stayed in touch with her, by letter and phone, as long as she lived. She had soldiered on for years, as I would in turn, in a public educational system ever more hostile to teachers. If I had had Virginia teaching me English when I was in seventh grade, I might have actually graduated high school.

I would finally meet a woman who really did love me, who got what I was attempting in life, and didn't blame me if my efforts weren't met with success and acclaim. Then I became complete enough to stop seeking the mother my own had never been. Virginia was the last of my godmothers.

7: Green Man Grove

One Saturday afternoon I was poking through *Enchantments*, a neo-Pagan store in the Village on Ninth Street and Avenue A. I went there to look at the books, which sometimes included unusual mythology titles, and peruse the jewelry. I was going through a phase then when I wore as many as seven rings at once, all of them with occult symbols like skulls or stars and goat's heads. It was, as the saying goes, "a look." I liked staring down at my hands and seeing a cosmology in shiny silver.

On the bulletin board of the shop was an advertisement for an event hosted in Jersey City by a Druid group, calling itself Green Man Grove. What drew my attention was the quality of the graphics. The page was decorated with original artwork fusing Celtic knotwork patterns with modern objects. It was the first time I'd ever seen neo-Pagan artwork that was actually good. Usually the best they managed was bad art nouveau. But to see rendering on this level on a mere handbill—ordinarily one was lucky if people even bothered to paste in some clip art—that piqued my interest.

I phoned them up and got the details of their event. It was a kite-flying party to be held in Jersey City's Liberty State Park. Those who showed numbered five including myself, and the leaders of the group, Bryan Perrin and Meryl Gross.

Bryan was an extremely talented artist who had adopted the stylistic vocabulary of the Celts in pursuance of the Druid path. The American Druid group had been founded by Isaac Bonewits, a Catholic from Michigan, who graduated from UC Berkeley in 1970 with a "BA in Magic" as he liked to call it. This was actually a self-created interdisciplinary major, involving courses in psychology, anthropology, mythology and the like. Isaac represented this as "a degree in magic from an accredited university" and alerted the media regarding his accomplishment. He was covered in *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine in an "amusing kook" sidebar, to Berkeley's embarrassment and Isaac's delight. Isaac's next move was to join Anton LaVey's Church of Satan—"to meet girls," he explained years later. LaVey was a cocktail lounge organist who reinvented himself as a "priest of Satan" in the sixties when the hippies' interest in occultism made the papers eager for lurid features on this topic. LaVey was a great showman-charlatan, inventing an appropriately colorful past for himself—he claimed to have worked with caged tigers in carnivals while a boy, and grown up to be a crime scene photographer for the LAPD. With a head shaved "in the tradition of medieval executioners," and a "demonic" moustache and pointy goatee, he had a face that sold papers.

Isaac assuredly learned from a master, though what he learned might be hard to put into words. This phase of his life can be glimpsed on YouTube in the 1970 B shockumentary *Satanis*, in which he assists LaVey in rituals characterized by low-key Catholic blasphemy and mild nudity. Isaac is there in the ritual scenes, with his thin beardless face and horn-rimmed glasses, looking like a teenage Woody Allen. In a scene where the communicants crave boons of Satan, through the ministry of LaVey in a horned Halloween costume, Isaac asks the Prince of Darkness to grant him virility, in liturgical language so far superior to anything else in the film he clearly must have scripted it himself. You can see Isaac smiling, struggling manfully not to crack up. Unlike the rest of Anton's coven, Isaac was in on the joke.

In 1983, after just over a decade trying to make a living as an occultist, writing books, speaking at neo-Pagan events, and attempting to market his religious beliefs as a theology for the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, he founded the Druid fellowship ADF. The letters stand for *Ar nDraiocht Fein*, which must mean something in Irish.

Not that all this undignified shuffling in any way derogates from Bonewits' work. Founding a faith is always a sketchy business, and all the originators of whom we have a detailed record, from Mohammad to Joseph Smith, evince similar opportunism and flexibility. What Bonewits came up with was a generalized reconstruction of Indo-European belief and ritual, to which he gave a particularly Celtic coloring. Since Wicca drew from its English roots a fascination with things Celtic, Bonewits had chosen a plausible means of engaging American neo-Pagans, offering them something seriously rooted in the history they claimed.

Bryan was an extremely talented draughtsman, and had a positive genius for scrap modeling and constructing puppets. He brought a great deal of artistic firepower to ADF. Regrettably, he felt that his Celtic authenticity was greatly enhanced by drinking. He would rapidly become incoherent, which was a pity, because he could be rather entertaining.

For me the principal interest of the group was his wife, Meryl Gross, who had her own skewed view of the whole operation. Her interest in the Celtic imagination extended no further than James Joyce, whose work she knew quite well. But she found a way of interacting positively with the new Druid tradition: she added a hint of the ridiculous. Since the Druids, like the rest of the Pagans, were given to Masonic-style mummery, she added this bit of hand-jive to the ritual:, she taught her group, at the rite's conclusion, to make the "OK" sign with thumb and index finger, while intoning religiously "Okey-dokey, all done."

She also developed her own side-chapel to the religious structure, though since the Druids referred to their groups as "groves," perhaps I

should call it a little thicket of wit. This was the Betty Crocker Cult, of which she declared herself the "Grand High Ladle," appropriating unto herself, as her sacred domain, the kitchen "with all its wondrous utensils, appliances and storage capacities." She was accompanied on this stovewards *hejira* by all the ladies (thereafter Ladles) of the Green Man Grove, because, as she explained, "I hate to eat alone."

Meryl's teachings included the Transmigration of Tupperware (which is how yours ends up in someone else's kitchen). There were subordinate deities, such as Little Debbie, Goddess of cellophane-wrapped snack foods, and Mrs. Paul, Queen of the Frozen Seas, and Aunt Jemima, keeper of the Holy Syrup. Meryl's occultism was a veritable Midnight in the Pantry of Good and Evil.

She justified these innovations by invoking the role of the Fool or Sacred Clown in the rituals of many archaic societies. Bonewits gave her his blessing. Whether he was sincerely impressed by her reasoning, I cannot say. But Meryl's anarchic humor was a valuable asset, while opposition would make have made Isaac the hapless whetstone of her wit.

Meryl was brilliant. She was dressed in sixties retro fashion, her hair was piled high and sprayed into place, she wore cat's-eye sunglasses and chain-smoked. She was the most fabulous woman I had ever met. I attended the events at her grove as often as I could, and I would sit beside her on her couch doing my Oscar Wilde thing. I was in love with her.

8: Naropa

While I was in graduate school I remained close friends with Allen, visited, spoke to him and wrote to him on an ongoing basis. I would show him my poetry, he would offer criticisms and improvements. We would catch up on each other's events. It became at last a deep calm friendship. In 1986 I finally went out to Naropa.

Allen had always wanted me there at what I irreverently referred to as "dakini beach." I hadn't taken him up on it, because it sounded like a Buddhist summer internment camp. I wasn't interested in being schooled in poetry by Allen's inferiors, and I had easy access to him in New York. Also, I had no romantic notions of what America's flyover states were like. Queens seemed more interesting than Colorado.

Allen's guru, Chogyam Trungpa, had founded Naropa in 1974, as the first Buddhist college in America. Trungpa immediately had Allen create its poetry program, the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, which enrolled students the following year. A primary purpose of the poetics program was fundraising. The faculty, headed by the Beat triumvirate of Ginsberg, Burroughs and Corso, with guest lecturers frequently drawn from the ranks of second-tier rock-and-roll celebrity, impressed potential donors and gave the school priceless publicity. Allen had a free rein in the running of the poetics program, and made the education depend more on the unstructured association of students and faculty than on formal coursework. Though Naropa as a whole was organized as a serious (and soon to be accredited) college, the creative writing program was run like a 1960's free school, and that's a very legitimate way to teach the unteachable: how to be a poet.

In 1986 I was in the Classics graduate program at an Ivy League school, so I felt I could go out there with something of my own to offer, not just as Allen's minion. I gave an organized class in Greek poetry. It was quite a flop. I taught a serious course, in a relaxed manner, but it was still serious and a course. Naropa was about putting on a show and (even more important) being sociable afterwards. I was very annoyed at the time, but what did I expect?

It was a poetry school run by beatniks! What Sheridan might have called "The School for Sandal." A half-baked Hardy Boys (or perhaps "hardly boys") Adventure. Working titles might have been: "The Mystery of How They Got Students," "Footprints Under the Medicine Cabinet," "The Case of the Missing Syllabus."

To be fair, the Jack Kerouac School was, academically, not notably worse than any other liberal arts college in America with a reputation as a party school. The scheme of the school was, at worst, overly idealistic. Allen expected that under the Crazy-Wisdom guidance of his whisky-drinking Guru Trungpa, and with the genius insights of himself, Burroughs and Corso, wonderful things would come of Naropa. That in an atmosphere of spontaneity and low-key chaos real creativity might flourish—creativity of a kind that was resolutely stamped on at "real" schools like Brown.

The Kerouac School was a brief utopian experiment which was folded into Naropa's English department after Allen died. I had failed to appreciate the *poetry* of Allen's fanciful undertaking. I was a beatnik among the classicists, and a classicist among the Beats. My timing was never more off.

X The Last Crusade

1: The Canaanites

It all came down to poetry. As a teenager, I had tried to make poetry the ordering principle of my existence. Following Rimbaud's example, I got myself into a lot of drunken trouble, which I snapped out of with the help of AA. Then I cleared my intellectual decks with a good dose of Nietzschean modernism. This worldview intoxicated me by its austerity and truth, for which I found echoes in the Bhagavad Gita.

Under the influence of Peter Wilson, I saw the mystical interpretation of scripture provided a paradigm for integrating life and poetry, of suffusing lived existence with the marvelous. Using Eliade's archetypalism as a guide, I explored Greek, Roman, Hebrew and Egyptian literature, then Voodoo, to come up with a new and mythological view of the modern world.

This depended on the use of symbols. Symbols from ancient scriptures, and new-forged modern ones, like Williams' red wheelbarrow or the ones that give the titles to Ibsen's plays. I didn't much bother Allen with all this. I'd never convince anyone I was on the right track with theorizing. I had to show the poetic results!

Israel was, I felt, the only place I could do this. For years I had been mastering the image vocabulary of Hebrew civilization, from the Torah to the Kabbalah, not to mention a detour into the Egypt known to Moses. I'd refined this with a great deal of cross-cultural comparison, which made it possible to see what about the Hebrew mythic imagination was really unique. Now that I had the intellectual tools, Israel was the place to apply them.

In the nineteen-forties there had been a literary movement in Israel that attempted to create a secular Hebrew culture based on the literature of ancient Canaan. Canaanite is a northwest Semitic language, as closely related to Hebrew as Spanish is to Italian. Canaanite language and literature underlay Hebrew literature and religion as Roman paganism did the imagery and liturgy of the Church. The declared objective of Israel's Canaanite movement was to revive Hebrew paganism—on the level of literature and art.

The members of this group, all European-born Jews, took on this exotic project because they thought it could replace the religious, Yiddish-speaking culture of the diaspora with a new, secular, but magical Hebrew culture The Polish-born Israeli poet, Uriel Shelach, who adopted the jazzy pen-name Yonatan Ratosh ("Johnny Smash") was the most significant figure of the

movement. He wrote in an impressionistic, evocative style, often deliberately surreal, blasphemously mixing Biblical allusions and references to Canaanite deities. It is modernist poetry such as we find in Pound's *Cantos;* hints, echoes and suggestions often supply the place of clear meaning, which makes it extremely difficult to translate.

Ratosh advocated a pan-Semitic culture. He thought the broad heritage of the ancient levant, from the Epic of Gilgamesh on, offered real opportunities for cross-cultural understanding in a post-religious Middle-East. As an interesting sidelight, Ratosh also had a large influence on the development of Israeli science fiction, translating into Hebrew Kendell Foster Crossen's 1952 anthology *Adventures in Tomorrow*, introducing for the first time writers like Ray Bradbury and Theodore Sturgeon to an Israeli readership.

One member of the Canaanite group was still alive: Aharon Amir. Best known as a translator of literature from French and English into Hebrew, he was a prolific poet and a true believer in the Canaanite project. As soon as my thesis was accepted and I took my doctorate, I went to Israel to find Amir.

Amir's address was in the Tel Aviv phone book. He replied at once to my letter and met me at a Jerusalem cafe. He was an elegant fellow with a neatly trimmed mustache and short gray hair. He looked like a British officer from a World War II movie. I had already begun writing the eighteen poems of what eventually became my *Bible Land Blues* cycle—probably the finest poetry I ever wrote. I gave Amir copies of the three I had completed. Their strategically detailed descriptions of Israeli streets and landscape were not unworthy of someone who'd learned poetry from Allen Ginsberg. I had studied the Bible in Hebrew for years, and I knew how to weave Biblical allusions and phrasing into my lines with a skill Ratosh himself could not have bettered. The theme of every poem was the deities of ancient Canaan surfacing in a modern world that became translucent at their approach. I was thirty-six years old, my artistry was mature though still informed with the energy of youth.

I told him of my literary plans, of my ambition to translate Ratosh into English. I only spoke to him in Hebrew for the whole time I was there: broken weird Hebrew, but Hebrew nonetheless. I was showing my determination to put the diaspora behind me and make myself anew in our recovered land. In this I was an image of what he and Ratosh had been thirty years before. Amir and I were brothers. He was my friend and ally in every way possible during my Israeli adventure. He got me translating work, we dined together any number of times—he never let me pay. He translated some of my Canaanite poems into Hebrew, and they got printed in the

literary supplement of an important Tel Aviv paper—one that had never accepted his own poems, he noted wryly.

This is one of the first poems Aharon repatriated for me to the language of Isaiah:

Gehenna

Gehenna is the Hell of Jewish legend: the name comes from the Hebrew for "Valley of the sons of Hinnom" — a small ravine to the southeast of the Old City of Jerusalem, now a park.

Friends of my parents visited, took me out
to a French restaurant, *Mishkanot Sha'ananim,*
expensively overlooking the Valley of Hinnom
where the Canaanites burned babes for Moloch
and the Hebrew kingdom buried its wealthier dead.

When, if not our heavens, at least our earth
was "rolled up like a scroll", became the Torah's
portable world, Gehenna flamed for sinners.

Nowadays the Hebrew Hell's
a public garden, and in its midst
the Cinemathèque remains infernally open
even on Shabbat, to offer Jerusalem
visions of the world of the dead:

movie stars of fifty years ago
appear as in life, flattened on the screen
as though pressing their faces
eagerly against the windows of this world.

Tranquil,
several hundred meters above the green
and pleasant hell, myself something less than
a hundred shekels above destitution, I
stare out at Judah's bare hills, clear skies
filled with my unsaleable visions.

2: Idol Merchant

For the first year I was in Israel, I took any work I could find while I improved my Hebrew. I got off the plane speaking the language of the Bible, which was picturesque and entertaining, but impractical. I made the usual amusing lexical errors, one of which was so sustained that it is worth rescuing from oblivion. I was at an Israeli family's table, and the father asked me how my Hebrew learning was progressing. I replied that I was still having difficulty at times with the similarly written letters Z and G. *Yesh li bayot im g'malim v'zaynot.*

Trying to make plurals of the words for the letters Z and G, I had said that I was having problems with camels and prostitutes.

The children at the table held napkins over their mouths to muffle back their laughter. I thought they were amused by what a dunce I was, a grown man who couldn't manage the alphabet. Defensively I glared at them and said, as I thought, "Z is a hard letter." *HaZayin kasheh.* The children ran from the table and howled with laughter in the next room. I had explained my problems with the camels and prostitutes by asserting "My penis is being difficult."

My long-term plan was to get a job at an Israeli university and pursue my cultural projects from the privileged position of an academic chair. The academic job market in America was already terrible. I thought perhaps an Ivy League doctorate would weigh in my favor in Israel.

So I worked as a dishwasher, a bartender, a translator (from Hebrew into English) and as an idol merchant. I had made rather a study of Neolithic goddess figures for my thesis, and I eagerly viewed the local ones in Israeli museums. These *asherot* (images of the goddess *Asherah,*) are relatively simple, so I got some clay, found a kiln to fire my productions, and presently I was in business, selling my creations through Israeli museum stores. I called my one-man workshop *Beyt Terach,* "The House of Terach," after Abraham's father, Terach, who, according to legend, was an idol merchant. Abraham is said to have smashed his father's stock of idols, and when he had to answer for his vandalism he pointed to a large surviving idol in whose arms he'd laid a hammer, saying, "It was that big one that smashed all the others."

"Abraham," said his father, "you know idols can't do anything."

"Exactly my point," answered young Abraham, the precocious monotheist.

I was, of course, of Terach's party, and proudly adopted as my company motto "The Standard of Quality in Vulgar Superstition." I even attempted to

interest the pistol-packing West Bank settlers in buying my idols for target practice. A costly indulgence to be sure, yet it offered the opportunity to root out idolatry—a *mitzvah* difficult to fulfill in the modern world. But today's taste for righteousness has no feeling for history, and I sold none of my clay creations to the cowboy Zionists of the West Bank.

My one great success was when A&E's *Mysteries of the Bible* series came to film an episode on Abraham. They wanted to buy forty idols to dramatically smash. I was rolling out clay torsos and notching crotches day and night to fill this rush order. Presently, the whole cargo of archaeological Barbies, individually bubble-wrapped, was on its way to the land of the free. I imagined my fortune made. When the camera panned over Terach's shelves laden with my goddess models, that would be advertising of a kind you couldn't buy!

But it turned out that the camera crew all loved my statues and grabbed them up as souvenirs. They only used a closeup of a single statue crumbling under the hammer, in slow motion, repeated as needed. A blurry, lackluster display that did nothing for sales.

At this time I came to know an Armenian souvenir merchant named Sarkis, whom I approached to carry my idols in his shop. He looked them over and said sadly,

"Yakov, you are an artist. The tourist does not appreciate art. Look, this is the best selling item in my shop." He held up a t-shirt emblazoned with a cartoon camel drinking a mug of beer, under which was written the word "Jerusalem."

"A tourist is so dumb that if the name of the city is not written on the shirt, he cannot remember where he was. Yakov," he said, in words that remain etched forever in my memory as the wisest commercial advice I have ever been vouchsafed, "the more is stupid, the more it sells."

Elvis also came up in my talks with the sage Armenian. For a time I modified my beard into long sideburns. This produced a mild sensation among the various merchants, Jewish and Arab, with whom I had daily dealings. From the newspaper vendor to the baker, they all demanded, "What happened to your beard?" Having a limited fashion vocabulary at the time, I attempted a cultural reference. Pointing to my side-whiskers, I said but one word, "Elvis."

The response, from Israeli and Arab alike, was unanimous: "Ah, Elvis! The king!"

Sarkis himself was rather an Elvis fan. I once visited him in his shop and found him looking wondrously sad. I asked him the cause and he picked up a cassette.

"The radio show would not play my band's cover of Elvis songs. They say I sound too Armenian."

Sarkis had a traditional Armenian band which played weddings and the like; now I discovered his soul had been touched by rock and roll. Anxious to comfort my good advisor, I told him, "Sarkis, I'm sure you play Elvis songs better than Elvis could ever have played traditional Armenian music."

"You know, you're right!" said Sarkis, brightening up at once. The Chelmer Rebbe still had his chops.

I visited the classics departments at Haifa and Hebrew University, circulated my resume and was duly lunched. After a hardscrabble year in Jerusalem, I was finally engaged as an adjunct lecturer at Haifa University and given two courses to teach in Hebrew, one in Greek Tragedy, the other a survey of World Religions. So I headed north to continue peddling idolatry, on a somewhat more sophisticated level.

My wages, a pittance, were paid by the Ministry of Immigration for my first year as an adjunct lecturer. Thereafter, I was told, if I did well, I could be considered for a full-time hire. For the class in history of religion I showed slides of Eskimo carvings and explained the animal mythology of hunter-gatherers, noting the continued use of animals in modern military insignia. I took it all the way up to the modern mythologies of reason and light symbolism. For the Greek tragedy course I lectured with the Greek text in one hand and the Hebrew translation in the other, discussing the translation of key Greek terms and their Biblical equivalents, where such existed. That one semester was the only time in my life I was permitted to teach the subject for which I'd spent a decade training.

3: *Lama Bata*

Israel is an extremely difficult society to integrate yourself into. It is, I was told by a fellow who had been born in Japan to American parents, moved to Israel as a teenager, and finally became a psychologist (how's that for a range of perspectives!)—that it is harder for a foreigner to be accepted by the Israelis than by the Japanese, who have rather a reputation for looking down on outsiders.

"How is that possible?" people always ask. "They're a society of immigrants!" And there's your answer. It is precisely *because* they are a society of second-generation immigrants that native-born Israelis are hostile to the very immigrants whose "homecoming" the State of Israel publicly courts.

There's a natural tendency for immigrants to arrive and then stay sequestered among those of their own ethnic and linguistic groups. I had no difficulty finding friends among the anglophones. I also had some entrée to the Francophones and German-speakers. I could make myself understood in those languages, which immediately conferred upon me a limited human status. The Russians almost liked me, since my name to them was *Rabinovich*, but without the language, this recognition never warmed into friendship.

Most immigrants who arrive after college age never really assimilate. They master only as much Hebrew as is necessary to conduct the essential business of life. As one elderly Russian woman explained to me, in Yiddish, which I could then stumble through with my German, "I have three teeth left in my head: I'm not going to break them on Hebrew."

The children of these immigrants, speaking Hebrew as their first language, are mercilessly teased out of any accent they got from their parents, and take an embarrassed, "Papa please, we're Americans now!" attitude towards old-worldliness in general, and this carries over into a certain coolness towards immigrants.

You could say that the problem demonstrates the sheer success of the Zionist venture. The Israelis really *are* a people, with their own identity. And *real* countries are not always generous about the arrival in numbers of needy immigrants. The shared religion, which is such a bond in the diaspora, has no special meaning to the average Israeli.

Add to this the experience of mandatory military service from eighteen to twenty-one. Like high school in America, that's a socialization that gives indispensable tools for functioning in the society. It's not that Israelis disliked me for not having served in the army; but by not having served in the army, I

could never come to understand many unspoken rules of Israeli social interaction.

Thus we find the really awful rudeness and coldness the Israelis show towards immigrants at every turn. I had gone there specifically to become a part of their society, to learn to speak the language idiomatically, to write my poetry in Hebrew. After two years my Hebrew remained clunky, literary, and full of mistakes, because I had no friends who were native speakers—with the exception of Aharon Amir (who moved there from Lithuania in 1933, when he was ten.) Native-born Israelis wouldn't even lease an apartment to me. When I went to teach in Haifa I looked for days before I finally found a Russian family who'd rent me a room.

And the rudeness. At the Haifa University cafeteria the student who served behind the counter would throw the food on a plate and shove it towards you more abruptly than you'd dare to with a dog. When I looked shocked, she gestured with both palms up, and demanded, "What?"

More interesting than the ceaseless affronts, which made it an ordeal to so much as buy a newspaper, was my attempt to express my unhappiness. I didn't know any bad words in Hebrew. After all, I'd only read literature in it. The best I could muster for hot-tempered repartee were lines from Shakespeare in Hebrew translation But I got little mileage out of grimly muttering *mashehu rakuv b'eretz Deynemark!* ("something is rotten in the state of Denmark.")

My muteness proved most painful at the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, where I spent days waiting in line to find out I was waiting on the wrong one. Finally I got to the right window. The clerk told me, in words that identified him indelibly and forever in my memory as a warder of Kafka's Castle:

"I am not here to help you. My colleague is here to help you. My colleague is not here."

I implored my various Israeli acquaintances to teach me some strong language. They all insisted that such words did not exist in Hebrew. I determined to find them on my own. I would get a porno novel, from that I'd gather such nasty anatomical language as would do credit to an angry Manhattan cabbie! But where could I find porno in the holy city of Jerusalem? I finally learned that there was *one store*, in a basement below the central bus station, where one could buy such things. (In Israel, the extreme religious right has a few swing votes in the Knesset, which they deploy for anyone who will guarantee them legislation on the few matters that concern them, among which are keeping pork out of Israeli supermarkets and porn out of bookstores.)

I threaded the damp concrete tunnel below the bus station to the adult store. Alas, all they had were video-tapes! I asked the proprietor if he didn't have anything *printed*, nothing else would do. He looked at me with considerable curiosity. I was a pervert of a kind he hadn't yet encountered.

By chance I found in a second-hand bookstore in Haifa, a city noted for its political progressivism as Jerusalem is for its piety, a box of smutty paperbacks in Hebrew. I bought three at random and hastened home to bring my dictionary to bear upon these treasures. Sure enough, these tomes were as full of goodies as a Christmas fruitcake. Then, some fifteen pages in, I came across a phrase that gave me pause. Matters had reached a crescendo, indicated by a long line of *alephs:* aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! This terminated in the phrase *Yeshu kadosh!* ("Holy Jesus!") I flipped back to the copyright page. The book had been translated from English!

With some misgivings, I memorized the best of the terms I had learned. A few days later I favored a rude clerk in a travel agency with an utterance too impolite to more than suggest here. I told him he was behaving like a foolish, sexually active, and undignified part of the human anatomy. My expletives could not have produced greater hilarity had I used the euphemisms above. The man looked at me and said *Oleh hadash?* ("Just off the boat, eh?")

The curse words of any society are effective, not for what they actually say, but for how they relate to the country's taboos. America is very sexually repressed, so anything relating to the genital region sets off the alarm. Jews have always been rather matter-of-fact about sex. An entire tractate of the Talmud is dedicated to such matters as menstruation and seminal emissions, and these are studied without emotion by religious youth like any other high-school textbook. Sex is regarded as a normal part of life, like eating, and is a matter of serious interest only insofar as it affects ritual observances.

The tale of my lexical misadventures persuaded an Israeli acquaintance to explain to me the one really bad phrase Israel possesses: *Lech l'Azazel*. "Go to the demon Azazel." Azazel is mentioned in Leviticus 16 as the desert demon to whom the goat charged with the sins of the people (the scapegoat) is released as part of the ancient New Year's ritual. One cannot withhold one's admiration; when the Jews want to curse, they really *curse*!

There was another obstacle to my making Israeli friends. Israel is in many ways a traditional Middle-Eastern society. It's not open in the way America is. America is accepting of outsiders *on principle*. It doesn't always live up to this, but far more often than not an American will hire you for a job or rent you an apartment regardless of your race, faith or nation. Like any society, America expects a certain degree of conformity, but if you're willing to try

and fit in a bit, America will generally welcome you. If you don't think that's true, you haven't lived abroad.

In Israel, as throughout the Middle East, you absolutely *have to* have family. Extended family connections are what get you a job, find you a good apartment, fix you up with a girl. If you don't have an "in," what they call in Israel *protectsia*, you have less chance than a manuscript on the slush pile. If I had married an Israeli woman, that would have solved a lot of my problems.

There's one other option: religion. If you join an orthodox synagogue, that's a powerful mutual aid society. But I couldn't manage that even as a temporary measure. I was there to write pagan poetry. Rabbinic Judaism had no more charm for me. I did try attending the synagogues of Yemenite and Moroccan Jews, who are in many ways still living in the twelfth century. It was an experience unlike anything I had in America. This was Judaism as a living religion! The quality of fervor, the certainty of the belief, made the liturgy meaningful. These people charged the room with palpable holiness. But, as with Voodoo ceremonies, I could admire it, but I would always be an outsider and an anthropologist. I wasn't ready to blow my brains out with the revolver of faith, and that, alas, was the price of admission for a man from the modern world. If could have done so, I would probably teaching now at Bar Ilan, the religious university in the south of Israel.

We think of Israel as a modern country, which in many way it is. But the whole Middle East is a very different world that runs on rules that you won't find in any guidebook.

I had come there inspired by a kind of Zionism that really hadn't existed since the nineteen-thirties: literary, theoretical, idealistic. When I met Israelis, the first thing they asked me was *Lama bata?* ("Why did you come?") I heard this phrase so often as I began conversations I almost thought Lama Bata was my name. Israelis couldn't imagine what terrible thing I had done that forced me to leave America, with its secular culture and standard of living to which all Israelis passionately aspire. When I told them I had come to help build the nation and create a national literature, they usually replied *kol ha-kavod* ("you deserve all the glory"), which actually means something like the American Southern "bless your heart!" An accurate translation of the phrase's content would be something like "You poor fool, I don't see much hope for you."

Some less-intelligent Israelis actually got angry with me for coming, and told me that I didn't deserve to be an American—that they, the Israelis, were the real Americans! And here they had a point. In the two years I lived there I saw an expansion of highways and shopping malls that made the landscape look ever more like New Jersey.

In the final months I was there I drank more and more heavily. I would teach in the morning, come back and spend the afternoon revising my

doctoral thesis into essays a Belgian classics journal was printing. Come five o'clock I'd sit on the tiny second-floor balcony of the building I lived in and drink a bottle of arak while I watched teenagers in the small park across the square below. The girls were all dressed like prostitutes, with heavy makeup and short skirts; the boys wore wide belts and sunglasses, like greasers from the sixties. The girls were on one side of the park, showing each other the new purchases in their shopping bags, and the boys stood on the other side of the park, preening and pretending not to notice the girls. They would steal glimpses at each other and eventually there'd be some low-key social interaction. I watched this nightly cock and hen ballet as the shadows lengthened and I drank myself insensible.

I sold most of my books, left my linen and housewares with the Russian family I rented the room from, and anything of importance I couldn't fit in a suitcase I mailed to America. I had one final meeting with Aharon Amir. I told him that I'd reached the end of this road. I thanked him for all he'd done—and he had done much, till the very end.

I told Amir that the loneliness and the drinking were literally killing me. That conversation was the first time since we met that I spoke to him in English. The man with the most refined literary sensibility in the entire state of Israel, Aharon understood from the shift in language that I was, beyond all argument, out of the game. We stood out on the street in front of the cafe where we had our final meeting and shook hands. He showed no emotion beyond the additional firmness in his handshake. He turned and strode off. He went his way, and I went mine.

4: Earth and Sky

My most intimate relationship in Israel was with the weather, I don't really think travel for pleasure is worthwhile unless you're there long enough to hike across the country and see the seasons change. And particularly for Israel, where the interest is Biblical, my two years there were well spent.

There the dead season is not winter, but summer. Then an awful dusty dry heat sweeps up from the Arabian desert dries and bleaches the land under the oppressive sunlight of the longest days. In Autumn, cooling storms roll in across the Mediterranean. From the coast, you espy the thunderheads approaching. We are used to seeing storms overhead; looking out to sea, you see them advancing head-on, like a herd of dark spirits charged with lightning, roaring with wind. Winter is colder and wetter than you'd ever imagine for the Middle East; the stone steps of Jerusalem sometimes cascade like fountains from the downpour. It seems to rain day after day all winter long. Then in spring the land comes abruptly to amazing tropical life, the valleys color up with wildflowers sudden as a spray of fireworks, and you understand why Passover, not January, is considered the true beginning of the year. From these long alternations of heat and rain you come to understand the cycles of Canaanite myth, which sees the year as an endless struggle between the Baal, the God of storms from the north, and Mot, the god of death and dryness whose home is in the desert to the south. The sky imagery, from the thunderous ire of Jehovah to the apocalyptic vision of Jesus returning in clouds of glory, all this is taken directly from how Canaanite legend envisioned the storm god Baal. I had analyzed the literary mythscape of the Bible. Living there for two years, I saw it for myself, writ large as the landscape and wide as the sky.

Northern Israel is a rich agricultural region, more like a tropical land than what one pictures for the Middle East. Palm trees, enormous flowers, green hills and farmland rich with citrus, all its growth golden and oversized under the warm fostering sun. Such lushness favored the idolatries of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel against which Elijah raged.

The prophets tended to come from Judah, the desert lands in the south. If they weren't born there that's where they retreated, like Jesus, who left Nazareth in the north to take his forty days in the southern desert, or John the Baptist and the Dead Sea Scroll community in Judaea's badlands. They found in those monochrome, sun-smit sable expanses the image of their sand-bare rock-hard monotheism.

The physical traces of ancient Israel's walls are now no more than outlines on the ground, and even the fortresses of the crusaders are worn away like a

child's sand castle forgotten on the beach. The past only remains, fully and forcibly, in the land and in the sky. There, in geological time, the ages pass too slowly for the eye of man to note, and the "then" of a three thousand years ago has never morphed into a visibly different "now."

In those two years I learned how the landscape and the seasons colored the Hebrew prophetic imagination. *The Cauldron of Prophecy* could never have been completed without my two years in Israel. And there I wrote *Bible Land Blues*, a poetic account of my attempt to live a post-modern Zionist dream. Though I wish it were not so sad, it is my finest book of poetry.

5: Irish Soma

During the final months of my two year stay in Israel, I got an invitation from Peter Wilson to join him in Ireland for some for some sort of mystical event. Peter had rediscovered the Irish element in his ancestry a few years before, and had begun visiting that island to research what eventually became his book, *Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma*. This audacious feat of scholarship was inspired by the writings of R. Gordon Wasson, and investment banker turned CIA agent turned psychedelic evangelist.

Peter drank deep from Wasson's pot of cream of mushroom soup. He hypothesized that the Indo-European ancestors of most of the European peoples had all made ritual use of psychedelics, and that traces of this practice can be deciphered from Irish folklore as well. This became his book *Irish Soma*. Whatever the historical value of his speculations, Peter was hosting a psychedelic Beltane party in Ireland, and I took a week's leave from Haifa University to attend.

Peter had a patron in Ireland, Gordon Campbell, who ran a blue jeans store and fancied himself a patron of the arts. At this time, Peter was at the height of his micro-celebrity from TAZ and as such he was the beneficiary of Gordon's hospitality. He stayed at Gordon's Dublin home, and Gordon drove him around the country to visit the great megalithic sites, New Grange and so on.

The Irish have an ancient and complex tradition of hospitality. For them it isn't just a matter of being kind to strangers. On a deep ancestral level, hospitality is a show of power. The number and quality of one's guests establishes one's status. This knowledge is essential to understanding, for example, the 1981 hunger strike by Irish Republicans in English prisons under Margaret Thatcher, during which one striker, Bobby Sands, who eventually starved to death, was elected to parliament. I remember how baffled people were in America by the notion that the British government could be fought by starving oneself. If you bear in mind the role of hospitality in Irish culture, the refusal to eat at someone's table, a refusal unto death, was the most spectacular insult that could be humanly offered. Thus the popular power of Sands' act.

So Campbell was manifesting a very archaic cultural pattern by assembling a court of artists and writers around himself through his hospitality. They struck me as posers. Painters and poets with half an idea and a lot of self-presentation. But things were terrible for me in Israel. I'd put two years into getting fluent in Hebrew and auditioning for a kind of

teaching job that no longer existed, drinking myself to sleep every night as I lay in bed staring at the cracks in the ceiling. A psychedelic holiday among the Irish megaliths seemed a plan that had some merit.

The mushrooms were tiny, native, brown and fresh. I'd never seen psychedelics like this. Twenty years earlier, when I'd been a high-school acid-head, it was always speed-laced tablets, and occasionally pure acid on tiny squares of film which we called "windowpane." This was an experience of a far superior kind. Though I'd taken a seriously large dose, the onset was gentle, as was the come-down, and the trip itself as pleasurable as it was intense. It had a stimulating effect, I was up all night. Mostly I sat looking at the river Boyne in County Meath, not far from the Neolithic tombs. I watched Boann, the goddess of the river, gliding and striding forever down the stream, her form woven of shadow and mist and reed, the foaming waters of the river forming the glittering hem of her skirt. She seemed to be wearing the robes of a Catholic nun, which made sense, since hers was a seriously Christianized land. I recognized in her the fully worked out symbolism of the Fertility Goddess, and the vision was accompanied by the alterations of time and space proper to a genuine spiritual vision. It was like the acid trips of my teenage years, but at last I understood the deeper meaning of the experience. The drugged-out adolescent had become a historian of religions: the baffling phantasmagoria had become my native landscape. I was vastly gratified to return to the visions of my youth, able to understand them.

So profound was this experience that for some time I no longer felt the need to drink. I had a new calm and detachment. I remember Allen once told me "Acid teaches you not to cling to anything, not even to acid itself." This change of heart lasted a few weeks. More than that it could not do, for a drug vision is not entirely legitimate. You *do* see into the spirit world, but it's a stolen glimpse. The laws of "outside, over there" are strict. You aren't allowed to keep what you haven't earned. I translate Dante in the tenth canto of *Paradiso,*

The royal court of heaven, from which I've just returned,
has many a heart-fascinating gem,
beautiful jewels
such as no traveler can carry back.
Their radiance fades in human hands.
That which is realest in the other world
loses all luster when retold here,
turns to tinsel in our fingers.

What you acquire thus is a *mood* rather than a *state*. But nonetheless, it bought me time enough to dry out.

During this visit I was a frequent guest at Gordon's table, and set the room in a roar with humorous accounts of my misadventures in Israel. These performances, together with Peter's recommendation, made Gordon suggest I come to work for him. He planned to open an avant-garde bookstore and offered me the job of running it. Being a writer, having a doctorate in classics, and the experience of being a *Factsheet Five* coeditor, I seemed like a likely candidate.

I returned to Israel, finished the semester at Haifa, then went back to America to figure out and order up the contents of Gordon's bookstore. This was the late nineties, and the large chains, Barnes and Noble, Borders and so on, found it worth their while to have a section of outsidery books on the themes that had been hot in the zine scene a decade earlier. Weird sex, weird politics, weird religion, drugs and a few offbeat literary authors like Kafka and Burroughs, Bukowski and P. K. Dick, that's what was wanted. We figured we could actually undersell any competition since we would buy the books in America and ship them directly to Ireland. Other Irish bookstores got their English language content via England, which meant paying English duties. But Ireland didn't tax the importation of books, so if England were cut out of the trade route, we'd make money while charging lower prices. It was a good plan.

My immediate job was to research the bookstores exploiting this market in America, see what they carried, how they displayed it, how they advertised it, and so on. After the orders were set, I'd leave for Ireland to help put together the retail space. I wasn't paid anything for my work. The deal I was offered was a share in the business. That seemed more promising than a salary up front, especially because there was the possibility of moving permanently to Ireland. Gordon had already arranged my Irish working papers for December.

While I was back in America taking care of this business, my first visit was to Green Man Grove to renew my acquaintance with Bryan and Meryl. As it turned out, a member of the Grove who lived just down the block from Meryl and Bryan in Jersey City, a girl named Meg, was recently divorced. Meg was a sweet Irish-American girl and a musician. We liked each other, and soon we were a couple. It was August when I returned, and I'd be off for Ireland in December. Though we weren't ideally compatible—our tastes and interests diverged on a number of important particulars—we were well enough matched for a four-month affair. I told her from the beginning that this put a real limit on how serious things could get. Of course she didn't believe me.

Apart from sundry very short-term follies, I'd been alone since I broke up with Frederic five years before. Now I was forty. The women my age were often as not divorcing the unsuitable men they'd married right out of college. Suddenly my timing was right. And, I suppose, I finally looked plausible. I had a Ph.D., I'd spent two years in the Middle East, and now I was on my way to Ireland to run a bookstore. I was in my prime, unmarried, employed and unencumbered; I presented perhaps even a romantic prospect.

And Meg meant a great deal to me, not so much because of who she was as because of what she was. A charming, talented, warm-hearted girl, with a world of merit all on her own, she was also my first emotionally real relationship in a lustrum, and the first woman in my whole life who'd ever been good to me after the way of a woman with a man. It was only when I finally got on the plane for Ireland that my sense of loss showed how much she'd meant to me.

While I was romancing Meg, Meryl broke up with Bryan. He had been drunk and abusive for a decade, and finally she'd had enough. He threatened, as he often did, to leave her, and this time she said, "So go." He did, and she had the locks changed.

Then I became the object of Meryl's active interest. Here was an unenjoyable but not unflattering complication! I wasn't going to be false to Meg, nor did I want to become involved with Meryl while the momentum of her advances were perhaps best attributed to her breakup. I'd been the rebound guy before—and one time I wasn't even full-on rebound guy, but rather the birdie in a fighting couple's game of emotional badminton. I wanted Meryl to get her divorce and cool down for a few months, and for my own affair with Meg to be well ended, before we proceeded to indecencies, or anything else.

But I couldn't stay away from her. Her conversation was delicious, wicked and witty. I had loved her for years—though so hopelessly I scarcely gave it a thought. It was a disembodied passion. And now, with the prerogative of the disembodied, it haunted me.

The closest I ever came to succumbing to her charms was one morning, after I'd spent the night with Meg. I was in my car, parked on Mercer Street in Jersey City, equidistant between the two women's apartments, putting my affairs in order before I drove back to my parents' home in Fair Lawn. Meryl knocked on the car window, she wanted to talk. She appealed to a streak of sensuality in me that I had hardly been aware of, but which had an electric effect. I succumbed to her, or as far as I could in a car on a public street. Privacy, privacy! Where could we go? I didn't want to go to her apartment, close as it was, since there I'd have no control of myself or her or anything. Yet I didn't want this thrilling interval to end. If only we could fog up the car

windows enough to create a private space! Wide-mouthed, we breathed out our passion, against the glass of windshield and window, in a vain attempt to blur away the curious world with the pastel gray condensation of our love-sighs. Thwarted lovers, gasping like a pair of dying koi.

But that Woody Allen-like episode was the exception. I showed in general a far greater mastery of my emotions, and with Meryl I confined myself to gentlemanly expressions of my tender regard. Her breakup with Bryan was something she had planned for years, and she was well rid of him, but still it was a painful time for her, and I wished to do what I could to distract and comfort her. I promised we would be united once my present commitment to Meg had reached its term, and she had finalized her divorce and regained some emotional equilibrium. My union with Meryl was too important to be jeopardized by ill-considered haste.

Meryl became the New York agent for the bookstore. I charged her with overseeing the assembling of the purchases at the warehouse prior to shipping. This would take place at Autonomedia, Peter Wilson's publisher in Brooklyn, which had several floors of a building, thus combining necessary space with experience in shipping print. But the Autonomedia "collective" as they called themselves, a jovial crew, were stoners, and I needed a responsible hand at the helm.

Meanwhile I shared Meg's apartment several nights a week, and we had a proper boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. I had come back to America in August of 1995. I saw Meg first at a ritual of the Green Man Grove. Jerry Garcia had died on August ninth, and as part of the ritual she played her guitar in his memory and sang a poignant cover of the song "Uncle John's Band." Her performance of it touched me.

I loved hearing her play and went to many of her shows at clubs around New York City. I cooked meals at her house, we watched movies on her couch—she was very fond of screwball comedies from the thirties. It was a surprisingly normal relationship, and for the first time in my life I had a girlfriend. More than any of the men I had been with, she let me love her. And although I was not able to gratify her wishes for a lifelong commitment, I was, for those for months, entirely hers. I wrote an elegy on the relationship, *Leaving Meg,* which is not precisely a love poem, though it is that too. It's more an expression of gratitude.

Leaving Meg

Now speed takes on the feel of altitude:
a night-black road beneath a road-black sky:
white broken lines in endless vertebrae
slip underneath the car that seems to fly
across an x-ray of the daylight world.

Lit windows of the dark apartment blocks,
as thick as stars and no less infinitely
distant — yet far more unknowable —
these lights that mark unvisited warm worlds.

A car is passing. I am in that car
that leaves behind who I have been to you —
which was? Don't think, our thoughts are now too fast,
too sharp and sparky — accusations and
excuses circling the atom fact
electronlike: of all the elements
the most unstable one is human love.

But let's be kind now. We can be no less
since we have learned that we can be no more.
You truly loved a man who puzzled you,
who loved you for that love, and who remains
abashed before it even as he leaves.

My figure mirrored in the airport glass,
transparent shade, beyond it planes and sky,
my weeping ghost, since I have passed from you,
looks back with strong, defiant frightened eyes.

6: Dublin

I wish I had been able to stay in Ireland for more than half a year. The people were delightful, hospitable, friendly and helpful to a degree that was flatly amazing. Yet along with this they have a non-malignant, unconscious racism that's a bit hard to take. I'd be in a pub chatting with the fellow sitting next to me at the bar. In friendly welcome to the country he'd buy me a round, and when the tall black-and-white cylinder of Guinness stood before me, he'd say "There y'go, Shylock, good health to you!" If I'd been Black, he would no doubt have said "There y'go, Sambo!" They seem to think that if anyone should be so eccentric as to be born anything other than Irish, they must expect and accept some good-natured teasing.

The food was excellent, so long as you ordered nothing but breakfast. The plate would invariably contain your eggs, excellent french fries and two sausages; one white and one black. Both of these were made mostly with suet and oatmeal, but the dark lozenge of pork is made with blood, and is nice enough if you can get over the fact it tastes rather like a scab. The bacon was more like a small ham-steak, nothing like the fried-out fat we call bacon in America. The whole plate was invariably garnished with a sad little tomato, which had been fried down to a dismal wizened round of redness. This substantial and frankly delicious plate, available at any hour, was always accompanied by mugs of good strong tea.

Beyond this, the Irish culinary imagination does not appear to extend. Though there are marvelous individual items, such as the amazing wild-caught smoked salmon and the unparalleled butter from cows that ruminate the emerald grass of the isle, food does not appear to greatly interest the Irish. With one exception. The potato is there held in such extraordinary esteem, that at any drug or convenience store, where an American shop would display rack after rack of candies, the Irish offer a vast variety of bagged potato chips.

Alcohol is the aliment that inspires the Irish genius, and the beer and whiskey there are second to none. Alcoholism is also an accepted part of life, which meant I fit in rather well. A great many people lived exactly as I had done for years now, alternating periods of indulgence with stints "on the wagon." Not only was my thirst for ardent spirits unnoticed, my periods of abstinence, when I'd sit in the pub with a coffee, if anything won me greater "street cred." You'd have to be a great drinker indeed to need to dry out!

Ireland brought out the best in me poetically. I had time on my hands, and poetry requires much leisure. I find that inspiration of this order requires, as a rule, a kind of prolonged reverie, which is not easily achieved

during a half-hour's lunch break. Also, the Irish bring out the verbal best in everyone. They have, to a person, so keen an appreciation of language that I found myself speaking more beautifully than I would ever have dared in America. I remember overhearing one ordinary fellow complain that the slice of ham in the sandwich he'd bought was "thin as an autumn leaf." Poetry is a national trait there. Another time, I was in a bar and drunkenly decided to favor my acquaintances with a stanza of song. I was amazed to see the immediate rapt attention of all. A bardic performance, even so trifling a one as my tipsy rendition of "Miss Lucy Had a Steamboat," struck a chord of ancestral reverence for the chanted word. The only time I have seen a comparable immediate psychic snapping to attention was when I quoted a classic of traditional literature, in Chinese, to a Chinese friend.

I set to work learning Irish with a most particular plan. It is stipulated in the laws of the Irish Republic that any accused person may require that their case be tried in the language proper to the isle—a clear response to the centuries of English oppression. Now I was a New York Jew about to open a bookstore that would sell a certain amount of literary erotica. I was already preparing for the perhaps inevitable obscenity trial. Making my case before the court and the public entirely in the Irish language might prove a splendid and sympathetic *coup-de-théâtre.* I didn't get all that far with Irish, for my stay there was abbreviated, but I rather wish I had. The ancient literature of Ireland is vast and rich, and I would have happily devoted a decade to translating those magnificent legends into English.

This bit of a poem from the period gives a glimpse of my days in Ireland,

> Cold, wet and dark, the Georgian Dublin streets
> this evening; sweet, sad the hawker's cry
> of "*Eve*-ning Herald," golden-warm
> the light from restaurants
> wherein the fortunate are feasting,
> silver-cold the rain that falls
> on anarchists and poets, frayed-cuff men
> who've only got a fistful of ideas
> to make the world's entire amends to them.

Dublin is a beautiful city. The Irish are delightful people. It would have been a splendid adventure, and I'd have gladly spent the rest of my days in Ireland, but my pretext for being there evaporated. Gordon Campbell underwent financial reverses which made the bookstore irrelevant as anything but a tax write-off. It opened only so it could close.

But before I was discarded, there had been a few interesting developments on my side. I had been in constant communication with Meryl, professionally, as she was the New York agent (also unpaid) of the book company. Once I said farewell to Meg and got on the plane, my bond to her, loving but unrealistic, given how dear a girl she was and how different we were, had reached its clearly anticipated term. Then began an epistolary romance with Meryl, which extended even to our faxes, which I improved with passionate prose I rendered discreet with mirror-writing script, a skill I'd developed in graduate school so as to be able to write poetry during dull seminars without my neighbors being able to spy upon my muse.

Finally, I could stand it no more. I phoned her late one night, exalted from whiskey but far more so from love. "You must come out here!"

She put her job at risk by coming out on a plane forthwith, making a sudden use of accumulated vacation days without full and due notice. She wore beneath her clothes amazing lingerie so that when she got out of the cab from the airport she would be in full fabulosity. There's love! A seven-hour plane-ride without a cigarette, cruelly corseted! In the room on Raglan Road began a passion that has in no way abated in the last quarter century. At the age of forty, the rain at last fell on my desert, turning it to a tropical garden of unearthly delights, which yet sends forth sudden orchids of exotic pleasure. My life became a medieval bestiary of desires such as only the hot sun hatches, in the midst of which creatures Meryl reigns forever, Circe and more than Circe.

Meryl came out to Ireland twice. It was on her first visit that we took a train across the center of the land to the cliffs of Moher in County Clare, and there I proposed to her. The western coast of Ireland is spectacularly beautiful, the Atlantic ocean raging against the rocks far below as you walk the green summits of the natural parapet with which Ireland outfaces the windy sea. A setting from *Wuthering Heights*, or *Dark Shadows*, depending on your cultural references, but in either case a grand opening scene for what would prove to be an epic paranormal romance.

There was a certain amount of other supernatural action to be had in Ireland, of a far less pleasant sort. The fairies, or "good folk," as the Irish call them with cautious euphemism, are a very real presence in rural Ireland, and I had two unpleasant encounters with them. The first was in County Kildare at Trinity Well, the source of the Boyne River, when I came for the psychedelic Beltane. I walked up to Trinity Well to make an offering to the Goddess Boann. By chance I had with me a half-shekel coin, a large copper with the image of an ancient harp, which is like a Semitic mirror image of the Irish penny which bears a Celtic harp. The two coins match up exactly in size, and when I first saw it, I took it as a kind of omen that my Israel

adventure was *meant* to morph into an Irish excursion. I cast the two coins into the well as an offering to the goddess. It is an ancient Celtic belief that wells and fountains are points of entry into the Otherworld. I made a wish that my Irish journey should be a lucky one.

As I turned and walked from the well I was fairy-blasted. I suddenly had a mild tingling numbness on my whole left side that lasted a week. It felt a bit like the "pins and needles" you get when you put pressure on a nerve by resting with a limb in a strange position, and which fades when you straighten out. It didn't impede movement, but it was certainly palpable. I think the cause was cussedness on the part of the fairies, who don't like to be troubled at all. The very earnestness of my devotion may have struck them as importunate. In any event, I was rebuffed with the same shortness that one shows to someone who wakes you from a nap by knocking on the door to sell unwanted services.

My other supernatural mishap occurred while visiting someone with a castle on his property—not so rare a thing, considering that there are estimated to be thirty thousand castles in Ireland. The term castle is there applied to any stone fortification, be it no more than a small lone tower. Between the Irish clan chiefs and the Anglo-Norman invaders, a lot of stones were stacked in the course of Ireland's history.

This particular property also had a fairy fort, that is to say, the stone foundations for a long-vanished circular wooden structure, built in the pre-Christian times. In folklore, these rings of stone were regarded as imbued with Druid magic, as the homes of fairies. It was a moonlit night, and I decided to visit the fort, bearing offerings for the fairies; a few small cakes and an airplane bottle of whiskey. The ring was a large one, and hollowed out in the center, so it presented the appearance of a large crater. Bushes, weeds and brambles grew in it. I made my way to the center of the fort, left my gifts with a prayer and departed. Or tried to. For nearly an hour I wandered in that circle, not much larger than a two-car driveway, unable to find the edge, slipping on leaves and mud, catching myself in brambles, till finally, exhausted and well scratched, I made my escape. I ran back to the house and closed the door behind me. Everyone else was long abed. I had felt the presence of something baleful following me. Now it was on the other side of the door! I didn't know what it was, but I knew it was big and malignant and angry. I said the most efficacious prayers I could think of in Hebrew, without effect. The sense of dread became even more intense. Then it occurred to me to gibber what a terrified Irish peasant of centuries past would have said: the Our Father in Latin.

Pater noster qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum . . .

This at last was effective, and the thing beyond the door withdrew, satisfied with the quality of my abject terror.

Supernatural experiences of this kind tend to be found in places where the natural landscape is relatively undisturbed. Although mystical and religious experience are obtainable anywhere, elemental spirits (which is what I assume Irish fairies are), like ghosts—attach themselves to undisturbed locales.

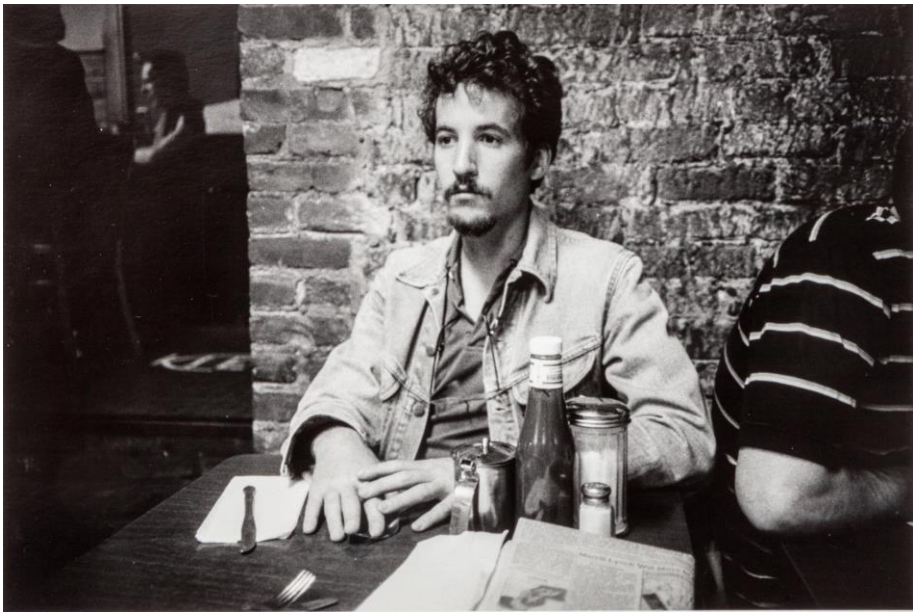
In their behavior, they are much like animals. Regardless of our romantic notions about them, they seem to have no interest in, and as little significance for us, as other woodland creatures. And, like animals, they can be dangerous, or at least frightening, if disturbed. The swamp entity Brett Rutherford had conjured from its repose in Edinboro Pennsylvania was probably a being of this order. If encounters with them have any value, it is to show that there is indeed something more to existence than the minimum that can be measured with a yardstick five senses long.

But the greatest magic I found in Ireland was my love for Meryl, which wove itself into the Irish folklore and landscape in which I was steeped. I hope I may be excused for quoting so much of my poetry in this part of the memoir. There seems no other way of doing justice to the beauty of that most hallowed and gracious time.

> Like two small boats moored side by side along
> a dock, that see-saw slightly, gently bonk
> as one wave underneath them both impels:
>
> our bodies, length by length in bed, breathe in
> and out, each belly, subtly bellows-like,
> falls, rises, with one shared upholding life.
>
> Our fingers interlace, and hard to tell
> whose hand is whose. We warm and press against
> the drunken warmth of one another's flesh,
>
> aligning, overlaying, synchronized,
> heart-beat, quick breath, one flutter, one sharp cry—
>
> like Angus and Etain, both turned to bird,
> a pair of freed swans circling upwards, linked
> from foot to foot by one long golden chain.

Meryl was ready to leave her job and move to Ireland to help me run the bookstore. She had come out for her second visit to scout things before she packed up and left New York for good. She'd already begun selling off her furniture and non-transportables, and had come with a few possessions she meant to leave with me, the initial anchors of her coming to port.

Then it all fell through and I returned to New York with her.



Allen's photo of me at the Kiev Restaurant, NYC 1984

XI: Badger Girl

1: Jersey City Again

I returned with Meryl to America and moved into her apartment. I had planned to rescue her from Jersey City, her day job as a sales rep for a publisher, and the dreary aftermath of her divorce, by spiriting her away for a grand European adventure. She was to have helped me run the bookstore and presided over a salon in Dublin. Now I was camped out in her apartment, sending useless resumés out for college teaching work that didn't exist, and doing all kinds of preposterous jobs. Jen Hunter, a girl I knew from my neo-Pagan days, had a job working for Dian Hanson's fetish porno magazines *Leg Show* and *Tight*. I had a go at writing porn for a living, thinking I'd follow in the footsteps of Anaïs Nin. I was startled to learn that I, who had grown up reading the Marquis de Sade, did not have a sufficiently filthy mind. The one piece I wrote had to be rewritten four times, until plot, character and scene had been essentially excised and all that remained was the cartoon-like bumping of uglies.

In retrospect, I might have surmised what sort of a pitch my prose was expected to soar at. Jen wrote an advice column for *Leg Show*, and conducted epistolary romances with a number of the readers on the following model: they would send her money, and she would mail them back her worn panties. She had a drawer full of fresh ones so she could pop her slept-in intimates into an envelope as soon as she got to work.

The double debacle of Israel and Ireland pained me sorely, and alcohol was the anaesthetic I applied. All this put rather a strain on my relationship with Meryl, who for her part had a full personal portion of parallel misery. Her decade with the abusive ex-husband was an abyss of regret, and though she left bravely unmentioned her disappointment at ending up back in Jersey City, it was as hard for her as it was for me. We began to have fights, long awful fights, punctuated by strange, astounding sex. I remember remarking to a friend at the time, "Ours will rank as a storybook romance—if we don't kill each other first."

It was now that I first came to *know* Meryl, and she me. A time rich in revelations. In the neo-Pagan community she had adopted the pen-name "Badger Girl."

"But why badger?" the innocent would sometimes ask. Because," she was quick to explained, "I am vicious, short-tempered and low to the ground."

"Why girl? Don't you mean *woman*?"

"No, I mean girl. In the sense of tomato, hussy, and broad." Meryl delighted in making a certain kind of Feminist sputter.

Meryl's phone number was one digit different from that of the cable company. She got many calls from inattentive dialers, complaining about the service. After a while she started telling the callers to "please hold," and then she'd go off to the kitchen and make a sandwich. If they were still waiting when she got back, she'd say, "I've reviewed our records and it seems we have decided not to give you the complete service."

"Why? Why don't we get the complete service."

"Because you don't deserve it."

"Why don't we deserve it?"

"I can only tell you what is stated in our records Thank you for being a subscriber." Click. Then Meryl would bask in the satisfaction of knowing this performance would be the subject of a further, furious call to the actual company.

The Jersey City street apartment was ground-floor level, and included a backyard in which Bryan had created a Druid grove, consisting of a fairy-fort-like circular embankment planted round with a variety of trees. Embedded in the earthen elevation were old fish tanks and interesting industrial debris. This planted, junk-begemmed, craterlike earthwork, the ritual space of Green Man Grove, looked like the sacred shrine of a crack-brained cult in a postapocalyptic B movie. Magnificent in its way, but Meryl wanted to be rid of this now-funereal monument to her marriage. Green Man Grove was to be Green Man Grave; I cleared the trees and made an even plot of it, with flowered borders, leaving the one tree she considered hers, a twisted hazel.

Disposing of the hacked-up saplings in the midst of Jersey City proved something of a conundrum. The garbage men weren't keen on this sort of debris, and it would have been a lot of work to reduce it all to kindling and sneak it out in the trash. I decided to make a bonfire of it in the backyard. The smoke alarmed the neighbors, who phoned up the fire department. Suddenly firemen in full fighting gear were trooping through the apartment to the scene of our paltry conflagration.

"You with the axes," said Meryl, "where were you when the wood needed cutting?" This so entertained the firemen that they let us off without a ticket.

In those early days of the relationship I was still discovering Meryl's tastes. She was a game girl, uncomplaining to the point of stoicism, and at times it

took some divining on my part to dowse out her dislikes. I was very fond of hiking, and took her off to the woods a number of times, even went camping with her. Although she enjoyed seeing a bear, or a hawk in flight, the actual tramping didn't really seem to agree with her. She is a city girl, and shopping is more her style. Give her a mall with deep discounts, and she'd march eight indoor miles eagerly. Once I discovered this, we made our tracks among the racks, and I became a practiced and happy shopper with lot of sharp clothes. But first I had to discover how matters stood. One day as I saw her unhappily perspiring from our woodland exertions, I asked her what her idea of an ideal hike would be.

"Well," she said, "pretty much flat, no bugs, not hot or humid, and lots of interesting things to look at."

"Sort of like a shopping mall, you mean?"

"Yes, like that. I don't really like, you know, *outside*."

2: Allen's Death

I never lost touch with Allen. He was always my best friend. I saw him as often as I was near Manhattan. He would tell me of his travels and poetic discoveries, and I would narrate my fiascos and show him whatever I was working on. The older he got, the sweeter he became. But also, he got to be more candid about his displeasure, in the way that is not only permissible but droll for the elderly. I remember hearing someone ask him about Maya Angelou being invited to read a poem on Clinton's inauguration in 1993. It was an impertinent question, since this sort of high-level recognition was never accorded Allen, whose lifetime of writing deserved it more than any American poet of the twentieth century.

"Well," said Allen, "I listened to her poem, and there was a good turn of phrase here, and a well-chosen word there, but overall it was just so . . . so . . . "

Here he paused and ransacked his word hoard, considering its vast contents with a more practiced ear than any man living possessed, choosing just the right word —

"—just so *stupid*."

On another occasion I was dining with Allen at a Polish restaurant around the corner from his apartment. Some poetical topic was being discussed and I was bringing to bear the intellectual heavy guns. Finally Allen said, "You're like that woman, that professor woman with all the opinions, oh, what is her name? They keep interviewing her."

"Camille Paglia?"

"That's the one. You're just like her. Really irritating."

My own moment supreme among these last conversations came one evening at a restaurant around the corner from his apartment. It was Allen, a few his assistants and secretaries, and I. All of us had known Bill and Gregory and Allen for many years. One of them did a Gregory Corso impression, then another followed. They did classic Gregory, the New York accented Shakespearean goombah with Tourette's. Then we started in on Burroughs, with his Missouri drawl that would occasionally rise like a slide-whistle into effeminate high-tea Anglicism. Then someone said, "Hey, do Allen!"

No one could. And it wasn't because Allen sat there at the head of the table. His sense of humor and his down-to-earthness never deserted him. He would have laughed harder than anyone if he'd been successfully parodied. Then someone said, "It can't be done."

"No," I said, "it can be done, but it won't be easy. And do you know why?"

I paused to be sure they, and especially Allen, heard every word. "Unlike Bill and Gregory, Allen doesn't always have to be "in character," he never developed an imitable mask. Because Allen isn't afraid of other people."

Since I was floundering for employment, Allen threw me some work editing and typing his lecture notes from poetry courses he had given at Naropa. This was the occasion of our last real talk about art. Allen had become very interested over the years in the Greek names for the various metrical feet: iamb, trochee, dactyl, anapest and so forth. I pointed out to Allen that this was an unduly complicated way of describing poetic meter. I explained to him the system Edgar Allan Poe presented in his essay *The Rationale of Verse*. Here all the different rhythms are explained as variations on a small number of essential ones. It's a far simpler method of analyzing meters, and just as effective as the Greek one, which treats every possible variation as a unique case with a unique name.

Allen wouldn't believe me. I challenged him to give me a poem I couldn't quickly describe the scansion of. He gave me one by Ben Jonson. It was a song from a play, which had been set to music, so it didn't seem to have a regular rhythm or stanzas. It wasn't in typical "common meter" such as are used for most songs. (The existence of "common meter is why you can sing *The House of the Rising Sun* to the tune of *Amazing Grace*.) It was a very irregular composition, which today we would call an "art song." Nonetheless, Poe's method worked perfectly here, though the metrical pattern didn't repeat itself and so become recognizable till halfway through the poem. Once it did, it was easy to show my mapping of the meter was correct: it fit exactly.

Allen still didn't like the system I proposed. I explained that it was far easier than learning more than twenty Greek names and what patterns they stood for. Wasn't the object to teach students, as efficiently as possible, how to use meter? Finally, in desperation, and frankly, in annoyance, I made an argument "from authority." Was Allen really going to claim he understood meter better than Edgar Allan Poe? Give the man his due, he might not fit a modernist's notion of an important poet, but in the matter of metrics he had not his fellow!

Then Allen told me that what he was interested in discovering, using the cumbersome Greek terms, was not really a method of writing metered verse, *but rather a way of appreciating the ever-varying, never regular music of ordinary speech.* I was stunned by the sheer beauty of his conception.

Just as Allen studied the natural progressions of ordinary thought, "the inherent shapeliness of the mind," as he called it, he wanted to be able to

trace the intuitive musicality of language. The Greek terminology wasn't for Allen so much a way of studying prosody as a means to put the unconscious rhythm of speech on a pedestal, to call attention to the orderliness of its disorder. Poe's system was for regular cadences. Allen wanted the complexity of the Greek terms because they could describe the generally *irregular* music of spontaneous utterance.

Allen's wish to make a science of the unique, to map the chaotic, wasn't just a bit of impossible dreaming, like wanting to put a cloud in a birdcage and keep it as a pet. It went back to the most profound instinct of the Jewish soul. The yearning to see the eternal in the temporary, the holy in the physical, the transitory, even the ugly and embarrassing, which had led to his correct use of the word *kaddish* as the title of his powerful but unlovely poem. This was the instinct that made the authors of the Bible include Moses' stutter and David's adulteries—the Romans didn't write like that about Romulus or Augustus, it would never have occurred to them to. In Jewish culture, realism *is* idealism.

Allen's belief that ordinary mind and ordinary speech contained the holiness that is poetry—that's in the oldest and noblest Hebrew tradition. In that, as in more obvious ways, Allen spoke with the resonating truth of a prophet, a voice that echoed back to Moses.

I believe with Freud this goes back beyond Moses to Akhenaten. You can see the ancient insight in the realistic precision of Allen's imagery. Akhenaten told his artists to take the Nile-side reeds as models. He instructed them to decorate his tomb walls, not with the traditional, stiff symbolic representations of plants, but the wind-swept stalks as they actually looked, bent at random by the breeze, askew and alive! Likewise he had himself and his family represented, not as stiff statues, but naturally as in candid photographs, laughing, kissing nibbling their dinner. For Akhenaten, the actual was one with the eternal. Allen's realism, in spoken prosody as in description, is the same idea.

Allen, who was not overly interested in Judaism, by the power of his genius and the honesty of his heart, reached back three thousand years to rediscover, with poet's intuition and prophetic common-sense, the same existential wisdom Moses had learned in the shadow of the pyramids. Material reality is the visible face of God.

That was the last teaching Allen gave me. Our final conversation was by phone. When he got the diagnosis of liver cancer, fatal within the month, he phoned up every personal friend in his Rolodex to say goodbye. When he told me he was dying, I let out an involuntary, inarticulate cry, like an animal in pain.

He told me that in life he had always been fortunate in his teachers, including me.

History affords few examples of people who faced death with such courage, or who lived their lives with such tender regard for others. The Buddhist funeral was held in Manhattan. It was quite the social event, a parade of the scene royalty of art, music and literature. Then came the memorial concert at Saint John the Divine, up near Columbia University. I remember Philip Glass played very beautifully and affectingly. Many, many people had poetic or musical tributes to offer. As for me, it was a year before I had organized all I felt into this poem.

Elegy for Allen Ginsberg
(April, 1997)

Now the Twentieth Century's his — none begrudge him the final three years.
All that Williams or Pound ever planned — he achieved and proved right and made clear,

bringing poetry back from the dead, made anew from the bare primal stuff,
thought's *materia prima*, where being is one with perception, the rough

elegance of spontaneous mind, rythym'd idioms out of plain talk,
as unfussily, artlessly art as the shape of a Zen-garden rock.

This is known. I am only a witness — no judge. I recall and repeat
certain incident details of time: things he said, clothes he proudly bought cheap

from the Salvation Army; the items he clipped from the paper and saved
so's to show how the government lied; Mount Blanc pen, and the full-scribbled page;

conversation sliced painfully thin by the telephone's fame-powered ring;

and his incense and tankas and bells. All the mortal montage
of his things,

a kaleidoscope twenty years wide telescopes to a moment, a
lens,
to tears that are hot in my eyes — now I see, whom I'll not
see again.

I was seventeen then, when we met, and that's twenty years
gone, and too late,
and I made him too little return on the much that he gave
and forgave.

It's no fine thing to say how I envied his fame, and a source
of small pride
the cruel youth of some judgments I made — more my
shame if at times I was right.

It's a hard sight, the look of myself in the light of the life of
the man,
one so good that beside him I look, as without him I feel, like
the damned..

At the funeral, press was in wait, cameras raised as the
mourners arrived;
I was angry to see them at all, and enraged because not
many times

that poor number. All's loss, nothing's right, there's no way
you can win against death.
For the service the most had a prayer, and a few of us,
scotch, on our breath.

There we stood in our socks and our grief, with the hallway
floor covered with shoes,
while the Buddhist priest groaned out his chant in the ears
of a great many Jews.

There was a service a year later, when the marker was placed on Allen's grave beside his father in Newark's *B'nai Israel* cemetery. There were perhaps ten persons there. We barely made a minyan. On the stone was a phrase

Zalman Schachter had suggested, *Mishorer haDor*, "the greatest poet of his generation." I read from the last chapter of my translation of *Ecclesiastes*.

Buddhist meditation, which typically involves the stilling of thought by concentration on one's breathing, made breath a motif and a theme in Allen's writings. Mindful of his likings, and his Buddhist belief in the essential emptiness of all phenomena, I read,

> . . . while the bucket still draws you up waters of life from
> the well of existence,
> before your clay melts back into the earth it was shaped from
> and your breath returns to God who lent it
> —remember your creator, now, in your youth, and what he
> has in store for you, and realize everything is breeze-
> meaningless, fast-passing, empty as air.

3: Nadir

I took any jobs I could get, and those on offer were few and far. Thus I worked for a year as a newspaper reporter at a small town in Massachusetts. Then I discovered that I could get hired to teach Latin on the high school level.

During this period my romance with Meryl continued, at a distance, by medium of phone calls and visits. She took the train up to see me in Massachusetts or I drove down to her in Jersey City as often as we could manage three days or better of time off.

We had both come to the relationship with a certain amount of baggage. Meryl's ex-husband of a decade pursued his career as an artist, so far as the pot and booze would allow, while Meryl worked full-time. Meryl's sacrifice was repaid with resentment and violence. For me, my very lack of relationships had been damaging. My parents had never known what to make of me. They always helped me, unhesitatingly, in all material matters, but they strongly disapproved of anything I did which they considered, in my father's phrase, "counterproductive." Being gender-fluid by nature and a poet by vocation, if they ever had a good word for me, they never said it in my hearing. In consequence, I felt unwelcome and tentative in all my relationships, which made me shy about forming them at all. I'd only had one real love, Frederic, that ended in discord and death. Between Meryl's expectation of injury and my anticipation of rejection, we were in a state of unconscious red alert most of the time, forever launching pre-emptive strikes that brought about the very responses we most wished to avoid.

Meryl and I were baffled. We loved each other so utterly, yet we were at each other’s throats. What we fought over never made any sense: it was never about money or responsibilities or anything people normally fight over. We didn't even squabble in Ikea: we both looked on it as a design-museum petting-zoo, and wandered among the Saarinen and Eames knockoffs in a state of aesthetic glee. But an unintentionally poor choice of words could initiate a fight that lasted for days. In that year when I was teaching south of Boston, renting a room by a cranberry bog, we parted ways.

She needed time by herself, to finally recover from her failed marriage. Joining with me the moment it was over was not the solution it appeared to be. And I had to do something about my drinking, which had now reached an extreme.

And the disappearance of every career I was fit for, then Allen's death, right after I returned from Ireland feeling only failure, was a terrible blow. I remember walking around the West Village, where I had strolled, talking with Allen, for the last twenty years, in dull unending pain. When I'd walked with him there, everything we saw was the occasion of some insight or playful turn of phrase. Now the cityscape seemed hollow as a stage-set, an unreal appearance. The real third dimension, the dimension of his friendship, was gone, and even people seemed like cardboard cut-outs.

My drinking had worsened while working for the paper. This was the normal mode of socialization in the news biz, so it passed without remark

I was teaching high school Latin and living in a room I had rented in someone's basement when I reached my limit. I would sit in front of my computer, amusing myself in chatrooms, as I knocked back glass after glass. I had a world time-chart on the wall, so I could tell who I could reasonably phone up at which odd hours for a drunken conversation. Different colored push-pins indicated the people who were no longer taking my calls. That was my "situation room."

I remember lying in bed watching TV, trying to sleep, looking at the half-full bottle of tequila on the bedside table. I'd think, just a couple of shots, I won't drink it more than halfway down the label. The next morning the alarm woke me to the bottle emptied, on its side on the floor, and the TV still on.

I remember putting the empty bottles in bags within bags when I ferried them out to the trash can, so the man who was renting me the apartment wouldn't "get the wrong idea."

I remember lying there in bed, broken up with Meryl, forty-two years old and alone in the world. I drank and huddled under the covers, unable to shake the chill that wasn't physical.

I remember deciding over and over that I wasn't going to drink, and then watching my hands pour the liquor into the glass, operating independently of my will, as though they were someone else's. Hands I wasn't controlling raised it to my mouth and I swallowed, utterly unable to stop. It was like watching a movie.

I went back to AA. Once more I swallowed my pride and worked the program. I had long ago figured out the psychological hows of why it was effective, and I had evolved my Nietzschean yogic techniques of self-mastery, but nothing I knew was enough to outweigh the sense of hurt and alone-hopelessness that overwhelmed me without Meryl. Though I never made any friends at the meetings, I went to them, and I got enough out of the other drunks' company to keep sober and hold it together. At least, in that limited way, I wasn't alone.

4: Yankeedom

My high school teaching career was like dream, which is after all a harmless, transitory psychosis. And as in dreams, what happened made very little manifest sense, and holds little interest for the later listener. I shall accordingly draw the curtain of charity over my part in the world of Public Education.

Teaching brought me the first real money I'd ever seen. I was now earning thirty-five K, more than I'd ever seen before. For the first time in my life I could rent a proper apartment, not just a room in someone else's home. I had more empty space than I knew how to fill. For the first time in my life, at age 43, I bought new furniture, something I'd never done. Previously I'd always lived like a graduate student, with my things in cardboard boxes. By way of a bed I had usually had a mattress on the floor—typically a mattress someone gave me, lamentably sweat-stained as second-hand mattresses tend to be, so it looked like a sepia-toned map of an alluvial basin. My bookshelves were planks and cinder-blocks. Dishes and silverware were the eclectic treasures I'd scavenged from garage sales.

Now I had new, self-chosen furniture. I purchased two plain pine bookcases, some Umbra chairs, a spindly mid-century-modern-looking computer desk, some huge Japanese paper floor lamps on three wee metal legs, and a new mattress, this time with a frame. In the big bare apartment it all looked wonderfully spare and modern. I stared at it in pride and anxiety. I had spent hundreds of dollars on all this, more than I'd ever spent before on anything. I wondered what terrible thing would happen to me now.

I had always been so impoverished that a hundred-dollar traffic ticket was a catastrophe which had me phoning my parents for financial help. I'd lived my whole life on rice and beans. I had been so poor for so long I didn't even *know* I was poor. Now I finally had money to spend on simple amenities and it freaked me out. It was then that I realized how abnormal my economic life had been made by my splendid degree in classics. Other people started earning a proper living in their early twenties, just out of college. People who earned practical advanced degrees deferred the ordinary gratifications of life for another five years, but before thirty they were well remunerated for their patient work. I had spent a decade earning a *real* doctorate and for the six years since, I had run from country to country trying to get hired for anything.

From my new economic height, I could see my professional life laid out like a landscape. Desolate yes, but on one level oddly reassuring. Some of the problems I had had weren't entirely my fault. I might have had a less

picaresque existence if I hadn't been desperately poor. Even the alcoholism and my failed relationship with Meryl—though I took responsibility for those—it could be conceded I'd have had a fairer chance at managing if I hadn't had to wake up every morning wondering what I would be if I grew up.

I went to a lot of AA meetings. I could make one during my lunch break teaching and returned to my duties with new reserves of energy and enthusiasm. The kids couldn't figure out where I was getting it from. I was unsinkable.

I found a therapist, a woman who was an MSW, and that helped a lot. I discovered that what counts in a therapist is insight and empathy, and these are things they don't necessarily teach you at an analytic institute. She didn't completely untangle the gordian knot of my psyche, but she was sympathetic and supportive, and what she said steadied my tottery, newly-sober soul.

New England is a very cold place. I made no friends there, not even in AA meetings. I couldn't fathom why no one would respond to any of my overtures. Teachers whom I'd worked with for a year wouldn't go out with me to get a cup of coffee. I finally got some insight into this from another teacher, a girl from Jersey, who'd married into a New England family. "Why," I asked, "are they so hard hearted? I'm a stranger here. If I were in their shoes, I'd at least reach out a hand. How did they justify being so mean?"

"They don't think they're being cold," she explained. "They think *you're* being pushy."

I finally fathomed the New England soul one afternoon when I visited some famous church or other on Beacon Hill in Boston. The pews were boxed in, like horses' stalls. The benches were essentially in cubicles, open above so they could see the minister in his elevated pulpit, but they had doors with latches, so the faithful could seal themselves in and be absolutely sure they wouldn't have to so much as nod to acknowledge anyone who wasn't part of their social set.

My theory is that New England's apartheid lifestyle began as English class snobbery. The English class system runs as deep as the caste system in India. Class striving is the soul of most English novels. On one level, all of Dickens is about patting yourself on the back for making it into the middle class. Every Monty Python sketch is another relentless sendup of the class system, it's always the middle-class Pythons making merry at the expense of upper-class twits or lower-class twits.

In the crucible of New England Puritanism, the all-consuming English passion for class distinctions became confounded with the theology of predestination: everyone is either saved or damned in advance, regardless of

what they do. And on the day of judgment the Lord will separate the good sheep from the evil goats, the latter to be consigned to eternal flames, while the Lord's triumphant lambkins look on, bleating in triumph, "You were so baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaad!"

By an act of God, as it were, New England became a New Jerusalem of social segregation. On the positive side, their sense of moral superiority made them fervent Abolitionists in the nineteenth century and keeps them politically progressive to this day. On the negative side, if you weren't born among them, you're one of the damned. Retribution is a key concept among New Englanders, but it's fairly even handed. *You* of course must suffer for being born in the heathen regions to the south. But the Yankee elect don't spare themselves either. They brought the appalling English food with them along with their Puritan notions, and the two were gruesomely interfused to make, if I may paraphrase the Mikado, "the nourishment fit the crime." Thus was visited upon the table such horrors as the "New England Boiled Dinner."

5: Badger Girl

After I'd been sober for a year, I tentatively got back in touch with Meryl. She had likewise had a bad time of it since our parting—a period which she later referred to as "the year of drinking dangerously." She'd taken up with another fellow whose drinking problem was even worse than mine. He eventually sobered up and became a Buddhist and a vegetarian and completely impossible to be around. But when he and Meryl parted, he was still one pickled dill.

Meryl, a tough and strong-willed woman, had been raised by women. Her father left when she was six and died, of the drink, on dialysis, on New Year's day, when she was eleven. Her mother and grandmother ran the show. Her single sibling, a younger brother, is developmentally disabled. There were no assertive males in the picture. Hers was in some ways a blissful childhood. Her wishes were rarely contradicted, sibling rivalry was not an issue, an indulgent and admiring grandparent was ever present to add an additional insulation of love. And she was a brilliant, precocious child, who offered much to merit the admiration she received.

A prophetic recollection from Meryl's infancy reveals her, at age two, being pushed down the streets of Queens in one of those old-fashioned baby carriages with rubber tires, as big as a modern compact car. She insisted on being placed facing forward, rather than looking back at her mother, so she could greet everyone.

"Hello, lady!"

If she didn't get a response, it was,

"Lady. Lady! I say *hello!*"

Even then, she was determined not to be forgotten or ignored.

Her father did visit, and as badly as he coped with her disabled brother, he adored her. He took her to the Museum of Modern Art where she would stand for as long as her father would let her by Duchamp's 1918 flat transparent composition *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass) with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour.* She touched the smooth Brancusis (you could still get away with doing so back then) and was entranced by Joseph Cornell's boxes. Ad Reinhardt was her father's favorite. She was raised to modernism as French children are raised to gourmet food.

She remembers fondly a children's book, *Henri's Walk to Paris* — illustrated by the graphic designer Saul Bass (who created the iconic logos for Warner Brothers, Kleenex, and AT&T.) The apartment she grew up in in

Queens with its mid-century-modern furniture, all reed-thin legs and straight lines, included a Castro Convertible couch upholstered in golden-green sharkskin. These things imbued her with that populuxe aesthetic which has returned to favor in our time as expensive retro.

Her perfect world ended with the sixties. Her father died just as she entered middle school—making more difficult what is a period of misery for all children. She weathered it far better than I did. She stayed in school and thus acquired the harsh elementary lessons of adult socialization.

Far worse, however, was the first year of high school, where she was completely invisible. She resolved then to make herself someone so compelling that people whose names she didn't know would greet her by hers in the hallways. Lady! I say hello!

This she did by affiliating herself with the theater department, which gave her the skills to project a persona that was large and marvelous enough to fill the room. A brilliant student hardly needs a teacher, and what her acting instructors suggested she immediately realized. Her goal, however, was the not the stage but the social world; she took to acting for its political applications—evincing a pragmatism far in advance of her years.

Not conventionally beautiful, she made best use of her intellect. She was terribly fast and funny, and at need, sharp enough to eviscerate. Hers was indeed a tongue with a tang. Hilarious and dangerous, she was untouchable, in both the positive and the negative sense. She immediately acquired an entourage of all the not-quite-out gay guys taking theater, all of whom somehow thought it would be a good idea to come out to her. Straight guys liked her for being funny, but her intellectual firepower felt uncomfortably unfeminine, while that fast vicious mouth gave them pause. One can here appreciate her later choice of Badger Girl as a pagan moniker; it was a true *nom de guerre*. Diminutive of stature, redoubtable in speech, she was the very incarnation of Hermia in *Midsummer Night's Dream*

> Oh, when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd!
> She was a vixen when she went to school.
> And though she be but little, she is fierce.

At this time she came upon the writings of Machiavelli. That philosopher teaches, in brief, that people are essentially sheep and easy enough to lead if you know what you're doing. Further, you shouldn't feel badly about doing so: people deserve what they'll allow. Meryl applied these principles of hardnosed statecraft to surviving high school. Ignored in freshman year, she learned that people could be trained to think of you the way you wanted them to, if you understood where their buttons were. And, to a careful

observer, people's psychological buttons are as plainly displayed as the ones on their shirts. People are bored, she was funny. People are insecure, she was sharp. Administering pleasure pellets of funny and periodic shocks of sharp, she trained those other kids to follow her around like Pavlovian dogs.

There is a clear and poignant significance to this determination to make sure no one forgot who she was—in a young girl whose father abandoned the family, by divorce then by death. Further, her quick assessment and mastery of the social reflect the child who was early on given responsibility for looking after her disabled brother. There were no other siblings to share the burden; she knew from her earliest years that someday it would all be left to her. It was the girl who knew she would always have to protect her kid brother who studied Machiavelli.

Meryl's high school years were in the height of seventies. Everything was olive green or burnt orange: cars, refrigerators, dishes. While the final excesses of the sixties aesthetic played themselves out in bellbottoms and carpeted vans, Meryl was taking high school art classes. Her college plan was art school. But creating her persona was still her primary creative effort.

She went to Pratt, where she promptly played in a succession of bands you've never heard of. Her instrument was the bass, the choice of people who don't know what they're doing in music. She spent a lot of time in clubs; CBGB's, Max's, Hurrah's, Irving Plaza. She discovered speed, and with this, the joys of stippling with a Rapidograph. Farewell to high school highs, pot and alcohol, it was coke and speed from here on.

She herself regards her art school years as rather a fallow period, much as I do grad school in classics, but although we graduates make light of the education we got, we did learn essential skills and standards which set us far apart from the self-taught and amateur. I left Brown with the tools of a philologist; Meryl left Pratt with the technical skills and compositional sense of a trained artist.

She majored in illustration. It seemed more sensible. Back then hand-drawn commercial art was everywhere: on calendars, record albums, magazine articles. But Photoshop put paid to that career shortly after she graduated. So she worked at art supply stores for the next eight years, had several longish but finally inconsequential relationships. Then she met Bryan, who got hired at the art supply store where Meryl worked. At first she thought he was hideous. He was gangly, and had greasy hair and bad skin. But she was impressed by the work he brought in to show her.

In 1984 they moved in together in Jersey City. Two years later they married. The deal evolved that she would work, while he did art full-time. Once he was making a go of it as an artist, it would be her turn. And I came on the scene at the end of her ten-year tour of duty as a patron of the arts.

Once she took up with me, she began, for the first time, to make her own artwork in earnest. At first it was all in boxes or in wee vitrines. Within these diminutive spaces she made small assemblages; sculptural compositions collaged together out of toys and colored plastic and bright bits of this and that. These rapidly evolved into small psychological scenes with tiny dolls or animal figures in poignant juxtapositions, riddled with visual puns and brilliant compositional tricks. Clearly she had admired Beuys and Cornell, but the synthesis she made was entirely original, playful and at the same time touching—like the music Mozart would have written had he lived to maturity. All of it miniature, all of it astonishing. Tiny comedies for the eye. Like opening a music box to find a petite live string quartet inside that played a few bars and then started squabbling. This aspect of her aesthetic always makes me think of the last stanza of Goethe's *Entoptic Colors*, which I might freely translate as,

> Leave the Macrocosm be,
> the "big picture" that doesn't fit on any screen,
> and no one really sees. Real it may be,
> but for us it will always be an abstraction,
> the ghost of the reality that's really ours.
>
> It's the dear little worlds of the dollhouse,
> of the landscape in a bell jar, that show us
> reality at its beautiful truest,
> poignant and joyful as toys.

I was still teaching Latin in New England when I reestablished contact with Meryl. Step by tentative step we resumed our relations. The year of separation had been dreadful, but we'd both had time to think, about ourselves and about each other, to have a good look at "what's out there"—that is, other possible candidates for romantic partnership.

While I'd been sobering up and seeing a therapist, she'd been able to live alone, as "bachelorette number one," for the first time in her life. Previously she'd lived at home or with a man. Now she'd had an apartment to herself, and the time and privacy to get her bearings, not only in the wake of her divorce, but in her life.

As for me, I'd now had a whole year's respite from unending disasters and failures. For the first time in my life I was earning a meager, but not despicable salary. I could cover my own expenses, buy a few nice things, and

still save a bit. I even bought a few art objects. An antique Nepalese bronze buddha, some Japanese bizen ceramics, a few high-end hand-painted Russian military miniatures. None of these items cost more than a few hundred dollars—but before then, they'd been as unattainable to me as the high-ticket items at Christie's. I discovered that unlike reproductions, original art is always new, always has a presence. The eye never passes over it with bored familiarity—you enjoy it afresh every day. In small ways I was beginning for the first time to really enjoy my life. My apartment was still gallery bare, but now there was some genuine art in the space. When Meryl, an artist, stepped onto this stage, my life was visibly completed.

6: The Silence of Mathematics

I was able to secure work teaching Latin in New Jersey, close to Meryl in Jersey City. My wages continued to rise. All was well for a number of years. Meryl and I moved in together in a house in West Orange, I learned Chinese and began translating *The Classic of Poetry*. Then came the economic downturn, and the Latin program was eliminated, not just from my school but throughout the state.

I had taken up math as a hobby. I'd been reading a good deal of philosophy and developed a taste for Descartes. I couldn't help but be curious about his mathematical work. Before I knew it I was doing geometry problems as other people do crossword puzzles.

Fortuitously, it seemed. Although exotic languages like Latin had disappeared from the high school curriculum, there was a great demand for math teachers, I decided to get the requisite thirty credits in college math and look for work in that line.

First I needed an entire year to fill in the gaps in the high school education I'd never gotten. Trigonometry, algebra and all the rest. Once I had this background, I went to Montclair State for the credits that would get me teaching certification. It took me five years to go from practically total ignorance of mathematics to Linear Algebra and third-semester Calculus, which is where (seemingly) arithmetic ends and real math begins. This is the level of expertise one finds in a competent high school math teacher, and though it is far from what a professional mathematician knows, it amounts to a formidable piece of learning.

I then discovered that the job I had prepared for no longer existed. Due to funding cuts, the adjunct phenomenon had come to public high schools as well. I could be hired part time without benefits, but a full-time tenure-track job at the pay grade to which my fourteen years teaching entitled me was out of the question.

So certification to teach mathematics up to the calculus level, even added to a doctorate in Classics and mastery of thirteen languages, proved insufficient to secure me employment in a classroom. I have taken a job as a night concierge, the graveyard shift, midnight to eight a.m. Though the compensation is scanty, I now have ample leisure to memorize Chinese characters and read German philosophy. I walk the empty but brightly lit lobby at three in the morning, reading aloud from Kant or Confucius. (You learn faster and remember better if you do your language studies aloud.)

The only interruptions to these resonant declamations come on weekend nights, with the arrival of drunken merry-makers who collide with the

turnstile that admits them to the elevator bank, then sick in the lift. Or I may find myself greeting late-to-home banker bro's, accompanied by ladies on precipitous heels who gain their guineas by the hour. Otherwise it's all quiet till about six a.m. when I wish the early-to-work crowd their good mornings and brightly comment on the weather, as though I hadn't spent the night making the place echo with the ghosts of philosophy.

I do not, however, regret a moment of the time I spent learning math. It deepened my understanding of philosophy to the same depth that Voodoo revealed to me the realities of archaic religion.

Humanities people like me (superstitiously) regard mathematics as the gold standard of truth, and imagine that its frontiers open onto metaphysical wonders. Math isn't actually a complete exploration of reality's chaotic infinity. Rather, math is like stepping stones that enable you to walk across that turbulent stream. They don't reveal the depth or content of the roaring waters, but they do, very ingeniously, get you across dry-shod. There's nothing especially magical about crossing a stream in this way: though it may appear to the uninitiated as if one were walking on water! Recurrent approximations like *Pi* and the Natural Logarithm seem to the spiritually inclined like God's signature stamped upon creation, recurrent clues for noble souls! But these mystic-seeming digits are really just planks we set between rocks too far apart to step between.

But after five years of serious work I only succeeded in putting a toe into the ocean of mathematics. From the perspective of those who wade knee-deep, the stepping stone analogy just given is obviously only true of math in Newton's time. Nowadays it's a matter of *which* mathematics, you use to solve a certain problem, and perhaps we should compare the various non-Euclidean systems to specialized lenses. But my general observation holds here as well. Mathematical systems aren't the definitive account of reality, they're just different ways we make limited aspects of reality humanly understandable.

Though Math didn't provide me with any new mystical insights, it made me better content with the ones I had before. Having seen what math can (and can't) do, I no longer felt that poetry was in any way its inferior as a grappling with existence. Mathematics, as much as poetry, offers merely *human* truths.

One might here fairly ask what kind of real knowledge does poetry impart? Mathematical knowledge is characterized by certainty. What does poetry offer in that line? Well, mathematical verities are certain because they are everywhere and always true. But when it comes to ageless and universal insights, Homer and Goethe are no whit inferior to Euclid or Gauss. The key difference is that *poetry and art decipher life as meaningful, desirable, substantial*

and valid. Poetry, no less than Math, shows us the Real, which we perceive in our blinkered, glimpsy way. Even this minim is enough, and sometimes too much, for us.

Math isn't even more practical than poetry. The number of people who earn a living doing real (that is theoretical) math are no more numerous than those who earn a living by their pen. Mathematical careers that *pay* involve the soul-deadening, repetitive application of a few formulae suited to reprehensible objectives, like petroleum geology or investment algorithms.

Math did however give me new senses and widen my world. What first impressed me was the *silence* of mathematics. All my life I had busied myself with words. My mind was an unending din of chattering languages, from the breathy gutturals of Ancient Egyptian to the long flexile verbs of ancient Greek that twist and pivot like fish, to the melodious tones of Chinese. In math there were no words, only the contemplation of disembodied relationships, as soundless as they were timeless.

People sometimes ask me how I was able to make the transition to mathematics. Once I too would have thought it impossible for a poet to become a mathematician. I used to like quoting a line from Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*: "I can show the existence of the soul; it is that within man which shrinks at the thought of algebra."

I learned that Mathematics concerns itself with the compulsory features of the imagination. For example, if I tell you to picture "green," you are unlikely to see precisely the shade I have in mind. But if I tell you to visualize a circle, we both see a shape identical in every important particular. Mathematics deals with the agreeing features of mind, found in all people. And these are, I assert, an intellectual patent of nobility.

In his *On the Republic,* Cicero tells the story of a philosopher shipwrecked with his companions upon an unknown shore. Fearfully they proceeded up the beach, not knowing what sort of a land they had come to, perhaps one peopled by savages or dangerous monsters? Then, seeing geometric shapes traced in the damp sands (the public blackboard of the ancients) the philosopher cried out, "Gentleman, we're saved! I see the tracks of human beings!"

Cicero's story is a delightful bit of polished snobbery, but it also makes exactly my point. A certain mathematical sense is *everyone's*. None are shut out by their nature from the ability to appreciate it.

There is more: basic geometric forms like the right triangle or the square are so composed of law and proportion they may fairly be called mathematical proofs incarnate. And mathematical proofs, whatever they say in particular, all of them demonstrate that truth and order, fullness and

perfection, validity and meaning, are built into the physical world, and the human mind that can discern them.

I learned that mathematics are *beautiful*. Not beautiful in the same way a painting is beautiful, but rather in the way a flower or a shell is beautiful.

Both the art object and the natural object reveal beauty, but they do so in very different ways. In the composition of the painting you can enjoy the shapeliness not only of the subject but of the artist's mind. In the orderliness of the flower, you can see not only the beauty of the object but *of your own mind*. You recognize the symmetry and proportion in nature because the human mind is already conformed to symmetry and proportion. Therein lies the beauty of mathematics. Through it you experience not particular beauty, as an individual, but universal beauty, as a human.

Mathematics is, as it were, the sheet-music of nature. It takes some work to learn to read it, but once you understand it, the satisfaction of doing math is like that of the person who plays music. And real mathematicians, not amateurs like me, can actually hear and transcribe that music.

Thus my ability to go from poetry to math is no freakish gift, but the careful fanning of a spark already there in every poetical soul. Admittedly there have been few poet-mathematicians; Omar Khayyám and Lewis Carroll are the only ones I know of. Yet mathematics is essentially poetic, and my Greek edition of Euclid rests on the shelf next to Sophocles, not because both authors are Greek, but because both are poets and dramatists.

My narrative has telescoped down with the passage of time. My life stabilized and my adventures became more interior and less impressively messy. After the Israel debacle put paid to my ethnic and national fantasies, there was a great gaping hole in the roof of my symbolic universe, through which ugly reality was leaking in. Allen, faced with the same problem, stuffed the cracks with sutras.

I decided to accept the wreckage, and in fact widened the gap till the walls stood, ragged battlements open to the sky, like a ruined castle. I have since improved the turreted rubble and made it habitable with precious oddments carted back from the junkyards and midden heaps of history and literature. I built a personal and perverted theme park, my own trash utopia, a backyard Bimini, an obstinate, insolvent independent state that appears on no map.

Thus it was that Blake built his city Golgonooza, in obscurity, from the ruins of the radical Protestantism he'd been raised to, making the mortar from Jakob Boehme giddily mixed with Milton. In his lifetime he gained no better recognition than I have for his real work, and it's just as well he didn't. Had his contemporaries read and understood him, they'd have hung him, and not in the Tate!

It's a poor sort of cake that has no cherry on top, and a badly packed lunch-box that hasn't a surprise inside. You may fairly ask what treat I've saved you who have read so much further than perhaps you planned?

There *is* a fairy-tale ending. The younger son whom no one thought would amount to anything did indeed defeat any number of dragons, ogres and traitor knights. Though I didn't exactly slay them, considering these were the abstract forces of globalization, technology amok and economic inequality, the fact that I wasn't bested and am still sober several decades later can fairly be claimed as a victory. With no one's assistance or permission, I managed to do exactly what I planned, learned the lore that I thought worthy and carted home the mental booty in many a finished book. If the times had been more propitious, I would have been less harried, but I would have done no differently.

And I did end up winning the beautiful princess and living happily ever. Admittedly we are both still subject during sunlight hours to an evil enchantment, that is to say, day jobs, but we are working on this, and have some hope the spell will yield to our mighty conjurations, of which this volume is the latest installment.

7: A Cautionary Tale

The material question had now become a pressing one. I had written a number of books, translations and studies of Greco-Roman, Hebrew and Egyptian antiquity. In the nineties I published it all online as free PDFs. The only response I got was an email or two each year from persons intrigued by the Egyptian material, who wished to share with me personal revelations, religious in nature, often involving flying saucers.

My hope had been that, putting my material out there on the Internet, it would be found by interested persons. But this proved to be worse than a needle-in-a-haystack proposition. It was more like expecting people to find a needle in the asteroid belt. A search engine is attuned to what the majority of its users have wanted to find.

I thought, perhaps I should write about something less esoteric than the ancient world. What about art? I had learned a good deal about this from Meryl. I wrote two essays, one on Duchamp and one on Kandinsky, sent copies to celebrated art critics and important magazines, the latter with an eye to the Kandinsky retrospective at the Guggenheim. Again I posted my work on the Internet.

Since my words on art awoke no echo, I then turned to fashion, which I thought might be a more open field. Meryl was again my teacher here, and has been since first we took up, when she cleared my closet of its worst contents—starting with the western shirts with scalloped yokes and pockets with pearly snap buttons. Also a duster coat, for which I wasn't tall enough, and which made me look like a sad little pile of laundry.

With the advantage of years of shopping and conferring with Meryl, I now studied the masters from Poiret to Balenciaga, and wrote a fashion study, a long article on Dior, whose often sculptural work goes far beyond mere design into the realm of fine art. But the world of fashion magazines were not interested in a literary and scholarly approach. My Dior article, duly posted on the Net, found few readers.

I thought perhaps my problem was print. It was too much to ask of people to actually *read*. I made YouTube videos, over a hundred, including an animated treatment of the first thirty proofs in Euclid's *Elements*, a few Khan Academy style videos on Java programming and math problems, and a series on all the most important illustrations to Dante's *Purgatorio*. My model for these last had been Kenneth Clark in his *Civilisation* series and the art history documentaries of Robert Hughes. Again, the work awoke scant interest.



"Lounge Suite," Meryl Gross

While I was changing career for non-existent career and attempting to attract interest on the Internet, Meryl's art evolved. She gradually abandoned the boxes, and began creating scenes from "spectral suburbs." These were mid-century-modern interiors made with doll furniture, the walls rendered in translucent plastic, making it appear as though the rooms had already dematerialized and abstracted into memories. Their phantasmal, remembered quality was enhanced by the pale monochrome doll figures, which Meryl had painted in unbleached titanium, giving them the look of miniature George Segal sculptures.

These sixties-modern interiors echo the recollected rooms of her childhood in that Queens apartment done in Eames period furniture; the idealized happiness of her earliest youth found expression in the brightly lit populuxe decor.

The people in Meryl's scenes typically faced away from one another, like those in a Munch painting or a Bergman movie. The suggestion of abandonment was elevated from a mood to the level of a psychic state by the mannequin-like abstraction of the colorless figures—and by the humor.



"Christmas," Meryl Gross

For the scenes were also full of visual playfulness. A flat white plastic star became the spilt milk lapped from the floor by a tiny toy deer. A wee zebra emerged from a similarly striped snail shell, realizing the archetypal birth symbolism of shells with cartoon literalness. The transparent plastic silhouette of a goldfish was caught in a petri dish filled with silver dragées that stood for bubbles, making the petri dish itself seem but a larger bubble of underwater tableau. An undercurrent of artistic merriment flows through Meryl's mindscape. It's like a Child's Garden of Separation Anxiety. If Lego or Playskool had commissioned Nam June Paik to design toy sets to amuse good children set free to wander in a paradise of sadness—you might get something very like Meryl's art.

While Meryl arranged her phantoms, I was busied with specters as well. I now translated the whole of Dante's *Purgatorio*, self-published it on Amazon, and posted on YouTube tours of the most important illustrations to this work; those by Botticelli, those in the first printed edition of Dante, and those in a magnificent fourteenth-century Sienese illuminated manuscript. I wrote to all my friends, enjoining them to buy copies of my Dante and review it on



"Ancient Adolescence," Meryl Gross

Amazon. I charged them to do so in most urgent terms, this was, I thought, my final jump-shot. A year later, only four had actually complied. I asked Meryl, "How can I have fallen so far in everyone's regard? How did I come to be such nothing?"

"That's not it," she explained. "You get up at three in the morning to translate Dante. You don't appreciate how very unusual that is. Most people would rather *wash your car* than have to read Dante in *anyone's* translation." "Well, I'll tell you one thing," I responded, "when I finish translating *Paradiso* I'm going to call up all my friends and tell them to come over and wash my car!"

It was Meryl who suggested I undertake the present memoir, overcoming my reluctance. There are many reasons to write an autobiography, few of them creditable. Peter Wilson describes autobiography as "taking your ego for a walk," an amusing view, which has not led him to compose such a record. But generally speaking, Peter is quite right. Usually people write a memoir out of a kind of pride, to describe the great events they have taken part in or to describe how they achieved their own successes.

Others take up the pen to get back at those who have wronged them. This is particularly the case with those who were involved with celebrated persons early in their careers and who feel they deserved a portion of the fame their associates came to enjoy.

Some, like Jefferson Davis or Ulysses S. Grant, tell their story out of the sincere but inglorious need to make some money at the end of an interesting life which left them embarrassed financially. I must confess that I most fairly fall into this last category.

To characterize this work by genre, I suppose it might fitly be called a "cautionary tale" — a very moral way of promising a lurid tour of someone else's secrets.

Memoir has become rather a trendy genre of late, and no doubt this is of a piece with the popularity of Reality TV. People enjoy seeing the world they know and familiar human types. At its worst, it's the narcissism of the ordinary; people like things that smell like them. But it does have its positive side. In the hands of an artist, the everyday is the ground from which poetry grows its most enduringly resonant expressions. We see this particularly in the Chaucer of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Shakespeare of the Falstaff scenes, Whitman and of course Allen Ginsberg.

Howsoever these things truly be, I now draw to the close of the opus, which Meryl assures me will enjoy a success never vouchsafed my earlier efforts.

"Your other books," says Meryl, "were books of the sort that *you* want to read. This is the kind of book *I* want to read."

8: Dame of Dames

My spiritual quest ended up where it began, in the suburbs of northern New Jersey. Here I first glimpsed the potential poetry of existence, in the pallid shadow-play of old horror films on a black-and-white TV. In my teens I developed this initial inspiration and fashioned myself into a kind of occult dandy, a legitimate if non-lineal descendant of Edgar Poe. In my early twenties, when critical self-awareness first developed, I began my, as yet unconcluded, attempt to find my place and meaning in a modern world for which the fantasies of late romantic poetry had done so little to prepare me. I began with a heroic materialism forged from Nietzsche and the epic poetry of India. Soon I required a worldview of greater depth, and spent the next thirty years attempting to force my experience into the framework of various religions; scriptural and pagan, modern and antique. I ingested the entire Joseph Campbell's soup of comparative religion with the same terrific industry Warhol showed back in 1962, when he transfigured the famous thirty-two varieties onto canvas. (In keeping with the brothy metaphor, this account of my spiritual gourmandise is condensed.)

The failure of my attempt to find a grand religious synthesis is perhaps a little dispiriting. But think how much worse it would have been had I succeeded! Had I crammed all I knew or thought I knew into a monstrous new system! Such structures are like palaces: terribly impressive but not really habitable.

For years I desperately thumbed through my Bible or Koran or Book of the Dead like a lost tourist trying to divine his location with an outdated guidebook's inaccurate schematic map. But I did thereby stumble upon many an image and insight, that is to say, I found much *poetry* which served me well and serves me still, as "constellations by which to steer the barque of the soul," to borrow a line Peter Wilson wrote when his hopes were noblest.

It must be confessed that, whatever my spiritual attainments amount to, they are not so great as to save me from the ordinary world of head-colds and checkout lines, squabbles and problems, efforts and mess-ups, the endless repetitive business with which unimproved humanity has always been busied.

Still, monotony can be undervalued. Repetition is the essence of comedy: I am a parade example of that fact. I have been the always willing victim of my own too-durable optimism. Though I have at times doubted my wisdom, I have always had an unfailing trust in my stupidities, and it is this which has sustained me—like the fool in the tarot deck—through all my picaresque adventures.

Back in high school I realized I wasn't cut out to be a romantic lead, that I was one of life's character actors. It was a little surprising though to learn, and so late, that all my earnest exertions have served to define me as a comic stock character, a brother to Punch and to Pee-Wee Herman, whose "Hah! I *meant* to do that!" might serve as my motto.

Admittedly, comedy doesn't exist in nature — a fact which elevates comedy to the impressive level of an unnatural act.

Since the great existential question of modern man turns out to be a multiple choice one, with no points off for guessing, we can proceed to the essay portion. How can one find poetry in the ever more unnatural modern world? Here Meryl, with her fine arts background, was once again the Beatrice to lead me through new heavens of intellection.

My friends, who expend time and treasure at Zen centers and weekend spiritual retreats, could gain a fuller and fairer vision of God's immanence on the walls of the Whitney. If *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* were updated (like poor old Jansen always is) from a 1911 to a 2011 edition, we'd read that the holy is ready to hand in items of popular consumption and mass manufacture (as Warhol taught); in old newspaper photos and things thrown away (as Rauschenberg revealed).

Glass and cellophane make skyscrapers and sandwiches glisten with spirituality, the generosity of existence is declared from every supermarket shelf, where all that's edible is wrapped up as brightly as a gift. Advertising amplifies into view the intrinsic shininess of all activity. A new pagan pantheon extends in a centuried procession, led by Aunt Jemima and Betty Crocker, and going all the way back to the Mucha maiden who vouchsafed us *Chocolat Idéal.*

It is not the place of the poet to endorse or deplore the politics or ecology behind our situation—and even if it was, didactic and political art never really works. The nobler task is to help us experience as meaningful the world in which we actually live. An allied and important insight is that effective spiritual practice never consists of exotic exercises, but rather in investing what we actually do with validity.

My position may sound rather like the one I criticized Peter Wilson for taking. The difference is this: Peter came to view the spiritual as something we should take, steal if necessary, in *physical* form, from the material world. I view the spiritual as something we need to discover, in *poetic* form, in the material world.

Eternity is only accessible now, and the center of existence has to be here. It takes much philosophy, not a little history, and a great deal of poetry to make the pilgrimage to where you actually are — just as it takes dancing lessons to walk with real grace, and some serious study of aesthetics and

design to be able to pull the one wondrous article of clothing from among its lesser fellows on the racks at K-Mart.

Though it might seem I went an awfully long way around to end up back in Jersey, not twenty miles from where I was born, the journey could not have been plausibly shortened, and if the place is relatively unchanged, the same cannot be said of me.

Among the highways and malls, with Manhattan on the horizon at night, like yellow embers of the city it once was, I am at last content to be where I am. As a teen I hated the Hudson because it wasn't the Rhine, enthralling with Lorelei, thickly misted with metaphysics. Now I rather enjoy the Garden State's reality, which is at least authentically my own; actual as fabric, malleable as metal, pleasing as plastic, shuddering with eco-catastrophe and political scandal, its colors over-saturated, the volume turned up loud, relentless neon numinosities of gas and glass! To this landscape I welcome home, to *my* home, the Muse, that same spirit known to Homer, Dante and Goethe—and to Whitman who saw the "dame of dames" approaching us and wrote:

> I say I see, my friends, if you do not, the illustrious emigré,
> (having it is true in her day, although the same, changed,
> journey'd considerable,)
> Making directly for this rendezvous, vigorously clearing a
> path for herself, striding through the confusion,
> By thud of machinery and shrill steam-whistle undismay'd,
> Bluff'd not a bit by drain-pipe, gasometers, artificial
> fertilizers,
> Smiling and pleas'd with palpable intent to stay,
> She's here, install'd amid the kitchen ware!

9: Gregory Corso's Confession

The last time I saw Gregory Corso, he was living in New York City. He'd moved in as the permanent house-guest of Roger Richards, who ran Greenwich Books on Greenwich Avenue, just south of the corner of Fourteenth Street and Eighth. Roger dealt in secondhand books, but his real interest was the writers themselves. He did a public access cable show, "*Greenwich Books Presents*," and actually interviewed me for it when I was seventeen and still obsessed with Byron. Roger collected manuscripts. He paid cash, and writers were willing to hand over their hand-corrected drafts for ready money. I remember Gregory filling notebooks with scribbles, pictures and "poems" with the urgency of a schoolboy finishing a punishment penmanship assignment, so he could sell his creations to Roger and go off to score. I fenced a certain number of pricey art books to Roger myself at that period of my late teens when my fingers were lightest and my drinking was heaviest.

Roger had come to Manhattan from New Hampshire back in the sixties, with literary interests and hippie values. He'd gotten involved with Andy Warhol's Factory crowd. For a time his apartment was a crash pad for drugged-out transvestite superstars, whom Roger regarded as true artists. He broadened his circle of friends to include the Beats, and his bookstore remained a popular stop on the itinerary of both of these groups. Andy would refer wealthy friends to *Greenwich Books*; Allen, and of course Gregory, would stop by to peruse the stock and chat with the affable Roger.

In the nineteen-eighties Gregory moved in with Roger and his wife, Irvyne, and remained their house guest till the apartment next door became available in the mid-nineties. It was there that I visited Gregory for the last time in 1997.

It was a junkie's apartment; chaotic, dusty, untended. Gregory and Roger were hanging out, and both were well hooked, as I discovered when, forty minutes into the visit, I excused myself to the bathroom and they leaped up together crying, "Wait, wait!"

Clean pee. I had brought a house gift after all.

I stayed a while longer. We spoke of indifferent subjects. Gregory expatiated on the spate of superhero films that was then just beginning its domination of the screen.

"When I was a kid I used to read comics, Batman, Superman, and then I got older and I moved on to other things. Who knew those comics would come back to haunt me to my fucking grave?"

Gregory's last book, *Herald of the Autochthonic Spirit*, had appeared back in 1981, more than a decade before. Much of it was startlingly wonderful, but it was the poetry of a drug addict, casting the glamor of art over the ruins of a life. It was great, his finest production, but it made for sad reading.

Gregory struck me as a little creepy on that last visit. He had that effusive, overdone politeness and cordiality you encounter in old rummies. He was pushing seventy. But age and methadone had brought Gregory some kind of peace. He sat in his chair with his white hair and his face of unshaven white stubble, his reading glasses on a cord around his neck, resting on his paunch, speaking quietly and gently, better behaved than I'd ever seen him. This toothless lion would roar no more.

I was about forty then, twenty years ago. I have since learned how very, very injured Gregory was, and I take his addiction less as a measure of his weakness than of his pain. Part of this realization came when I had the opportunity to look at Gregory's final manuscript. Left under the joint executorship of his four children, no agreement has been reached about what to do with it after eighteen years. And I can understand the hesitation. It's nearly two hundred pages in no particular order, and much of it reads more like journal entries than poetry. It should be published, complete, in facsimile, for scholars, but for a book meant to be read, it would take a biographical commentary, written with a profound and empathetic understanding of the man and his work.

It needs a lot of editing, but it's a remarkable document for exactly that reason. Gregory's poetic gifts always had to swim upstream against the tide of his intoxication. But his editing is really what kept him no more than a glowing footnote to the Beat Generation. Gregory was always chary of revealing his heart and he self-censored much of his best work—as now appears. In the last manuscript we have the raw unfiltered Gregory.

It's a real confession, a *confiteor.* I give the word in Latin, because the *confiteor*, the prayer of confession, has a particular prominence in Catholicism that similar prayers don't have in other religions. It is recited twice in the course of the Mass, and as part of the rite of Extreme Unction, the blessing of a dying person. In the course of prayer, the penitent says, "My fault, my fault, all my fault," in a line that is familiar to all in its Latin form, *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!*

In his last poems Gregory pondered his regrets, the four children by different mothers he didn't stay around to raise, and the faith he no longer laughed at but was no closer to attaining. He was always intrigued by the idea of wisdom and enjoyed writing aphorisms, but the self-examination that makes one wise he'd deferred till the approach of eternity. He'd felt the wind from the wing of death in Allen's sudden demise. Then he'd had an

encounter with his heartless father when the latter was so old he didn't know who Gregory was, kissed him and sang him little Italian ditties and called him by someone else's name. Now the sight of his own aged face in the mirror announced mortality—he'd always been the youngest, the kid! These were the cold moments that made him wonder how much time he still had. Long enough to outlive a cat?

Gregory was always haunted by the feeling that there was in him "an inherent ignorance. . . deep in [his] being, to the very core," that he was a kind of emotional primitive—a self-image he tried to redeem in his poem *In Praise of Neanderthal Man.* This is a very significant work for understanding Gregory's psychology. It's a dream-poem that begins with a vision of pathetic goat legged infants discarded as soon as they're born. Gregory himself, a hirsute man with a low forehead, is of course prototype of both the neanderthal and the hairy abandoned newborns in the dream poem.

Deserted by his mother, then his father, while an infant, coldly raised by strangers, Gregory never acquired any sense of emotional security. There was never a loving parent he could trust and no good pattern for adult attachments. It would have been a herculean work for him to repair this early damage to his psyche; a very strong and very good woman and an insightful therapist would have been the prerequisites. But heroin interposed with its ersatz but overwhelming emotional warmth. Gregory tried over and over to reprogram himself. His four children by four mothers were attempts to rewrite the past and make it right—but he knew no more of parenthood than he'd himself experienced. The same scenario of abandonment played itself out again and again. But he *knew* he was lacking in the basic knowledge of how to love that other people had. This awareness tortured him, and appears over and over in his poetic use of figures like the Neanderthal. He made for himself mythologies of ignorance, he saw himself as a kind of emotional minotaur; "an old mangy bull charging through the red rag of an alcoholic day."

These self-images underwent a final metamorphosis as he felt death coming closer. He felt himself more Italian, imagined himself a hard-headed Calabrian, a *testa dura*, like his ancestors. Maybe the problem was bad blood? He sifted through his fragmentary memories of his immigrant parents for the few Italian words he'd learned and remembered from them—perhaps these held some wisdom that could help him now? Maybe the Corsos were cursed, and his life made sense when seen through the lens of the *malocchio,* the "evil eye"? It was a black magic indeed that rendered him toothless and white haired overnight before he'd learned life, while his capacity for love remained emaciated, untried, hidden away like a deformity.

Outrageous Gregory, Gregory the hilarious, was a protective mask of comedy. It concealed as much as it revealed. The hidden Gregory emerged at times in the poetry—which he'd have to get drunk to read publicly. Even that degree of vulnerability made him wince.

Gregory was like a terribly clever child who has gotten his own way all day through his wit, willfulness and manipulation of adults, but who feels heartbroken come evening. He never enjoyed the wholehearted play of a child, nor has he, despite certain filched privileges, ever been treated as an adult.

Gregory was that precocious all-licensed boy for nearly seventy years. He'd played the prince of poets, the modern-day Villon, but this extravagance had come at a cost. He read the price in other people's disappointed eyes. In his final days he dreamed of a compensating poet's glory, the marble-bust assurance of art triumphant that would pay all his outstanding moral debts with a check drawn on the bank of immortality.

But the real gold of Gregory was the alchemy of his humor. He was madly funny in beautiful, artistic ways. His shattering rudeness was just the furthest-out echo from the true detonations of his wit. In his last manuscript there are passages as funny as the improvisations I heard from him in person, but which he never entrusted to a page. The setting for his comic routines is always cramped, abject, trapped situations: bad news in an igloo; family fights during a prison visit; a dinner party gone horribly wrong with everyone struggling through the too-small exit door at once; clambering into a lifeboat on the *Titanic;* St. Peter's in Rome where the required reverence is its own special brand of claustrophobia—all situations where human nature can reveal itself by outbursts at its hilarious concentrated worst, where Gregory advises humankind, in a streetwise aside,

"Oh man, your fuckin' behavior is deplorable . . . ."

10: Good-bye!

I am now sixty years old, a white-bearded man. The youth I was may be traced in these pages, but no longer in my face. I have seen how many a story ends. Some people who seemed to me the winners in life have come to nothing. Others to whom I was devoted proved shallow and selfish. Seeming fools turned out to be wise true friends. I myself have no more than a family resemblance to the person I was when first I wrote to Allen in 1975.

I have seen the economic certainties by which careers could be planned and sound plans laid altered in far less time than it takes to earn a degree. Our actions are rarely to the measure of our intentions, not much of what we set in motion can we actually control.

When you translate a poem, you understand it more closely and intimately than any ordinary reader could. When you write the story of your life, you re-experience it with a clarity and insight far surpassing regular recollection. All those I have known—my friends, my loves—reappear to me now for the final time, in that highest resolution that only comes with hindsight. Many of them are dead, and what I write is all the elegy some of these shall have in the wider world.

I cannot help but think of the great theophany in chapter eleven of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, where Arjuna asks Krishna to be vouchsafed a glimpse of his divine form, the full measure of his being, not the condensed version which is his present incarnation. The Krishna whom Arjuna sees now is huge, bloody, demonic, with many bodies, myriad legs and arms, countless heads, open mouths showing murderous tusks, and bulging eyes halo'd in flame. All created beings stream into his infinite throat. Terrorized gods, their hands pressed together in prayer, sing abject hymns of praise as they vanish. Seers and ascetics, perfected by fierce austerities and spiritual discipline, shout ecstatic greetings to the deity. Warriors and heroes rush blindly into the teeth that will crush them, naive as moths hurtling into flame. Those who have prepared for the meeting with divine fire by meditation, self-discipline and philosophy gladly enter the fire that will complete their purification. For the wicked, these are the flames of Hell.

Krishna says, "I am Time, destroyer of worlds, and the time has come! All things ripen that I may swallow them: I have ordained all things, I complete them."

I have seen the end of many whom I loved: some were saintly, deliberate and calm; some took their own lives in final anger or despair. The image of Krishna, the "I am Time," who fascinated me in a poem when I was twenty—now I understand his terror and his truth.

In the Gita, Krishna gives Arjuna celestial sight, so he can see the frightful reality underlying all the shapes and colors which the supreme God takes on. His self-manifestation is the entire cosmos. When I was young I was fascinated by the sheer thunder of Krishna's utterance. The gruesomeness of God; there's an insight to impress a twenty-something! Now, after a lifetime seeking holy wisdom from books and from life, having succeeded in stealing a few glimpses of the infinitely secret, I comprehend better the terror — and the humor, of God. I understand the reality of Krishna as Time, but I also appreciate the comic-book too-muchness of the imagery. To my mind, there's something funny and childlike about the Supreme Lord Krishna putting on all his Halloween heads at once to give his friend a scare.

And I am grateful to all the astonishing people who filled my life as they have these pages, memorable, hilarious, many intentionally so. Especially I'm thankful to a particular few who basked their genius in the transfiguring light of fame, and were made yet more saintly or tragically baffled by the universal interest and permission. Their vast, substantial gifts were fully and fairly applauded, and they were generous enough to admit me to their company— and most of all I'm indebted to one, whom I gladly make this memoir's final invocation. You, who living I so rarely allowed the last word, you'll *be* the last word here, dear Allen.