The Terrorist of Life

The psychic terrorist on the bus of life. There is always the feeling in the café that there has to be something better; a love, or some work. The love-hate affair with the café life is manifest in the looks of boredom and irritation. But the café is neither love nor occupation. It isn't home, and it isn't the workplace. And that is its virtue.

Sally says that, here, you think that no one knows you the same way that you are known or know yourself in those other contexts. It's the crosstown bus of our lives, and it's surprising and delightful, to reveal us in a way that seems to hide us at the same time. There is no crucial demand to reveal, and yet there is also no demand to conceal, either.

A woman came in off the street, one day, and began pacing back and forth. Finally, she rose up in a shriek, and yelled, "What are you people doing? You're all zombies! Why can't you live?" and she ran back into the street, screaming, "You're all sick, sick!"

A little psychic terrorism to confuse the issue even further.

Tom or John

Every story I tell is a song to the end of stories. A man I know by exchange of empathy, a temptation to nothingness, stopped by today to tell me he can no longer imagine any desire for anything, a word for things to do and things to be. He disclaims suicide. Even his curiosity about death is shaken down.

When I came back with the coffee, he was gone. After all these years, in occasions of conversation, I don't know his name, Tom or John, an ordinary name, I think, but I can't remember.

He's too frightened to be a poet, he said. But there was no fear in the man, only courage without eyelids, only strength without dreams.

She unveils herself,
opening,lifting,
lowering,and draping
her coat on the chair
beside her chair.

A Woman with Grace

There is a woman in the café with one hand missing, covered by a long green sleeve. I've been watching her, and not watching, working on a cold acceptance, unpitying her, imagining making love, the feeling of her blunt arm against my back skin, my muscles jumping under the soft touch blow.

I chastise myself for not knowing how to think of her, as if I should know, or should think anything. I think about the remarkable and the noticeable, not knowing.

While I'm waiting in line for a glass of wine, I see a poster tacked to the wall. I wince. It reads, **We're stumping for the Coming Revolution in Higher Consciousness**, and above it, the grinning face of Elizabeth Clare Prophet, a pseudonym for squeaky clean, uncrippled freedom from awkward thought.

I think about the grace that accrues to the damaged and the wounded. She holds her book bag on the crook of an unseen wrist, as if her missing hand is sunk deep in her pocket. I love her graceful accommodation with disaster. No wonder I treat it as if it is nothing.

Then I think the missing hand is a guard let down. God has unprotected her. That unprotects her from me. I am awed by the power I might have, and the use I might be, but she doesn't need me. She is more than a broken-wing sparrow. She is independent, as everyone I admire is.

Which one reveals the other wounds? Which one shines with other grace? That's the higher consciousness I would stump for. The word pains me. Let it stand.

John Carlson

Avast! John Carlson sells cars. He has a card; **Richmond Toyota / 444 Delgado / Mr. Nobody**. John is a native San Franciscan, born three blocks from the Owl and Monkey Café. He knows that Donuts & Things dumps out bags of donuts, every night, at 4AM.

In the used car lot, they have a refrigerator full of beer and a sign that reads, "No Hard Booze Before Five." John has a pocket calculator that plays Stormy Weather in beep tones. John gives freely of his gentle but cutting wit, like a razor with a lamb's wool handle. He says of Joel Martin, "He's a veritable spittoon of knowledge."

John wears a loose sports coat and a dress shirt of a color not found in nature. He lives in a room in a hotel on Van Ness, run by a family from India. He doesn't own a car. He has frizzled hair, and he's balding. He wears glasses. He laughs.

John is anticipating an end-of-the-world confluence, any day now. Not the apocalyptic kind but the "oh, my god, I don't know what the hell I'm doing," kind. Last Saturday, he made fifty bucks selling cars, while the other salesmen sold six cars between them. They got checks for four thousand each, but took home only sixteen hundred. They complained to the manager, wanting more. The manager said, "You know what you get? You get AIR!"

"They're cruel," John says, and laughs.

"How's your love life, Johnny?"

"Scattered clouds, chance of rain."

John told me a story. A woman bothered the salesmen all day, trying to get a good deal. Finally, one salesman told her he wanted to FUCK HER, and that sent her home. It wasn't funny. John uses the word "wench" for women. His frustration is becoming dangerous, and his lighthearted sexuality is getting overcast. Storm clouds are gathering.

He leans back,
she leans forward.

He rubs his cup,
she clicks her pen.

Silence speaks.

A Guy

A guy sits down next to Johnny and tells him that they know each other, but John can't remember him. Then his girlfriend comes out of the back room like a surprise, sits down next to me, and pushes my ashtray out of the way.

I say, "You are going to sit next to me and condemn me for smoking?"

"Yeah," she says, and now we two, thrown together by the imagined bond of two others, sit in silence, back-to-back, uneasy and hostile.

She smiles when she turns to apologize for mistaking my coffee cup for hers, and I like her eyes. I'm crammed into a chair by the wall by an attitude I would grant her, if I could also grant her the other side of the room, the other side of the moon.

The man holds out a forkful of lasagna for her mouth, like a spoonful of axle grease for a baby sparrow, good for the feathers. The world disintegrates.

Larry Tarelton

Forswear foul potations. Larry Tarelton squints. He's improving his eyesight by performing various exercises. He claims he can almost read the small print on the menu board above the counter. He holds a pencil up in front of his face and squints at it.

Larry teaches English as a Second Language at the University of San Francisco. He takes pride in his Chinese, Palestinian, and Pilipino student's occasional ability to write an interesting and coherent prose passage. Larry likes to affect a Shakespearean dialect ala Richard Burton and repeat scatological and sexual remarks made between Prince Hal and Falstaff.

His best friend, Mikael Rudnikov, moved to Oakland, recently. Larry is lost without his friend. Mike was a drinker of Rainier Ale, who, when drunk, would physically attack Larry, beating him on the arms with fists or a rolled-up newspaper. Larry took delight in the attacks, as their voices rose and their love bloomed melodramatically.

If his eyes improve enough, he may be able to make out his old pal coming down the hill from Oakland. Mike and Larry used to call women "the talent." Mike was always exhorting Larry to "pork" some anonymous, generalized sixteen year old.

Mikael Rudnikov

Big Brooks! Mikael Rudnikov translated Russian in his sober moments. His girlfriend, Liz, was a doctor at the UC Medical Center, just up the hill from the café, and she despised The Owl and Monkey. She thought it was a repository of desperate, depressed, and directionless people.

Liz was anorexic skinny and wired for action. She called Mike "Mischa", and she doted on him. But she wouldn't darn his socks. She was as aggressive as Mike was passive. He was one shy guy. One day, he felt trapped in a conversation, so he excused himself to go to the bathroom, went out the backdoor into the garden, climbed over the fence and went home, leaving his food, drink, books and papers behind. The books and papers were put behind the counter for his return.

Mike's mother died, finally, and he and Liz moved into a nice place in the Oakland hills. She forced him, he says, or convinced him, to sell the family house, which he cherished. "My parents and I came to this country without anything but the shirts on our backs, and that house was what we made from nothing."

He's come back to the café, a couple of times, but he never stays very long. Larry Tarelton misses him. Mike always calls me Big Brooks. I tried several nicknames on him, but they never took. I felt as if I'd failed him not to find one. He'd say, "Big Brooks," and I'd say, "Mike." I tried to put some forced into it, but I couldn't match his resolution. I loved it when he called me Big Brooks. When he was drunk, he'd call me Big Fucking Brooks.

Liz Klein

Mike once asked Joel Martin what he thought of Liz. Joel was on the spot, but he went ahead, “Well, she was born on Westend Avenue, grew up in Great Neck, Long Island, attended Radcliffe College and Harvard Medical School, and despite these disadvantages, I think there’s a human being in there somewhere.”

This chair
faces that
other chair,
or is it
the other
way around?

Patti Dormacher

The Third Place. Patti is half-owner of the Owl and Monkey Café, along with her live-in, Doug Biddle.

There's a rubber mat at the front door. It looks like it's made out of thousands of little rubber nipples. Everyone trips over the thing. I said to Patti, "I finally figured out the purpose of that mat. It's to trip over." She laughed, "I have a perverse sense of humor. Every time I see someone stumble on it, I just have to laugh."

Patti dresses and looks like a French coquette, with her beret and short skirts, pointy heels and fluffy sweaters. She picks out the artwork for the walls. It's always talented but devoid of art. She once rejected a drawing of mine, a cartoonish thing of a goofy-looking fellow sprawled beside a telephone, his genitals dangling – a couple of simple line loops. It was named, "Waiting for the call."

"We have older people who come in here," she said, "and it might offend them." Later, when one of my drawings sold, I replaced it with that one, and she took it down.

At Christmas, Patti hangs plastic mold displays of Santa and Rudolph in the window. She puts out a scrawny tree on one of the smaller tables. It's bent in the middle, burdened by its bulbs and tinsel, like an ancient floozy under her jewelry and makeup.

Patti is always friendly. She bubbles a little bit. She's proud of her café. Doug looks like hired help, ambitious and thwarted.

All kinds of tables,
all kinds of chairs,
someone picks
the music,
all kinds
of people.

The Nurse

She has the soft body of a nurse, dusty clean, wearing orderly clothing. She has the eyes of one who once loved animals and hated bloody abuse, tired of waiting for doctors who act like petulant children to grow into many compassion, tired of waiting on patients to die or fight for life, worn down by the percentages.

A few degrees of wonder in a great many humans have not added up to a profession of caring. One loses faith in work that seemed to be grounded in it, back when it was a dream.

Now, she sits alone with coffee and reads the paper, absentmindedly. Hope and cancer spring endlessly in the human body. A tiny, pretty amulet seems to be all that's left of a young woman's dreams. The reward for nursing is too private, too much a wisdom, to be of any use to one who works for salary in a virulent, half-sterile debauchery of vitality called hospital.

He butters his bread
like a painter
spreading gesso,
preparing his canvas.

Phil Keeson

Phil is a photographer. He drives a ’67 Monte Carlo that looks like it rose from the trash heap, one winter morning, stuffed to the gills, to wander the streets in search of reclamation. Phil is a street artist. He works Telegraph Avenue, in Berkeley, and Fisherman’s Wharf, in the City. His photographs are a marvelous combination of crystalline clarity and surging color.

He wears his hair in a crude Prince Valiant. Some fellow looked at me, one day, and told me my twin was in the café. He meant Phil, and I was surprised. I asked others if there was a resemblance, and no one saw it. Phil and I are the same age, and he was on the swim team in high school in New Jersey with a guy I swam with in college in Iowa. That guy now makes soft porn films in LA.

Phil sits by himself and reads, constantly. Books on how to write and sell fiction. He has a gleam in his eye. He is sorting through his slides. Some representative from Hallmark approached him in Berkeley, yesterday, and asked him to submit some work. Phil is apprehensive. He’s been burned before. Hallmark might pay $200 for an original photograph, but he says, “A good one might earn me $2000 over the next ten years, on the street. The big companies are not known for their scruples. I don’t want people coming up to me and saying they saw my stuff in Walgreen’s for $3.95.”

So, he’s sorting through the slides he took for his own pleasure, the ones that don’t have the resolution of his better work. He has a nice one of a rainbow trout, in six inches of water, next to his submerged, tennis shoe left foot. His foot looks like a fish. The convex lens of the viewer I’m using makes it look three-dimensional. It makes me want to go up to the country, where even the dirt looks clean.

It’s raining in the city. The city is getting a cleansing. People come in the café wearing Mackinaws and boots, with raincoats and rain hats and their belongings wrapped in plastic garbage bags. San Franciscans go nuts whenever there’s any weather at all.

Napkins
fall to the floor
like leaves,
kicked in the breeze
of feet.

The Pigeon Lady

The Pigeon Lady comes in the café every few days to pick up old bread and rolls for her flock. She is Russian and quite well spoken. She has the air of one who has survived a great deal in her years. She has a warm smile and a ready hello. She doesn't seem to be a typical bag lady, despite her large carrying bags. Her makeup is a bit exaggerated, but I suspect her pigeons don't mind.

The
Amityville
Horror,
its cover torn,
lies across from
whispering lovers.

Jim Barnes

“A Diana”, he says. Jim Barnes is an army brat, a tall, lanky, blond, ridge runner, a disturbed man, a writer, ne’er-do-well, wit, harsh critic of women, overseer of humanity, planetary derogator of “the humanoids.” He works for Manpower, and he feels powerless. Gradually, because of his periodic exile to the Texas coast, where he works as a boat-builder, he is building a book, he says. His sympathy is with the lizard, the hawk, the isolated American who survives the sun and the wind like the gnarled, bony scrub oak.

I notice that his Diana-of-the-moment has knobby knees below her running shorts, bony fingers on her tanned hands, a soft voice and taut muscular calves. Jim grins like a small boy who’s just discovered girls, a young vulture hovering in the sky above an innocent rabbit.

“A Diana,” Jim says. She goes to the counter and asks us to watch her bag. She looks at me, and glances at Jim. Jim jumps up and hides her bag. “She’ll carry your arrows,” I say. “I’m all a-quiver,” he says. A small man starts to sit down across from her spot. “Is anyone sitting here?” he says.

“There’s a girl across from you, but I’m sure you won’t mind,” Jim says. The man goes back for a napkin, and Jim leaps again. He moves the guy’s stuff over, puts his own Calistoga water down, then he goes up to the counter, as she comes back. I go up, as he comes back.

“I think I’ll call you Swifty,” I say.

Some
wipe gestures
off their faces.

Some
rub them in.

Ian Callahan

Dr. Hostility. Ian Callahan, who's been evicted from the café, comes to the window with his bitter, toothless grin, holds up a biography of Yasser Arafat and points to it as if to himself. He nods like a violent, mad, ceramic dashboard dog. Ian is a street crazy, a paranoid, aware of the nefarious plots of the CIA and the FBI.

When he was a baby, his mother went nuts. She held his baby sister out the window by the ankle and called her husband at the office, "Come home, or I'll drop the baby."

Ian's brand of insanity is hard to pin down. He has it secured for his own needs. For his imagined enemies, the Fascist Jews, like Joel, for example, he has a look of gargoyle scorn, looking down the side of his cathedral with immense stony superiority. For others, the occasional visitor, like a middle-aged Korean man, who Ian claims is following him, he has the cringing fear of a starving, cornered rat.

Ian desperately needs a father. He's often chosen me to partially fulfill his need. Whenever I feel up to it, I scold him and encourage his chances for survival, and he is pleased. It doesn't change anything, of course, and it wears me out.

One terribly vulnerable, hung-over Sunday morning, he rushed up to me, his face a mask of anger and terror, and declared that one day he would stab someone. It wouldn't be his fault, though, he said.

"Don't do that," I said, feeling his direct gaze. "If you do, I'm going to be pissed." The worst thing about being the object of a madman's need is the possibility that it may turn around abruptly, violently.

A lemon wedge
floats in clear water
in a tall glass
next to two crumpled
dollar bills
on a napkin
on a dark wood
tabletop.

The Water

I am in the lovely texture of the visible world. The lemon seed in the glass of sparkling water, with silver bubbles clinging to it, like barnacles of mercury, sinks to the bottom, touches, and rises to the surface, loses a few bubbles, and sinks again.

Any tender obstruction sends the seed to the top or blocks its rise. The pulpy underside of the lemon wedge is a crystal garden of bubbles. I want another word for bubble, a word, in another language, that means too may things to be translated *bubble*.

I drink the water and return to my reading.

She pulls
her hair
in a knot
at the back
of her head,
then lets it drop
in a heap of curls
across the back
of her chair,
with a laugh.

Connie Shoop

Connie Shoop walks by in a hurry. We were housemates, brief lovers, years ago. Connie wears a cheap imitation leopard-skin coat, black pants and black shoes. If it weren't Connie, it might be style, but Connie fights style with a rebellious style of her own. (See *Savage Amusement,* written in 1975*)*

Connie runs a second-hand shop a few doors up the street. She's married to a sweet guy who's semi-famous for his singing parodies of Rock & Roll stars.

Connie is ambitious. Success is iconographic for her. When I was performing, Connie saw me as a rising star. Now, three years later, as she hurries past, she casts a worried look at me. Here I am, sitting in the window seat of the Owl and Monkey. I'm not rich, not famous, and I smile.

There was a time when Connie's disappointment distressed me. Connie's still got her shop. I've still got mine.

She fingers
her hair,
he fingers
his beard.

She fingers
her hair,
he fingers
his fingers.

Nick Dormacher

Nick is a law student. His sister owns the café. Nick fancies himself quite the rake with the ladies. He also fancies himself a reasonable man. His ambition is to negotiate the legal trials of ascetics and gurus. He is beginning to accept that he will, in fact, take any job he can get.

Annie thinks Nick will be an ambulance chaser, a divorce lawyer, in short; a shyster. Nick admires idealism. For him, it's a worthy exercise, a show of delightful infatuation.

Nick is going bald. One night, he was saying it was all right. I mean; that's life. I told him he had a handsome forehead for baldness. He seemed accepting. Then, at 11 PM, on the street, near his car, he began to bellow, "I WILL NOT GO BALD! I REFUSE TO LOSE MY HAIR!

Nick has a motorcycle, a car, a snazzy little house, and a string of attractive women. After attracting them, with his dumb-blond, Mr. Sweetness act, after a few weeks, he begins to look at them as if he is an adoring asexual grandfather. Then they're gone, and he dresses well and goes to town.

Four people at this table,
four people at that table.

Two here, three there,
one, one, FIVE!

One more, three,
two, SIX!!!

Marty Dankowitz, Elizabeth, Ken

Mighty Marty. Marty refers to a Tibetan guru who says that three things, once overcome, release us to life; anger, ignorance, and desire. The problem, for instance, with desire, is to get rid of it without extinguishing the passion that fires it.

Elizabeth is pissed. She has come into the café for support, to talk. Ken calls the café, The Inner Sunset Outpatient Clinic. Elizabeth has been working for the Bechtel Corporation. She's about to be 42. She's a secretary at the bottom of the ladder. She can quit, she can sabotage, or she can succumb and disappear into the bowels of capitalism.

Ken was, for eight years, a cog in the labor mediation for the US government. Elizabeth seeks his advice. Ken quit his job, two years ago. He has an agent, he's been writing science fiction ever since he quit. Essentially, his advice is; quit. Elizabeth was a three-pack-a-day smoker. She quit. Now she's fatter, smokes marijuana, snorts cocaine, and paces her apartment like a caged animal until four in the morning. She seems to be in the same place.

"Still the same," she says. She is about to explode. She doesn't believe in her own competence, and the work that comes down on her in beneath her abilities. Ken is reading the Bay Guardian, after Elizabeth has gone out of the café. He's reading an ad, "Want to Go on a Feminist Tour of Pornography Shops?" the ad reads. "Ah, the worst of both worlds," he says.

Elizabeth is in a bind. She is thinking of going to a government agency to help her in her quest for dignity on the job as a flunky for a giant corporation that gets its money from the Arabs and the US government. She has discovered that American Business is not different from American Government Bureaucracy. She is angry.

Ken gets up to leave. He puts on his white golf cap, clips his sunglasses on, puts on his blue down coat, and says, "Well, I'm off to Golden Gate Park to play Marlboro Man, without cigarettes and without a horse. Hopefully, no one will notice, and I won't get arrested."

Mighty Marty is small and dapper. He walked around one party carrying a bottle of Reunite and two wine glasses, waiting for a beautiful woman to say, "That's nice!" None did. Marty used to live in the Tenderloin, where he felt the people were useful, because they were worse off than he was. Marty speaks softly, almost a monotone, in a deadpan expression, but with an amusing, dry wit. He reads the newspaper and then paraphrases and quotes the articles, adding bemused observations.

Marty is a skilled engineer of some sort. He seems to have worked at some time or other. He moved from his $100 a month Tenderloin cockroach heaven to a $350 a month studio and bought a stereo, minus the turntable, because he only listens to the FM.

Like a lot of people in the café, who spend any regular time here, it seems as if Marty is always here. Regulars appear shiftless and non-productive, despite the success or affluence they may have outside the café. Marty has large, sad eyes, and a considerable nose. For news, I'm inclined to think. He discusses the revealed truths of the world with a considered philosophical irony. It is male gossip. His voice is comfortable, monotonous, and subtle. He requires only of listeners that they have a cud to chew. It's a cow-like sensibility that this mouse-like fellow brings to the pastures of life.

Marty shows me an article about a fifteen-year-old boy who drives over and kills his mother on his way to the Motor Vehicle office to take the test for his driver's license. "This is the sad story of the day," he says.

A yellow truck
goes by in the street
like a whale behind
aquarium glass.

The Artist

She buys a cup of coffee and sits down. She sets her chair back from the wall and sits on the edge of it. She begins to recline, until her head, with two bunches of hair tired at the back, like horns in repose, is within inches of my knee. She holds her book up to her nose and giggles, like squirting water from a toy pistol into the air.

This is not only a desperately lonely being, this is someone, like an oil leak, who spreads herself across the floor and makes human ease greasy.

She wears white and yellow, cheerful camouflage. She takes her giant bag up to the counter, when she goes for a refill, and returns. Her arms begin to waggle in all reachable space, like sunflowers in a high wind, like finger cactus in a slow-motion search for sun.

She moans like a baby seal whose mother may be dead. She's reading "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," and it reminds me of the uselessness to which writing can come.

She sets herself up, with black velvet cloth, a roll of wire and cutters, plastic cups of beads and tape measure. She bangs my leg with the leg of her chair. "Oh, I'm sorry," she says. "Was that your leg or the leg of your chair?" I looked at my leg, crossed over the other, no chair even close.

She has her purse, just so. She has her bag, just so. She has her artist's carryall, just so. She takes off her tennies and puts her sandals on, and she sits there, staring. Tiny beads of sweat are forming on her forehead. She's shaking like a petal in the wind. She's shaking her head. It's no damn good. She's all strung out, on or about something.

One man puts
his coat on
from below.

Another man
puts his coat on
from above.

A woman
shoves past them both
and heads for the door.

Bill Hoover

Bill Hoover is another paranoid. He can document the number of times he has been the object of poisoning (112) robbery (143) and assassination (7). He is tall and pasty-faced. He bounces silently as he walks, stealthily conscious of his enemies. He wears his pants so low, they defy sartorial laws and gravity. He wears glasses and smokes a pipe.

One night, a woman was singing her songs for open-mike night. When she mentioned she was from Hawaii, there were oohs and aahs and comments on the wonders of the islands and on the good fortune of her birth. In a moment of quiet, Bill's voice cut across the room, "There are a lot of assassinations in Hawaii." Despite the ringing laughter, Bill was undaunted. He, after all, knows the real truth.

Bill says, "I'm an inventor. It's tough in the city. I haven't really been very creative, lately. My best time was at Virginia Tech. It's in a college town. Well, I think I'll go to the Grand Piano and see if they'll kick me out. A number of my friends have been kicked out of here. Jim, Ian."

Later, Bill says to the stranger next to him, "Yeah, well, maybe you heard of some of my inventions. Did you ever hear of the MX Missile System? You know what I got out of it? Nothing. The only way I could get out of the Pentagon was to relinquish rights over it. Vitamin C therapy for cancer was my idea. Linus Pauling stole it from me. But, I couldn't make any money out of cancer cures. So, take care," he says and gets up to go next door for pizza. "Yeah, nice meeting you," the stranger says.

Bill comes back and reads the want-ads. He asks Claudia, "Maybe I could be a salesman. Do you think I could be a salesman?"

"I don't know," she says.

"I was the top salesman when I sold encyclopedias. Selling encyclopedias is tough work. But you meet a lot of divorcees that way."

Quotations from Bill Hoover:

> *Man's best friend is his pipe, not his dog. Especially if the dog is a Doberman Pincer.*
>
> *I've got a crazy card. It's a transit pass. Five cents on the Muni, ten cents on ACT. They discriminate against us in the East Bay.*

I must have terrible references. That's the only reason I can think of I can't get a job.

Arlene Singer

Arlene Singer is a teacher in a Hebrew day school. She grades papers in the café on Mondays and Tuesdays. . They are the papers from Friday she was going to do on Sunday. Arlene is distressed and bemused that she dresses just like the teachers she had when she was in school.

"How are you Arlene?" and she grins from ear to ear. "Fine…terrible. I've been miserable all day." The headmistress of her school wants to set up a Bar Mitzvah for another teacher, who Arlene knows is a lesbian. The headmistress promises the woman a husband as a gift. The woman says a husband is the last thing in the world she wants. The headmistress doesn't understand.

One of Arlene's kids told her, "I know this is lousy, Arlene, but I was in a hurry." One kid signs his composition, "Carol Saltzman," his mother's name. "I'm worried about him," Arlene says.

Arlene has a peculiar look in her eyes, a dodgy look, like someone is going to catch her doing something and send her to the principal's office. She's thirty, single, and unattached. She's a full-bodied woman with a dumbstruck look. She's from Los Angeles. She says she doesn't really like anybody. It isn't that she dislikes anyone. It's more that she thinks she knows how rotten little kids are.

He holds out his copy
of ee cummings
like a badge,
like a piece of cheese,
like a nice pair of gloves
on a nasty night.

Kirk Munley

Kirk claims to have slept with over 2000 women in his 42 years. Kirk was a muscleman when he was young. He's still fairly trim and bulgy. He looks down at himself and says, "This is stupid. I'm stuck with this body. I built up a long time ago, for no good reason, and it's useless. I don't need it."

Kirk has a daughter, about the age of 20% of the women he's made it with. After his divorce from her mother, he didn't see her for years. One day, in Baltimore, she found herself singing a song about dancing, "Doin' the Kirk, doin' the Kirk." She realized what she was saying and called him up. They looked constrained together, when she came out, but he was transported and mystified.

He says he bought one woman an expensive fur coat, but when he got excited and ejaculated all over the coat, she kicked him out. His women seem to be among the plainer of the sex. Kirk is a successful, independent architect, but as with most regulars, it has nothing to do with his café life.

Louis

Louis taps on the window and holds out a bag of whole-wheat crunchies. He offers them to me through the glass. I hold my hand up to the pane, and he pretends to pour some into my palm.

Louis is a truth-seeker, a wanderer. He giggles. He's silver-haired and tan, in his forties, and nicely dressed, but casual. He has decided to be open to what may happen. He doesn't work. He worked for a while as a housepainter, but after his return from the Southwest, he's been living off the sale of belongings and the good graces of friends and others. He gives people someone to be concerned about.

Louis says he tells his story, and that's his gift to the world. Some hear him, some tolerate him, some think he's an idiot, some mock him. He carries talismans. He says if he gave himself up to his quartz stones, he would go mad laughing. His turquoise necklace, some two thousand years old, reminds him of the human body.

Louis has no calluses. He doesn't seem to suffer in any sense. He does look bored, and he naps at his table, or meditates, it's hard to distinguish.

Louis giggles, "I've gone from 77 to 28 rpms. I'm operating at 28 rpms, and my awareness drops." He giggles some more.

Louisisms:

> *I think perceptive people are everywhere.*
>
> *I don't understand jealousy. I guess because I'm not a jealous person. I think it has something to do with being possessive."*
>
> *We're all real. We may lie about it, but we're all living on this earth, and everybody knows things.*
>
> *Some of us are butterflies, and some of us are eagles, but we get shot down, too. I like to think I'm an eagle, but I'm probably a sparrow. But I can fly.*
>
> *I lie in bed, and I think I'm in great pain, and then I smile. I don't know where that smile comes from. But it tells me everything's all right.*
>
> *I've been down and out. Someone said I'd been destroyed.*

She holds up
her hand
to make a point,
as if the proof
is written
on her palm.

The Lover

I saw an old, closet-worn lesbian's sweet, careful head turned by the entrance of one, younger, tough and striding. She looked, then not-looked, then thought better, then turned reminiscent, or absent, then busied herself with the newspaper, and, waiting, wiped her glasses, then chewed her salad.

What's to be done, but to hold her broken eye-glass frame and work ill-fitted dentures as best she can, and think, until thinking finds a distraction that might hold.

Newspapers
lie in loose piles,
here and there,
cast off like clothing
left behind for others,
not yet arrived.

Len Selvin

Len used to sing snatches of songs in response to any situation, emotional or social. He's a housepainter, working for Frank, his friend and mentor. He's a man with bad eyes, apprenticed to a man with no direction. For a while, Len was apprenticed to the Financial District, but it was a pale and unfocused leadership, too much like the pattern of his family, all of whom are lawyers.

Len thinks he looks like a current movie star, and he has the saving grace of beginning to believe he's a fool. Only now, he thinks it's just depressing. Len studied philosophy in college, but he closed the book on that possibility. He looks better and worse since he quit his financial job. His hair and moustache look great, but his eyes have a haunted, desperate look.

When he was in college, one day, he stole a car he didn't need, for no good reason, in front of several witnesses. When the police caught up with him, he was walking away from it. He went to jail and freaked. To this day, he has no explanation for his behavior. He probably thinks he's crazy.

He's like a movie that fails because the director couldn't decide what kind of movie he was making; a comedy, a farce, a romance, a tragedy, a psychological melodrama.

He studied piano for twelve years. He loves to laugh. Or did. The years have worn on him. He used to be a charmer, back when he worked behind the counter in this café. Time tells us to grow up, and some are bent on taking their hearts as a failure.

When Len was in Israel with his family, he was impressed with the clean streets, the garrison camaraderie, the fellowship of the armed citizenry, the handsome good looks and ready smiles, the beautiful, clear-eyed women. At a Tel-Aviv restaurant, Len had a ringing in his ears. His mother told him that meant he thought someone was lying.

Len and Frank used to go down to Union Street and run the bars, in search of some ill-defined, women-centered glory. Every once in a while, Len remembers how much in love he was with a girl he knew in college, when all was beer and roses. He knows where she lives, somewhere in Buffalo. He thinks of calling her up. He never does. Apparently, she was lovely.

He plays chess and smokes low-tar cigarettes. For the longest time, he was concerned with my wellbeing. "How are you?" he would ask, with motherly concern, or brotherly, or perhaps the blend, sisterly. I used to try to answer him, sincerely. But sincerity is his forte. Now I say fine and smile. Len was

angry for a while that I wouldn't be his close friend, but now he looks resigned, if still a bit perplexed.

Ian said to me, one night, "I wish I could think like you." I laughed. "No, you don't," Len said, "I've been trying to figure out how Brooks thinks, for two years."

He holds
a magazine
up to his face,
and his face
becomes a
beautiful woman
who holds
a piece of silk
to her cheek.

Joel Martin

Joel had a dream that he and I and Len and someone else were in the Marine Corps. He couldn't find his place in the ranks. He asked me, "Can you have an Oedipal Complex and be in the Marines?" I went blank for a few seconds and then said, in a strong voice, "Yes." He and I had talked about our mothers a few days before. He had read an article about Isaac Bashevis Singer giving a speech at West Point. At 17, he considered joining the Marine's to get away from home.

A straw's
shredded wrapper
lies softly
beside
the base
of the lamp
in the darkened café.

“Pablo” Pat Curtis

Pablo is about to turn 30. He decided, at 23, to waste the next 7 years and then begin his life’s work at 30. Time’s up. His eyes have dark crescents below them. He’s a heavy pot smoker, and he works as a typist, downtown. Writing is his talent and his ambition. He says he’s a spineless Pisces, who needs a strong, clean-living Virgo to straighten up his act.

He says he’s a hermit who becomes gregarious to the point of being obnoxious. He has to buy me a beer. I am reluctant. “You want to come up, and I want to bring you down,” he says, and barks a laugh of recognition.

Pablo’s real name is Pat, or Patrick. He’s tall, bearded, and ironic. He has a marvelous recall of passages from great writers.

“I don’t know why I work downtown,” he says. “Well, I do know. For the money. $6.50 an hour and all the coffee you can drink.”

The menu board
has an impossible
number of choices,
i.e., more than one.

The Poet

A young, dark, longhaired, romantically tragic and ethereal girl, in blue overalls, comes over to my table, looks at my feet up on the other chair, and says, softly, lightly, "Well, I won't sit on your feet."

I move my feet, and she sits down to invite me to a party, Saturday night, even though she'll be evicted by then. My car has no battery, so she considers getting me one, so I might be enlisted to help her move. She begins a long, disjointed monologue about pollution and dead leaders.

She stares at my cigarette, undecided whether to tear it from me or forget about it. "The party would be good for you," she says and then tells me of a guy she invited who said no, he was into solitude. She says she's into life studies. She'd like to go *bang-bang-bang* to all the new politicians in Washington. I say, "Well, I'd like to get back to my musings." Hurt, but acquiescent, she says, "I'd like to get back to my salad."

She goes, but she leaves me a poem, I presume, about the recent shooting of John Lennon.

Going to the sea
a bluebird dropped
a lennon leaf
on my shoulder

shoulder say
oogh
no oh
well

ding dong.

The Window Seat

In the afternoon, the café has its other face on. People wander in, stroll by. The sun angles in across the rooftops. Boutique Guerillas come in for lunch and a cappuccino, removed from the regular life of the face, mindful of shopping and soiree planning. They bitch about the slow service and the excess of bean sprouts on the salad.

One day, last spring, a 67 year old man picked up his car at Vittorio's Auto Repair, directly across the street, pulled out through the wide doorway, then his accelerator stuck, mysteriously, at full throttle, and his car, a large Pontiac, lunged across the street, swept aside a parked Toyota, and bulled through the front window and doorway of the Owl and Monkey Café, scattering and wounding a few afternoon coffee-sippers, and came to rest with its right rear tire smack on what had been my favorite chair.

I was home resting a hangover, gotten from several Rainier Ales drunk the night before. When the news spread, several people were concerned I had been crushed beneath the old man's wheels. It was one hangover I was grateful for.

Nevertheless, the loss of my café/office catbird seat, combined with other tragedies, sent me back to Illinois for six months. It was a welcome change, but I'm back and I still like the café life.

I do notice, since my return, that I am sitting at different tables. When my favorite two tables open up, I'm less inclined to leap to them. No, I suspect, am I much longer bound to this café.

The window seat remained open far too long, and I had no choice. I took it.

Rainier Ale is called Green Death. It's the favorite waker-upper of Charles McCabe, local pundit and alcoholic. I have a deaf-mute gesture I use to call for a Rainier at the counter. Four fingers on my left hand sprinkle down in the air near my face, then the index finger points to my ear. Rain-ear. Old Chief Rain in the Ear, the biographer of a café.

I must say, I feel self-congratulatory on this warm, sunny January Thursday afternoon, at my favorite table in my favorite café.

Like meeting
in someone's
kitchen,
like eating
in someone's
living room.

Daniel, Thomas, Bob

I'm sitting at a table with Daniel, who, I just learned, was Paula's last lover. His friend, Thomas, comes up and says, "I saw Paula, yesterday, on Castro. She didn't see me." Thomas doesn't acknowledge my presence. I was with Paula, yesterday, on Castro. I'm sure Thomas saw us together. Paula left Daniel. She left him hurting. I had been telling Daniel about rejection. My publisher turned me down, yesterday, without prejudice, with care for my better poems. That is, he told me he liked the poems I used to write. He spoke of them fondly. He said they were my better poems. Either that, or he can't accept change.

Daniel's leg is jumping. Thomas is talking about buying a car, a flashy car, to pick up girls. Daniel rejects the crass proposal. He looks terrible, distraught. Thomas's sympathy is clumsy, harsh, protective, lost in his own ambivalence. I slip, going up for a beer. "I'll dispose of this banana peel," I say, picking up air with my fingers.

Some men like men and don't like women because of their desire for them. Some men go along, looking for satisfaction for their sad, angry wait. Some men don't like their dissatisfaction, unable to say, "I am stopped."

Bob stands with Daniel and says, "Here's the five-foot-six club." He laughs and says to me, "I notice that you hang out with the six-footers." His remark makes me uncomfortable. It's true. Even though I like both Bob and Daniel, I enjoy the company of men my height more easily. I feel intimidated around those who are obviously shorter. At the same time, I wear two-inch heels, to give me an even greater sense of myself.

Besides that, Daniel is still *in love* with the woman I'm with now. She is short enough to wear four inch heels, and in Khan Tok, a Thai restaurant, where you are required to remove your shoes, she insisted on walking on tip-toe, back to the table, which was lower than the lowest Limbo bar.

Daniel does eye-brain research, he has black hair, large eyes, a long nose, and a decidedly quiet, nervous manner. Bob is a writer of sorts, a reader, a thinker. He laughs gently every time he sees me. We used to play ball at the Jewish Community Center, and we played well together. While Daniel and I are respectful, we are antagonists. Bob is complicit. He suggests the best bargain around is the New York Times Book Review, at 35 cents, two doors up, at I. Gutenberg. I go out and get one, and begin reading about the dearth of literary interest in the new administration. A poet will not read at the Inauguration.

A framed mirror
reveals
a parallel universe
in the likeness
of this café,
enticing,
forbidden.

The Poet Reading

The poet, reading his poems, has a nice voice, but no presence to overcome the bus going by, the door opening, the telephone that rings, and the giggles from the kitchen.

Each poem has its spoken title, in that nice way, that turns our ordinary place lives into quintessence and melody, but fails to deliver any spoken feeling or any feeling wellspoken.

Each poem, like prelude, stops, then nothing opens. He drives into a town, drives into another town, enters another, approaches a place where people live, yet, either he never lived there, or he keeps silent about it.

The Queen of the Rhumba sits across from me. Melancholy, she says, “Nothing. Nothing.”

I tried to like his little flowers for an absent lover, but the Queen of the Rhumba wants to dance, in the poem, and in every way that lovers dance.

A bus
going nowhere.

People get on,
get off,
all day long.

The seats
stay warm.

This nowhere
is somewhere.

Lindy Stein

Dreamers' Café. Lindy Stein is "in video." She works for a video production company that's on the rise. She does training films for corporations. "It's ironic," she says, "My company has its own training technique. It's called 'baptism under fire.'" She's working constantly. Last year, she did video for UCMed Center. Before that, she was a video student artist at SF State.

Lindy's first love was Derek Eveland, the guy who created the Owl and Monkey Café, years ago. After a while, as a 20 year old, tall, attractive, eager young woman, she left him, for adventure. She met a guy last year who compared favorably with Derek, but they broke up. "Footloose and fancy-free, again," she says, wistfully.

She's reading "The Culture of Narcissism" and trying to decide if she's a New Yorker or a Californian. Like everyone in video (nee TV) she never watches it. Her company, she says, has two rules of conduct, its moral code: no military work and no porn.

Lindy is earning money now, and she' spending it on herself. "The Rehabilitation of Lindy," she says. She got a haircut and new shoes. "I'm starting at both ends and working toward the middle." I'm not certain if, by middle, she means the belt, or below the belt.

The fleshy little waitress from Milano's Pizza, next door, passes by, and Lindy says, "I wish I looked like that, I mean, had her shape and the way she carries herself."

"But you do look like that, only taller," I say.

"Well, thanks a lot," she grins.

"All you need is more paint on your face and some designer jeans."

I don't like someone else's name on my ass," she says.

Ah, there's the rub.

"We make our videotapes so fast, there's no time for doubt."

"I think doubt is essential," I say.

"Not when it's debilitating. I mean; I'm more suited to doubt." She indicates, in a sweep, the café. "Sitting around and dreaming. I think I can, I think I can, I think I can. Now, when we're done with something, I realize, "Hey, I did it!"

I congratulate Lindy on her success. A friend of hers has a play opening at the New Victoria Theatre, just reviewed at a near total failure.

"I need to meet more artists," she says, "get out, get some new blood."

“Was Derek your great lost love?”

“He was my first. I had nothing to compare it with.”

She gathers her packages of new clothes. “I designated $500 to start my new wardrobe.” She sticks out a hand. We shake hands. “Always a pleasure,” she says.

“Always a pleasure,” I say, surprised to hear myself say it.

She goes off to see a movie. “A light, fluffy movie,” she says.

Quiet,
the café,
calm.

Neither this
nor that.

No business,
no relationship.

Iris Melbern

"I didn't give a shit about John Lennon before he died. Then he died, and suddenly he's a martyr. Now I'm reading everything he ever sang." Iris is a *New Musician*. She helps produce a magazine called "New Music." She's working at Stanford, under a federal grant for new music. From what I can gather, it's a combination of electronic, synthesizer, and invented instruments.

"Speaking of Reagan," she says, "he'll improve the economy, but there's always the threat of nuclear war. If that happens, we'll all be dead or mutilated. It'll be nice. Exciting." She laughs.

Iris has long, dark, curled hair and sits with an air of casual disdain, nearly a sneer. She smiles at her friends genuinely.

"…chimes, drums, vibes, pure sound, really beautiful," she says. "Do you still see some of those people?"

Her world, she says, is a lot smaller now. Little things mean a lot. Like, which bell to use. When she gets up to leave, she says, "Don't let anyone know you like to come in here. You'll have to hang a sign around your neck, "I am not a regular."

He rolls his head
like a bowling ball
in a salad bowl,
rolls his eyes,
says, “Yup, yup.”

Victor Kline

Victor survived the holocaust. He was a boy, forced to run across Eastern Europe for years, in hiding, eating only turnips, at times, dug from beneath the snow. Whether or not it scarred him beyond healing, he believes it did. He believes it separated him from everyone else. No one else shares his experiences.

In his late forties, he looks many years older. He has large, bulging, mournful, desperate eyes. He thinks women misinterpret his longing, his despondent gazes. They think he rapes them, he thinks.

Victor is a printer, recently married to a younger, Russian Jew, hardly fluent in English, a marriage of convenience, that has not removed Victor from his lust, but it has removed lust from his conversation. Always a chess player, he used to survey the room for young beauties to assault. Now he's more intent on the board.

He tried to use me to approach girls. He would go on at length, at volume, singing my praises to any nearby female. Then he would invite me and the girl to The Hooker's Ball. I told him to drop the routine, and the girl, smiling uncomfortably, would withdraw to the other end of the room.

When I performed my satires in the café, he gloried in exultations, followed by the inevitable disclaimer. "You are a great. You could play the Fairmont. You are great. Of course, you'd have to clean up the language."

Victor's face is lined, sagging, and pouchy. His brother was a concert violinist. Victor regrets his failure to pursue a career in music. Remorse and regret are the tools in Victor's kit bag. There was so little blood left in his heart, after all those turnips, after all that fear. Victor waits to die, I think. His leg twitches under the table as he sucks on his cigarette.

Obedient chairs,
in gentle formation,
a vibrant anticipation,
a motionless dance.

The Old Woman

The old woman with the twisted leg humbles up the street. A thin cane helps her to make the walking go. She stays near the walls, past doorways, by my window, like a fish in a bowl.

Inside her head, prickled with grey, wrapped in old-age silk, she carries some thinking. She undulates along. Some thought swims like water flows. It makes a life.

The old wooden floor
does not hide but
tells the tale
of passengers
and sailors alike.

Bonnie Sloane

Bonnie is a singer. She painted the logo on the front window of the café. She collected the money for me when I performed her last. I dropped into Salonica's, on 24th Street, one night, a year ago, to say hello to Jeannie, the bartender. Jeannie said, "Listen to this," and she put on a tape. I listened. It was good. It wasn't just good. It got my body jumping. "That's very good," I said. "Who is that?"

It sounded like Billie Holliday doing Randy Newman. "That's Bonnie!" Jeannie said and pointed down to the end of the bar. There was Bonnie, with two guys, drunk on her ass.

Bonnie and I used to get drunk together. We met a guy named Don, and he filled out the trio. He was there to protect us from each other and give us the freedom to love each other. I barely remember the guy; he was so quiet. He told me that his father had no feet. I transferred the image to him, and ever since, when I think of him, I see a man whose legs stop six inches above the ground. A floater.

Bonnie is a chanteuse, a pipsqueak with a sultry voice. She wears her hair in a bowl cut, and she wears old-lady dresses from the forties. She's singing tonight at the Owl and Monkey. We had to find an extension cord for the spotlight.

The espresso machine sputters in the background. A bus roars by. There are ten people in the café. Bonnie sings confidently. It's been a year since her debut. I told her it'd be a year of surprise knowledge. I thought I was a pompous fool telling her anything.

Bonnie looks beautiful, but I'm prejudiced, and stage lighting has a myth-kindness about it. There are now seven people in the café. Admission is $2.00. Most of the time, I think I don't belong in this café, but sometimes I think I'm the only one who does.

As Bonnie sings, people walk by, step up to the door, check out the deserted tables, the cover charge, and walk on. On the other hand, I think she's gotten up too many singer gestures in her year of performing. It seems like a protection for such nights as this, but it kills the spontaneity, the danger. It's a direct route to the lounges.

Bonnie once chastised me, because I wasn't performing. "Get off my back," I said, in cold anger, "I know what I'm doing." It seems to me, we occupy the same viewpoint, but we're looking in opposite directions.

He comes back
from the bathroom
like coming again
from the woods
into the clearing.

Mac McGuinness

Mac was a football player at SF State. He had a tryout with the Rams. It was hopeless. He pled nolo contendere and became a small-time building contractor and part-time union carpenter.

He was upset, yesterday, because he went to bid on a garage reconstruction, and the man said, "You want to smoke some weed?" and the next day he told Mac he'd accepted a lower bid. Eleven dollars lower. Mac bid $1500, and the other guy bid $1489.

Mac has bad knees from college ball. Pro ball would have left him a cripple. He gave me some of his painkiller, once, and my goodness, such a painkiller it was. I noticed, after 45 minutes of peaceful euphoria, I hadn't touched my beer or my cigarettes.

Mac whispers most of what he says, as if it's a confidence. Bill Hoover comes near us, and Mac gets agitated. Hoover avoids bathing, and once Mac had to run to the toilet to vomit, he says, the stench was so bad.

He says he has a good woman now, and his good humor has made him more attractive. "I wonder if I could handle two women," he seems to ask. "Just fantasizing. After all, the dick has no conscience."

"Trouble is, you're attached to it," I say. The new waitress comes by, collecting dishes in a big, yellow tub. Mac grabs her arm, grabs my arm, stares into the tub, and says, "Room enough in there for him?" She laughs. Mac says, "My dry wit gets me in trouble."

Mac is 6'3" and 250. "My size keeps me from getting in trouble," he says. He sat down, just as I was beginning to write about him. I put my pad away, and say, "Where were you an hour ago, when I was staring at the wall? Great timing, Mac."

"I won't get you any painting jobs," he says, "unless you listen to my bullshit."

Mac is a big teddy bear, and he waddles on his knees. It's raining. He was working on a house on Noriega. He tried. He changed clothes three times and then gave up.

"Ah the good old Owl and Monkey," he sighs, "I've had pretty good luck in here, actually." He looks at the new waitress. "I think I'll take a sauna."

Reading and talking,
sitting and eating,
rain or shine.

Drinking and looking,
thinking and writing,
happy or sad,
rich or poor.

May I take
your order,
please?

Frank Galway

Frank Galway is a housepainter. His company is called Frank Galway, Inc. Frank's real name is Gouda. His father was an immigrant, a prizefighter, and a smalltime crook. Frank's brother is a hood, and his sister is an executive. Frank was a street fighter in Coney Island, before he was fifteen. He used to get up every day, go out on the street and beat someone up. And every night, he would crawl into bed and cry, for fear someone would beat him up. His rule was *hit first*.

When the family moved to Santa Barbara, Frank went to school, the first day, picked out the biggest, toughest kid he could find, and decked him. To his surprise, he was ostracized. This is California. Surfers don't do that.

Despite being undersized for the event, Frank became a college All-American shot-putter. He got a PhD in philosophy and became a communist. His girlfriend's father said he was Pinko. Frank said, "I'm not Pinko, I'm Red." Frank wrote a book about Thomas Jefferson and prepared to teach at Harvard. The book was rejected, and he never got the teaching opportunity.

In the early days of the Owl and Monkey, Frank was still weightlifting, pipe smoking, conducting Marxist seminars in the back room, working behind the counter, and charming every woman in sight. He met Sherry, and they moved in together. Sherry is a flirtatious blond, 35, with three sons. She used to live with a famous rock and roll singer. (The Monkees) She must have seemed quite a catch to Frank, and vice-versa. They've been splitting up for three years. Sherry laments about how easily men can be pushed around.

Frank goes down to Union Street and picks up girls. He tells them, "I'm living with a woman, but I have to have other women. Let's go fuck."

Frank went to work as a painter for Dick. Dick pushed him around and yelled at him for six months. Frank finally couldn't take it anymore and punched Dick. Dick said thanks, he needed that, and Frank became his foreman. Frank got me a job working for Dick. I instantly disliked Dick. Frank and I talked long about bosses and workers. We planned to quit and become partners, but Frank wouldn't quit. I quit. Many months later, when Frank quit, with Dick's blessings, his truck, and half of his equipment, I went to work with Frank, for Frank.

I got Chris a job working for Frank, and he and I talked long about bosses and workers. I grew tired of and angry at Frank's pseudo-Marxist hypocrisy, and I quit, and Chris and I became partners. No bosses, no workers. Frank's system is pure capitalism, a dead ringer for Dick's. He makes a lot of money,

using a pool of workers he keeps hanging, never knowing if there's work, form week to week, and he pays them adequate wages. He hired his girlfriend, and he took out taxes and didn't report it.

Chris and I made up an expression: To Frank. it works like this; you do a job like sanding a bank of windows for eight hours, and then Frank comes up to you, five minutes before quitting, and says, "No. No. That's not good enough." He commandeers the sandpaper, takes a few swipes at it, steps back, and says, "There, now it's good." That's what it is to Frank someone.

Frank got the feeling, after I quit working for Dick and then for him, "That poor Steve, he can't work for anyone or with anyone." It must be confusing for him that Chris and I work so well together.

Frank and I used to be close. We worked together, every day, and we sang as we worked. We'd go to the café and read and talk. I believed his words. Then I saw the difference between his talk and his action. He would complain to me, once a week, for over a year, about Sherry. And he was sympathetic about my own difficulties. That felt good. He was "tolerant" about my "poetic temperament." Later, he confided to others how unreliable I was. I wasn't sure about the distinction.

One night, we came out of The Little Shamrock Saloon, down the street from the Owl, drunk, laughing, with our arms around each other. A gang of a dozen teenage or college boys was coming down Ninth Avenue. They began a shout of, "Faggot! Faggot!"

I was still preoccupied, looking for Frank's truck, as he picked out the leader of the gang and dropped him, with one blow. He came back to me, running, on his way to the bar to recruit reinforcements. "Run!" he said. I started to run, and then I said, "Shit, I don't run." I was full of John Courage.

Four of the boys came up to me, and the guy that Frank had decked started in on me. He pushed me in the chest. I acted like a brick wall and asked the kid, "What's the matter? Don't you love your friends?" The kid wavered a second, and practically cried in confusion, "But he shouldn't have hit me!"

Mike Gatto and a couple of others showed up. The fight was over. Gatto told the kid, "You guys are crazy. Frank and Steve are the biggest ladies' men around." Bizarre. All the male bullshit hitting the fan at once.

Frank told me, a while back, "I don't think I want to go on painting, maybe another year. I don't know what to do. I have nothing. I'll probably end up working the counter in the Owl and Monkey."

"Another year," I thought, "Oh, and how's Sherry?"

Frank got back from vacation in Mexico, looking tan and harried. While he and Sherry were in Oaxaca, the Paris of Mexico, Sherry's boys had wild pot parties in their house, back home, stole Frank's van, had an accident in El Sobrante, and were arrested. Sherry refused to be angry. "I guess she's overwhelmed by guilt," Frank says.

It was the last straw. Frank is moving into Len's place. This is the hundredth time Frank and Sherry have broken up. This time, however, Frank has an excuse. The boys damaged his property.

Sherry says she'll sue him for half his earnings over the last three years. Frank has supported Sherry in high style. Now she's got rights.

"Cunt!" he says.

Larry says Frank's life would make a great soap opera. Frank says to me, "Did your mother tell you life would be so difficult?" The clutch went out on Frank's truck. "My mother never had to work," he says, "She told me I never would, either."

Frank says he's going to fly his crew to Mexico for a vacation. Capitalist Paternalism and Materialist Escapism, back to the primitive. "They're so laid back in Mexico," he says.

Larry leans over and says to me, "Hey, Steve, how does it feel to take poor Daniel's girlfriend away from him?"

"I didn't take his girlfriend," I say.

"Oh, well, I'm just kidding. She's a nice girl."

Wrong ideas abound about everything.

This audience
sits on stage.

These actors
speak when
spoken to.

This drama
unwinds.

These,
whom actors
portray,
also act.

Andy Eifert

Andy is a big, tall, blond kid. His girlfriend Didi works the counter. Andy does too, sometimes. He's a singer in the band, *Love of Pete*. JP Sutter, who also works the counter, is in the band. JP is the senior worker at the Owl and Monkey. In some ways, JP *is* the Owl and Monkey. JP looks like Mark Twain's riverboat captain.

Didi is about five-feet-nothing, and Andy is easily six-feet-three. They are, or have been, in love like teenagers. Andy is soft-spoken, shy, quietly intelligent, eventually a fine singer, and probably, quite soundly, nuts. All he needs is time, and he's got a lot of time ahead of him.

Andy's excuse for sitting down and talking is to bum a smoke. He introduces a friend, who asks me if I play with Andy and JP. I tell him it is my secret ambition. "I can carry a tune, but I drop it," I say.

Andy is impressed when I tell him, that under the right circumstances, I can play the blues harp and sing. He invites me to join him on stage, Saturday night. I blanche in fear and beg off with aplomb. I say, "Jesus, I would love it, but I would have to be too bold to do it sober or too drunk to do it justice."

Enrique

It's late. A large group of singers and musicians is playing folk-hippie living room music. The café is smoky. At the table next to me, with his back to me, leaning back in his chair, far enough to crowd me, is a guy who's been in and out of here for years. Enrique is his name, and he's from Guatemala. When he first got to town, he claimed he'd lost his glasses, and could he borrow my typewriter, and did I have a place to sleep.

Last year, just before I went to Illinois, he barged up to me and said, "Wait, I'll get my pad, I want to draw you." I was sketching at the time, and I was trying to be alone, in another café.

He lumbers through the Owl and Monkey Café, overweight and sullen. He hasn't bought anything in the last three hours, and yet he's spread out like an insolent Blob from Outer Space. He's finally removed his fur collar, black vinyl coat, and his six foot, striped scarf, and he's pulled up his sleeves to reveal a six inch scar on the back of his bicep, six inches from my nose. He's wearing a CCSF T-shirt (City College of SF) and paint-spattered jeans.

He recognizes someone and shoves on over to bum a cigarette and say hello. Who knows, he may be a genius. Larry sits down across from him, and Enrique says, "Hey, man, how the hell are you? You want a beer? I'm broke, man." He gets a pension from somewhere. He won't tell Larry how much he gets a month. "Hey, the last time I told someone how much I get…I mean…I don't know, man."

Larry asks Enrique how his ice cream was, yesterday, and moves across the room. Enrique has the right kind of hair to comb, long and straight back. It's amazing how long a person can comb his hair without shredding his ears.

It's amazing how long I can sit here, like Toulouse Lautrec, and paint these portraits. Sitting in this café is like sitting at a typewriter, if I were a novelist. Sometimes, it just sits there. Sometimes, it breaks down. Sometimes, it sprouts wings.

Enrique has decided to get himself another Styrofoam cup of water. He stands at the corner like a rhododendron with legs. He's wearing a giant brass VW belt buckle. He smokes Marlboros and lights them with a flame-thrower Zippo. He blows the smoke out, like a blast furnace, snorts his sinuses, moans, coughs, blows his nose, yanks a chair under his arm, leans into one of the banal paintings on the wall and belches.

Crazy Freddy

The rubber mat that everyone tripped over has been replaced by a piece of cardboard. I chucked the old mat into the street, last week, after a few beers. The next day, I noticed the bare floor. "Oh, shit," I remembered the mat, lying between parked cars, in a heap, like a dead cat. "Oh, good," I congratulated myself.

Crazy Freddy and his two border walking cohorts just came in. "Me and the guys are touring the neighborhood. I'm still out of work. It's been 12 years. I applied at Bechtel. It'd be good if they took me back on. Then I'd appreciate this a lot more." He glances up, indicating the café, the city, life itself. Freddy is tall and looks about 35. He may be about 14.

"What are you reading?" he asks me. "I'm reading *The Frontier in American History*." Joel Martin had recommended it to me. Fred says, "Does it have Daniel Boone in it? He discovered the frontier. In Kentucky. That's where it was, back then. Well, it's been good talking to you. Hey, I saw you painting in my neighborhood, once." I remember. It was three years ago.

Fred likes jokes, and he really admires his dad. His dad told him all kinds of interesting things. His dad told him how to smoke a cigarette, and his dad told him how to strike a match. Always, away from you. Only girls light a match the other way.

Fred once told the following joke, at the top of his lungs. Everyone in the café, at the time, was nervous, but attentive.

"It seems this guy died and went to heaven. And, after a while, he got real hungry. He could look down and see the Devil and all the people in Hell. And they were sitting around a big table, eating all kinds of things; wine and ham hocks, and watermelon, and ham hocks.

So the guy went to God, and he said, 'God, I'm real hungry. Could you fix me something to eat?' So God looked at him and scratched his head, and went away for a while, and came back, and gave the guy a tuna fish sandwich.

Well, the guy was real surprised, and he said, 'But, God, the Devil and all the people in Hell are down there eating all kinds of things; wine and ham hocks and watermelons and ham and all kinds of things.'

So God looks at the guy, and he says, 'I'm real sorry, but I never expected anyone to show up here.'"

Everybody in the café broke up, laughing, and Fred grinned and said, "Yeah, well, I like jokes."

Norman and Donna

Norman just showed up in the café, with Donna and their daughter, Debbie. Norman is a musician, former LA rocker, who could have been, if he wanted, a member of a high-powered, big money, blast band currently at the top of the charts. (Van Halen)

Norman is a born-again Christian and too independently creative to opt for fame and success. Donna was going to divorce him, because of his "failure", a couple of years ago, and they split up. Norman, who believes in fate, serendipity, God, and luck, was stumped and mystified by her attitude.

Donna used to work the counter in the Owl and Monkey. She was nuts about Norman when he was a teenage Jim Morrison. She because mystified and stumped by Norman's aging disaffection with the rock scene.

They moved back to LA, last year, then up to the niceness of Marin County, and now they want to be back in the City. "This is home," says Norman, his big, watery, blue eyes nearly inscrutable, bordered with a continual, confused sadness. Some faith is best left free from scrutiny in details of actual life.

Nothing much has happened to Norman's music since a few years ago, when a benefactor gave him ten grand for a recording studio of his own. Donna now stands by Norman, lovingly resigned (or resignedly loving). "I don't get it," she seems to say, "and I guess I never will."

She's teaching him
how to manage change,
mispronounces *coaching*
as *choking,* turns
her pencil to eraser,
laughs as she corrects
her notes, one hand
holding her throat.

Mike Gatto, Sally Dickenson

I was sitting with Louis, last night, discussing with him the psychic life. Louis tells me to check my painting partner's eyes. "If they aren't balanced, then he's deceiving you." We talked about human relationships, the balance of energies, the levels and elemental equations of soul.

Mike Gatto and Sally Dickenson sat down, and we began drinking Rainiers. I felt demonic and devilish, with my shoulder next to Louis's. Louis was waiting for someone to leave a half-eaten salad, for his dinner. I was spending my last two dollars on beer.

I turned to Louis and said, "Louis, what you need is to get laid." He blanched and mumbled, "Oh, no, too messy." I turned to Mike and Sally and said, "Someone ought to bust Louis's cherry."

Louis said, "I had a relationship, a year ago, but none before that, for nine years." A year ago was when Louis opted for ersatz sainthood. Today, he's looking at me, nervously, I think.

Today, Sally is talking about Mike. "He's ambivalent about the whole thing, and the rest is confusion." Mike was president of his senior class at Hollywood High. His father is a character actor, but lately, almost exclusively, he's in real estate.

His father demonstrated to Mike his Svengali approach to women. A real charmer. Mike is ambivalent about his father, and the rest is confusion. Sally was talking about Mike's latest attempt at a career. He's taken the LSAT and passed it with flying colors, and now he's applying to law school. Mike is also a writer. One of the excruciating kind. Like pulling teeth. He's made several forays back into the Holly Woods to make contacts as a screenwriter.

For a time, he sold cars with John Carlson. Mike knows next to nothing about cars, but that's not the point in car sales. Car sales is the mythologizing of ownership. "This car is you!" John's attitude is comical and ironic. Mike's attitude is depression.

John shows me a computer game, made in Japan, that he says drove Sally nuts. "Sally," he says, in his inimitable analysis, "is reputed to be a very together lady, if not an automaton in her perfection."

It's a game with little tiny figures of two men holding a net under a burning building, and across the way, an ambulance. Repeatedly, at an ever-increasing rapidity, babies fall from the burning building. If they hit the net, they bounce once. They bounce a second time in the net, if it's moved

properly, into the ambulance. If they miss the net, they hit the ground with a splat. The game is designed so that it's finally impossible to save the babies.

Sally told me about a dream she had a few days ago. She saw she had a mouth in the palm of her hand, and then her hand rose up and smashed a tiny child. No wonder John's game was more than an oddity.

He leans over
his table,
like a man
staring
peacefully
into deep
water.

Gypsies

A man and a woman are sitting across from each other, sharing a pate on a piece of waxed paper, or a baked potato, I can't tell for certain. They are holding hands, and the woman is singing to him, with a pained expression on her face. It's Yiddish, or Gypsy, singing, or moaning. One line emerges, "I will KILL my man!"

Doug Connelly goes up to the counter and says to JP, "Hey, JP, turn up the radio, so we can dispense with this noise."

JP doesn't get it. The radio doesn't go up. She keeps up the caterwauling. Doug packs up and leaves.

Now, the woman is arm-wrestling her lover. "Put you into high gear," she says and laughs.

This pond,
this fire,
this crossroads,
this moment,
this hope,
this memory,
this place
called here
and now.

Felice and Mark

Felice is a poet. A couple of years ago, she was a lost soul, wearing the same bedraggled leather jacket, the same long, purple dress, the same wobbly, high-heeled shoes, her hair stringy and dirty, her teeth rotted and plaque encrusted.

Still, she had a look in her eyes of the good soul. She met Mark, a nice looking young fellow, and they married. Now, Felice's teeth are good, her clothing renewed, her hair full and shaped. She's much the same, but protected.

She's been invited to participate in a seminar, "Women in the Creative Process." She tells about some program where children are given chocolates for each completed poem. Then, I assume, it follows that the way to tell if a woman is in the creative process is if she's fat and has pimples.

Felice's sister lost too much weight, recently. They suspected mononucleosis, or "…she's contracted a strain of malaria from working in the Bank of America." Mike Gatto ran into her on the street. She was emaciated and gray. Mike said she looked "cute."

After four years in therapy, four years in writing school, Felice stopped writing for eight months. Mark said to her, "If you write three poems, I'll take you out to dinner." Women in the Creative Process.

A loaf
of bread,
a goof-off
of coffee,
a relaxation
of soup.

Claire and Suzi Peru

Claire came up to me, “Steve, could you do me a real big favor?”

“Uh, sure.”

She had to go up the street to the Front Room Pizza Parlor, to pick up the last checks for herself and Suzi Peru. When Suzi was fired, the manager got mean, so Claire wanted me along, as protection.

I think about it. “I’d just love to help you out,” I say, about as sure as I could be, given the streak of yellow that had begun to spread up my back.

I realized my body was the “real big favor” she was talking about. I said to pretend I was her boyfriend, and we were stopping by, on our way to the zoo.

There was no trouble. I got back in one piece. Claire engineered the confrontation with aplomb. I was the plum.

Reading,
he holds
three fingers
to his forehead,
a tripod with
its other end
an elbow planted.

Jerry Fritz

Jerry likes to wear loose, baggy pants that are tight and formfitting at the hips that outline his genitals like a second skin. Jerry is tall and thin, wears a boyish grin, has shoulder-length, stringy, brown-blond hair, and looks ten years older than he is. Jerry is a womanizer. Frank once said he could never be attracted to any woman who is attracted to Jerry. Jerry once said to me, "God, I'm a whore."

Then he told me a story. He met a woman and went with her for a ride to the beach. At a stop sign, he was attracted to a girl in a sports car, beside them. At the next light, he jumped out, ran up to the girl in the sports car and told her that he absolutely had to meet her.

Jerry is a lover of sun, softball, and darts. He's an easy lay, and a lot of women see him as a confidant. Occasionally, he will read a book, and from time to time, he will paint a house. There are mixed reports on his skill. He says he's quite good.

He doesn't have a mean bone in his body. The debate continues whether mean bones are functional or vestigial. Sally thinks mean bones may be a new evolutionary manifestation. There is debate whether Jerry has any bones in his body at all, other than the one that shows through his pants.

To be alone,
not lonely,
she enters
the crowded café.

Sally Dickenson

Sally is a med-student, a month away from becoming a physician. We were lovers once, like brother and sister, pretending. Her intelligence, integrity, and heart are easily apparent in her conversation. In the last week of her internship, as she waits for the AMA Draft to send her to a major league medical team, they are keeping her occupied with a compulsory course in ethics. The ethics of the medical profession is a constant in her thinking, anyway. Sally thinks like a healer, and the profession is institutional.

In December, Sally worked 116 yours a week. Now she is waiting, and the regimentation is being countered by a rebellion. The form of the rebellion, at this point, is jocularity and confusion. Sally has been in school since birth.

When I first met her, I told her she looked like one of the *Before* and *After* Girls in Cosmopolitan Magazine. The *Before*. But, I think, the transformation will take place, not in her makeup, but in her makeup.

Sally had a great love at Yale, when she was there as an undergraduate, and she took a mythic leap, leaving him for school in California. The love broke up and down, and now career looms large at the brink.

She's been working at the VA Hospital. She calls it the VA Spa. Patients are known to malinger in its rare, resplendent comfort, sitting as it does on the cliff just beyond the Golden Gate.

There's a fellow in the café, scratching his head, making innumerable phone calls, carrying dog-eared papers, who was at the VA Hospital. Sally did an exceptionally skin graft on his abscessed ankle. The guy broke it open and hung out for a few more weeks. He has the sad-eyed, beleaguered smile of a man with the Achilles heel of world-weary wisdom. It's a ruse. I wonder what it takes to make one want to stay in the hospital.

My kingdom
for a horse.

My horse
for another
cup of coffee.

Erma's Twin

There's a woman talking to Phil about statutory rape. I remember her, now, for the two brief conversations I had with her, over the years, both concerning rape. She's reading Science Magazine, saying it requires concentration.

She looks like Erma Bombeck, the quintessential homebody. She and Phil are now discussing big waves. Do I detect a pathology here? Yes, of course. What's the point of talking to strangers, if you can't reveal your essentials? Is it indecent exposure? No, because the two flashers, meeting each other, raincoat to raincoat, cancels the crime.

Two men,
who seem to be
salesmen,
turn out to be
dramatists,
discussing
Edgar Allen Poe,
to be
or nevermore
to be,
a play
of some sort.

He wipes his eyes,
she holds her chin.

She feeds herself
like a mother does.

He holds his pen
like a hunter
before
a silent sky.

She licks
her fingers.

Eileen Warner

Eileen is a painter, bank teller, 32, with frizzy hair and a fizzy voice. She is determinedly outspoken, and she drives her car similarly, with no attention to detail. She's a native of San Francisco. She lives with her mother and her drunken stepfather. Her mother criticizes her artwork, and her father tears up her mail.

Eileen is a sisterly sort of woman, who falls for guys and then wrenches her independence back from them, with regret, remorse, and a deep sigh of relief. Her current love lives in Sweden. The last heavy lived in Australia. She has a brother, who, everyone claims, is a better artist, and she lives in a private torment of not enough talent, not enough psychosis, and not enough will. She's organizing an art show of 25 acquaintances, and in that may lie a future.

Eileen plucks a Winston between her birdlike fingers and tells me about her latest skirmish with the hated, ever-present, authorities; bank manager, bar owner, café owner, teacher, store manager; small time despots all. It's the same old story. She draws good, but you can't draw a bath with a pencil.

He reads
The Pickwick Papers.

She reads
The New York Times.

Archaeologists,
at work.

Sal Bertolucci

Sal is going to *Berserkely* to do some contra-dancing. Line dancing. Sal and I reflect on the Fifties. The Stroll. Danny and the Juniors. Sal is a native. He tried, for two years, to get everyone to call him *Sal California*, but no one did. Larry and Mikael always called him *Spagettilucci*. Sal is a very laid-back fellow. He seldom participates in conversation.

"Any time you want to join in, Sal."

"Hey, I'm listening."

And he does listen. And listen. And listen.

Sal is an accountant. He worked for the quartermaster in Saigon, during the war. He carried a rifle to the opera.

His talent is to go along and blend in. Lately, he's been learning self-actualization, striving for action and willpower.

Sal has great parties. He always has three roommates, and they pack a house with a variety of people, from schools, Erhard Seminar Trainings, Self Actualization, and the café. The café people are the oddballs. A bunch of losers, hanging out together.

Sky above,
earth below,
music on
the radio.

Alice

Alice is short, round, bouncy, and speedy. She has the social graces of a Martian gym teacher. She used to come in the café and sit down with strangers and begin a running monolog of no consequence whatsoever.

She took to Jim for a while, because he gave her some advice on perspective. Alice's perspective remains between the covers of her artist's portfolio. She's trying to market greeting cards, made from her pleasant drawings of lions and tigers.

I was angry with Alice for a long time, because she would interrupt me, no matter what I was doing or who I was talking to. Then, I ignored her, and she was intimidated enough to restrict herself to a half smile and what felt like pity. She asked Jim what my problem was.

He told her I was an artist, and the only way I had to let off steam was to go down to the Panhandle in the park and beat someone up. If I didn't do that, he said, I would remain angry and frustrated. That satisfied her for a while, and she seemed to have learned a lesson from my complaints about her annoyingly aggressive attempts at being sociable.

One night, she sat near me and stared, politely, for a long time, making embarrassed noises in here throat. I suppose she thought she was being polite.

"Steve, I'm sorry, I don't want to interrupt you," she said, interrupting me, intent as I was on my papers and books, trying to stay with what I was doing, but losing it.

"What is it, Alice?

"Well, I've been trying very hard not to be so loud as I used to me," she said in a whisper.

"That's good," I said.

"Anyway, I just wanted to tell you I don't interrupt people like I used to."

"You're interrupting me, right now."

"I'm sorry, but I just had to speak to you."

"Well, thanks, Alice, but now I have to get back to what I was doing."

"I just wanted to tell you. I'm trying to be real quiet."

"Good, Alice. That's good."

"I won't bother you, anymore."

"Well, great. That's great."

I went up to the counter, then to the toilet. When I got back to my table, she was gone.

Sally

"I'm afraid my desire to read Faulkner is somehow wrong," Sally says. She reaches for *Absalom, Absalom* in the wee hours of the morning and rejoices. She reads him for his style, like a writer would. She had a poet roommate once, who encouraged her to write. She did, and he told her it stunk.

"Maybe you need more research. Medicine is pretty gothic."

"It sure is."

Her ethics class spent the day exploring the pitfalls of doctoring: suicide, insanity, and alcoholism.

"It's all true," she says, "but the individual responses to the pressure vary so much."

Sally's last love still wants to talk, to see her, and imagine some solution to the impasse of the relationship ending. She believes in talking, but it doesn't work. Her desire to be kind only encourages more false beliefs. She wants to do something to help him in his present need, when the only real help is the adamant refusal to help. Oh, my. We talk about learning and teaching.

"Teaching is a great way to learn."

"But nothing can be taught. Not poetry, not art, not healing, and methods can only be shown, not taught."

And professions.

"Some people are elevated by their titles. Some are only labeled. Some people are just people."

"You can learn everything, except what it is, to be whatever it is, you're being taught to be."

The bamboo
trash basket
is stained
at the base
like a high
water mark,
ankle deep.

Doug Biddle

Doug, the owner, just moved a bicycle out of the doorway. He kicked the crazies out of the café, just as easily. Today, he stops at a table, occupied by a young, seemingly despairing, dirty-fingered man, to move his wrapped drawings from the table to the floor, without saying a word to the man.

The man has beautiful curly locks, an unlit cigarette in his teeth, an empty cap near him, as he reads the Bay Guardian. Doug is seeming not so much the hired hand I once thought, but the throne behind the power. The previous owners, Derek and Julia, founded a café with open doors and an open heart. if there were difficult people, they were dealt with in private, outside, and they returned with a sense of respect and welcome, however cautioned.

They passed the café on to Doug and Patti, after rejecting other applicants. Their concern was that only the right people would carry on the spirit of the café, as it was, when they began it. The shape of the place has not changed, but the veil of respectability has been drawn across their spirit.

The café has been damaged, and I have feared and suspected, for over a year, now, that the subtle and not so subtle changes have destroyed it, even though it seems so much the same. To most people, it probably seems better.

A year ago, after Big Al and Ian were kicked out, I jokingly wrote a short poem and tacked it to the wall, “Free the Owl and Monkey Two.” It’s message was that if the crazies are kicked out, who’s next? The half-crazies, you and I, are next. And after us, who’s left? Nobody but the furniture and those who fit the furniture.

Ian and Big Al were happy when they heard about my statement. I still disliked both of them, and sometimes feared them, in their belligerent, staged insanity, but they are not here, and they are missed. Somehow.

The café is quieter. There are no more nights of wild, convivial, laughing danger and community.

Some come down
from the mountains.

Some come in
from the beach.

Some come
off the road.

Some step
onto a flight.

The Word

There's a point where, when the impulse says, like dreams show up, "Throw this thing that's available across the room." It enacts an explosion. The same engine that functions on tiny explosions says something, beyond running the wheels. It rears back and reels across the polite quiet, an object, like a thrown rod, the written word, like the chronicles of a poltergeist, demands some example of its ambition. It overturns a table or flings an ashtray, managing, instead of imagining, a fist blow or a kiss, a noise, a stupidity, crude and accurate, without nuance or gentle attention to the camaraderie of our shared happy misery. It is to do something without meaning, without knowing its meaning, and have it end up meaning, "I love."

No magic people,
but a magic door,
opening and closing,
opening and closing,
opening.

The Crapshooter

Some will plant a seed in your brain. It's best to notice the root as it begins to insinuate itself. The man said, "Poet's should never marry, never have money, never have a straight gig."

He had sat in his cab, dead broke, thousands in debt, when out of the Sheraton came a bejeweled and well-shod man in a three hundred dollar powder blue suit. As the man got into his powder blue Lincoln, my friend thought, "I'm 35 years old, I've written three novels, one play, and four books of poems, and one of us is a winner, and one of us is a loser. Pick one. If my novel is rejected again, I'm going to stop asking permission to live. *Fuck You!* is going to be my emblem. I'm going to look at life and say, 'Take this job and shove it.' I'm going to take twelve black beauties, drink a beer, and say, 'I quit.'"

This man, who prides himself in his sometimes almost maniacal optimism, who knows the salvation of laughter, who had me laughing at is tale of woe, has left me with my brain in knots.

"It's a good thing you love what you do," he said, "because no one gives a fuck." Well, some do and some don't, and breakthroughs feel like breakdowns, and maybe he can quit, and maybe he can't. I had no advice to give, except to shake his hand, when he only intended to drop a quick wave at me.

"Eight years of busting my balls, writing, and maybe it's just something I failed at." He bumped a chair, making a raggedy exit. The guy in the john outside the card game asked him what he had bet. "My marriage," he said.

"All hell is breaking loose, or breaking loose is all hell," I think, and try to save my own soul, sitting in the café, across from an empty chair; a small, cyclonic image dancing in front of me, like a beautiful woman with a black heart, "Come dance with me," she says, "You know I'm right."

But being right doesn't make it right, and, as my cousin used to say, "That's not what I'm looking for, that's what I'm looking at." Even so, I can't absolve the lingering destructive temptation of apocalypse.

My friend had words for it; "They should take my picture and put it up wherever gamblers are. *This is the guy you are looking for – a born loser."*

I felt as if I contributed to his downfall, simply because I understood what he meant, and when he passed by the café window, my right arm flinched to make a sign, without any idea how to complete it.

A newspaper
is a piece of bark
with honey in it,
with worms in it,
with a map
drawn on it.

The Madman

Whenever he acts unconscious of propriety, his lover loves him more, his thin acquaintances drop off like sheets of ice in a thaw, his good friends rally to a more human question, his mind becomes organic, anarchic, sensible. Despair becomes nothing more than part of the truth.

Without the romance that imbues the frightened into extremes of constraint and dreams of escape, living is beheld, close to what life is, and not what is imagined in airless rooms of alternating desire and dispute.

Smiles
ricochet
around
the room
from face
to face.

Joel Martin, Paka

Marty just told me about a French psychologist who says that if there's a madman around, he enacts the madness inherent in all others. And, if he leaves, or quiets down, or gets kicked out, someone else has to take his place.

I nominated myself, Friday night, as Madman of the Owl and Monkey Café. I got to talking to Geori, an old regular. Geori wanted to buy the Owl and Monkey years ago, didn't or couldn't, and opened up the Seabird Café, instead. Geori is a Palestinian poet, goes under the name Paka, and finally sold out his café to return to a life of letters, or whatever.

We were talking about the spiritual decline of this place, and I began to get worked up, drinking Rainiers. Geori is one of those quiet madmen who trigger me.

Eventually, I leapt across the room to Joel Martin and told him my secrets – writing about the café, wanting to own it, wanting to reinvest the room with its communal energy. I complained about Doug and lamented the lethargy, the loss of the madmen, the installation of gradual, inevitable semi-respectability. Joel suggested that it might be that we have changed and not the café. I was not to be discouraged, and my energy began to be infectious. The disease of madness spread. Tables and chairs began to break their territorial imperative. The noise level rose. It was music.

I met several people, including a New York poet, and a young guy, a musician from Boston with a big grin on his face and a giant scar across his forehead. He delighted in telling me the gruesome tale of the scar, which I forgot.

We all spilled out of the café and on to Clancy's, where I faded, under the influence of more booze, and the next morning, I woke up exhausted and embarrassed. I was glad I went a little nuts, but it takes a toll. My sober self wants to hide out.

Marty told me he heard from three sources that I had put on a real show, and he regretted missing it. He wants me to warn him, next time, so he can catch the act.

"It's your turn, next time, Marty," I said, reveling in my notoriety and wishing to let go of it. Tonight, three days later, the place does seem looser. Joel came in, smiling, and we shook hands. Friday night, I had hugged Joel, several times, and it was genuine. Some of my friendships in here, built in small pieces, over years, and denied for the same reason, are honestly

affectionate, and to a depth that surprises me. The neutrality, when broken, can erupt in caring. Or in anger, I hasten to add.

Joel is wary of Marty, who he suspects is an informer and might delight in telling Doug all my suspicions and doubts about him and his café.

"That's the chance you take," I said, "when you shoot your mouth off, in public.

A bold thought, but I'm apprehensive about it. I don't want to be 86'd from a place that's been like home for me for a long time. But I took the risk. Who knows? Now, I'm vacillating. I don't want the spirit to go back underground. I want a beer. On the other hand, the spirit has to spread into other, willing souls.

We seem ready. Larry, Joel, Dave and I stand, talking, near the counter, unsquelched by the business-as-usual, line-up-and-buy-something mentality. The shyness in my eyes, in my shoulders, in my belly, fades. I find myself grinning as I move about the café. The owners are absent. (Damn, this sounds silly.)

Liz, the counterperson, who I fantasized was coyly hinting at sexual feelings, is now turning on me. After a phone call for me, she says, sarcastically, "Your answering service, sir."

The café has long had a policy of serving coffee outside the regular line of customers. I went up, laid down my forty cents, and waited off to the side.

"You want something in a hurry, Steve?"

Sometimes, I see myself as merely self-centered and too sensitive, but the owners of any business manage, subtly, or not so subtly, to impart their attitude to the help and finally, it filters down to the customers. I sense a showdown brewing, or a breakdown coming, or, I hope, a breakthrough.

Joel is talking to Larry about the dearth of spontaneity. Liz is in a foul mood. She slams down a garbage bag full of bottles and trash. The place is full of quiet chat and book-lovers.

"Bring back the New York cab driver," I tell Joel.

"I wish I could. Sometimes…on my better nights. Like someone would get in my cab and say, 'Kennedy Airport, and step on it! I'm in a hurry,' and I would say, 'That's not my problem.'"

Larry laughs.

"One driver watched a late movie, one night, where a guy says the classic line, 'Penn Central, and step on it, Mac.' The next day, a guy gets in his cab and says, 'Penn Central, and step on it, Mac.' So, the cabbie says, 'Oh, you saw the same movie, huh?'"

The day I met Joel was his first day in town, and his first day in the Owl and Monkey. He asked if he could share my table, and began, in a near shout, to tell me all manner of things. I mentioned to him that he sounded like a New Yorker. I was embarrassed by his volume. It still makes me embarrassed, but I like it to be in life, that ebullience, that divine right of the human voice, that bold fist-hold on speech, that frontier scout of thought, forging and foraging the wilderness of silence.

On his way out the door, in his trench coat and cap, newspaper under arm, Joel says, "Let there be life!" He steps out, then back in. "You get to play the Jason Robards part from *A Thousand Clowns."* Finally, he comes back in and sits down. He tells a story about a corporate executive, who, kidnapped by the Tupamaros, did not have a superior attitude, who began to care about the guerillas, their health, and spirit. Then he tells me about a few minutes on the job, today, as an orderly, a gurney-jockey, at the UCMed Center. He sat down next to a distraught Black guy who was worried about his brother, who was being operated on. The guy took Joel for a doctor, and Joel played the role, not engaging with the man, but asking cautious, polite questions, allowing the man to tell his story.

Then, he talked about generosity. How it's suspect, as if "What's in it for me?" is the truth about any action. He says, "I do something, and then I find myself wondering, 'What is my motive?'"

It occurs to me that the current equivalent of "What's in it for me?" is karma. Any generosity is only an action in the karmic balance. Like buying credits. Chips, in the poker game of life.

I began to speak about my motives for writing what I had thought was a *satire* of the Owl and Monkey Café. But it isn't. And here I go, again. I begin to realize that I want to be IN my life, IN this life, and not safely ensconced in some ironic objectivity. The change I sought in the Owl and Monkey arrived in my thinking at the moment I wanted out of merely sketching the characters of the place. The more I wrote about the people who come here, as regulars and as strangers, the less I was able to keep my distance.

There's a woman sitting across the room, holding both her hands up to her face, observing, with fascination, her stunted and disjointed thumb, as she moves it in and out of its socket. She hasn't bought anything. Next to her, on the table, is a bunch of flowers, long cherry blossoms and daisies.

She got up for a cup of water and sat back down, hunched over, staring at the floor, then, looking around the room. She wiggles her thumb again and looks at it. Then, she looks at the spread palms of her hands.

Joel said he was irritated at me, at first, Friday night, until he got a little drunk, then a lot drunk, then pissed, then pissed at himself, and then happy. He met a woman, that night. He mentioned, casually, that the next morning, he bought a New York Times, and then staggered home.

The woman wraps her long scarf slowly and sadly around her neck, stands, and with flowers in hand, proudly walks into the street.

“Hail, mortal!”
he says, looking up
from his Shakespeare plays,
his voice held in check,
waiting to shout
the good news.

The Day After

My fingers graze the edges of things, like the bullfighter's sense of the horns, millimeters between grace and death, almost spill glasses, not quite knock over chairs.

I'm amazed, as the muscles guide the bones, to know the extremities, of skin and flesh, to dance along the edges, to slice the air like a razor, like racing wheels that drop a cup of earth on the rocks below, the beach, where birds and fish meet with men and women, with men and women and the birds and the fish and the sprinkling dirt, like a hint of rain.

Café des Refugees

The café across the street looks burned out, or closed quickly in anger. Rumors fly – a fight between partners, the health inspector, a fire in the back. The signs that were up in front, only a few days ago, are gone. Chairs are piled on tables. There's a hastily written sign, *CLOSED*, with no explanation.

It's a melodramatic night. The street is bathed in fog, dirty bathwater fog, and the babies, thrown out with it, have crossed the street to this café, the Café des Refugees.

It's a night of foreign intrigue, a night for Schnapps and muted conversations, a murderer's night. These lost souls step up to the darkened windows of the closed café, cup their eyes against the glass, then turn, bewildered, homeless, and catch sight of the Café des Refugees.

They cross against the traffic, step hesitantly to the new door. They contemplate. No. They turn away. There is too much danger in the City.

They walk in, boldly. One place is good as another.